

What Being Tall Means to Me - Ella Chen Yan

I wish that I could say being tall has always been a source of pride for me, but it hasn't been. Growing up in the northern part of China, where the average height for women hovers around 1.6 meters, my height was never something I could blend into. I stood out in classrooms, in group photos, and even on crowded streets. Adults commented on it casually, classmates whispered about it, and strangers felt entitled to point it out. Being tall was not something I chose, yet it became the first thing people noticed about me. Instead of pride, it brought self-consciousness. I learned early on how to slouch slightly, how to stand at the back of photos, how to shrink myself in ways that had nothing to do with physical size.

As a child, I wanted nothing more than to be average. Average felt safe. Average meant not being asked if I played basketball, not being compared to others, not being told I was “too big” or “too noticeable.” My height became a symbol of difference, and difference, especially growing up, can feel isolating. While others worried about fitting in socially, I worried about literally fitting in. Chairs felt small, uniforms felt awkward, and expectations felt heavy. I internalized the idea that taking up space was something to apologize for.

Moving through adolescence did not immediately change that feeling. If anything, being tall as a young woman came with new layers of discomfort. There were assumptions about confidence, maturity, and strength that I did not always feel. People expected me to be bold simply because I looked like I should be. When I felt insecure, shy, or unsure of myself, it felt like a contradiction to the image others projected onto me. My height became a mismatch between how I was seen and how I felt, and that gap was hard to navigate.

Over time, however, my relationship with being tall began to shift. Not because the comments stopped, but because I started to understand that standing out did not have to mean standing alone. I realized that my height was only a problem when I let it define my worth. Slowly, I stopped trying to disappear. I stood straighter, not out of confidence at first, but out of exhaustion from pretending to be smaller than I was. And somewhere along the way, that physical adjustment became an internal one.

Being tall has taught me what it means to own space without guilt. It has forced me to confront discomfort early and often, and in doing so, it has shaped my resilience. I have learned that visibility can be powerful. When you are seen, you have a choice: to hide or to lead. I did not always choose leadership, but learning that I could has changed how I move through the world.

Today, being tall still makes me stand out, but it no longer feels like a flaw. It is a reminder of where I come from and how far I have grown, not just in centimeters, but in self-acceptance. I no longer wish to be smaller. Instead, I am learning to be fully present in the body and identity I have. Being tall means carrying my history, my insecurities, and my growth all at once. And finally, it means standing exactly as I am, without apology.

