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Heights of Aspiration

At the recent Athens Olympics, the sight of an extraordinarily tall Chinese sportsman carrying the Chinese national flag at the march past occasioned considerable surprise. At seven feet five inches, Yao Ming, the hoopster who plays for Houston Rockets in the American basketball league, defies the universal stereotype of Chinese as small-built people.

Yao's height is not a freak occurrence. Evidently, he has inherited his inches from his parents -- a 6'7" father and a 6'3" mother who both played for China's national basketball teams. But it also turns out that China, helped by its growing prosperity, is literally a taller nation now. Some studies show that the average Chinese youth is a couple of centimeters taller today than he was half a century ago.

It is possible that India too is experiencing some modest gain in height, although, going by our fealty to starch and sugar, one suspects the growth is as much horizontal as vertical. There are studies that suggest South Asians are alarmingly more susceptible to heart disease than other ethnic groups.

Much of this is being blamed on our starchy diet. It would appear that the Chinese and Japanese among Asian people are stealing a march over South Asians because of a more all-round diet -- not necessarily non-vegetarian.

There is broad agreement among auxologists -- those who study human heights -- that Asians are closing the gap with Caucasians, who it was believed for the longest time were bigger and heavier because they came from colder climates. According to US researchers, the average American (5'10") has not grown in height in 25 years (weight, alas, is another matter.) Even the average Dutchman, at six feet the tallest male species, appears to have hit the ceiling. The average Japanese male meantime has snuck up to 5'8", once again defying the stereotype of a small built Asian.

Obviously, there is a co-relation between growing economic prosperity and size. China and India, now two of the world's fastest growing economies, have long been victims of stereotyping in the west. But we are also guilty of mutual labeling. For us, all Chinese have similar features (slit eyes, flat nose), similar names (remember the chin chin choo song?) and speak through their nose, as depicted in one tasteless ad now showing in India. The fact is Chinese too have a wide range of physical features.

Perhaps Chinese have similar spoofs about Indians.

But in the west, particularly in the US, where stereotyping on the basis of physical features or characteristics is a no-no, Chinese and Indians are synonymous with cheap labour. Most Americans are not concerned about whether Asians are tall or short, fat or thin (racism and colour is a different issue). All they care is that Asians work their backs off for low wages resulting in the flight of American jobs.

This too could be a temporary label, like the belief that China only makes cheap, shoddy goods (the same way Japanese were labelled in the 1970s before they became a byword for manufacturing excellence). The manufacture of the niftiest American products like the iPod is now outsourced to China.

Similarly, Indians are acquiring a reputation as peripatetic, risk-taking globalists, showing up for work in deepest Africa and riskiest Central Asia. In time to come, the only stereotype of Asians could be that they are fearsome competitors and immensely successful. Talk of physical characteristics could just be tall tales.