


RESEARCH ARTICLE

The portrayal of people with dwarfism in Chinese art

Liuyin Wu¹ | Ying Zhou² | Dan Zhang^{1,2,3} | Yiping Shen^{1,4,5} | Aixia Liu^{1,2,3} 

¹School of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Women's Hospital, Zhejiang University School of Medicine, Zhejiang, Hangzhou, People's Republic of China

²Department of Reproductive Endocrinology, Women's Hospital, Zhejiang University School of Medicine, Zhejiang, Hangzhou, People's Republic of China

³Key Laboratory of Reproductive Genetics (Ministry of Education), Zhejiang University, Hangzhou, People's Republic of China

⁴Department of Neurology, Harvard Medical School, Boston, Massachusetts

⁵Division of Genetics and Genomics, Boston Children's Hospital, Harvard Medical School, Boston, Massachusetts

Correspondence

Aixia Liu, Department of Reproductive Endocrinology, Women's Hospital, Zhejiang University School of Medicine, 1 Xueshi Road, Hangzhou 310006, Zhejiang, People's Republic of China.
Email: liuaixia@zju.edu.cn

Funding information

National Natural Science Foundation of China, Grant/Award Number: 82071276

Abstract

Dwarfism has been depicted in various Chinese art forms including literature, sculpture, and painting. This article examines several representative Chinese works of art from different ages of Chinese history, in order to glimpse the living situations of people with dwarfism, their professions and social status, as well as the social attitude toward them in China. We highlight “*山海经*” (*Shan Hai Jing*, translated as *the Classic of Mountains and Seas*), a remarkable collection of myths and illustrations which documented the existence of dwarf communities where the residents were capable of producing high-quality grains. Representations from sculptures and paintings frequently captured the images of individuals with dwarfism in royal courts, which showed their remarkable performance skills and social ability. There are also works of art associating dwarfism with rituals. In addition to portraying ordinary individuals with humble social status, there was one particular individual with dwarfism named Yan Zi (晏子) who was highly regarded as a figure of wisdom. Throughout the long Chinese history, dwarfism had been portrayed in art as either positive, neutral or derogatory, which reflected the fact that people with dwarfism, while short in stature, are usually intellectually normal, generally skillful, and often talented, in short, like the general population.

KEYWORDS

achondroplasia, art representation, China, dwarfs, skeletal dysplasia

1 | INTRODUCTION

Malformations and syndromes have been portrayed in various works of art in many ancient cultures, including ancient Egyptian statuettes, Indian stone reliefs, artifacts of the Mayan civilization and Chinese pottery (Bukvic & Elling, 2015; Friedlaender & Friedlaender, 2020; Kozma, 2010). In particular, individuals with dwarfism have been portrayed in Chinese art which documents their actual lives at different historical periods, and uncovers social, ethical, and cultural clues regarding the attitudes toward them. Although these art representations of dwarfism can be interpreted as positive, neutral, or derogatory, they all depict individuals with short stature who appeared to be intellectually

unimpaired, generally skillful, and in some, remarkably talented and wise. “Dwarf” and “dwarfism” are terms not commonly used in a modern medical setting because of the possible derogatory connotation. Most conditions with short stature have their own diagnosis, usually a skeletal dysplasia. For this article, we refer to “individuals with dwarfism” in the historical context.

In this article, we examined several representative Chinese art pieces including literature, sculptures and paintings from different ages of Chinese history, and we are able to obtain some information on the general characteristics, living situation, professions and skills, social status, and social attitude toward dwarfs from these art pieces. We offer a perspective on one group of individuals with genetic syndromes who may have physical differences from ordinary people, but mostly with normal intelligence and skills, which we hope will promote a positive attitude about short stature genetic testing and clinical management in the genomic era.

[Correction added on 22 May 2021, after first online publication: In the main text, 11 Chinese Characters were incorrect. It has been corrected.]

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License, which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.

© 2021 The Authors. *American Journal of Medical Genetics Part C: Seminars in Medical Genetics* published by Wiley Periodicals LLC.

All the photographs analyzed in our article are authorized formally or informally from museums or libraries, unless otherwise specified in the article.

2 | ARTWORK

2.1 | Images of people with dwarfism in Chinese literature

Chinese literature recorded impressive artistic mythology and legends that described the existence of dwarfism. “*山海经*” (*Shan Hai Jing*, translated as *the Classic of Mountains and Seas*) is regarded as a masterpiece of Chinese literature and classical art with invaluable and encyclopedic records of ancient Chinese. The book was compiled and assembled by many authors throughout the different dynasties. The oldest part of the book was believed to appear in the Shang Dynasty (1600 BC–1046 BC), and one of widespread versions was the edition with the commentary of Guo Pu (276 AD–324 AD) (Fracasso, 1993). This treasure of rare records and colorful stories about the mythical figures, rituals, medicine, natural history, geography, and ethnic peoples of ancient China includes descriptions of people with dwarfism.

2.1.1 | Jiao Yao

The chapter entitled “*山海经·大荒南经*” (*the Classic of the Great Wilderness: the South*) uses the term “states” (which refer to specific regions or communities) where people with dwarfism lived, including the state of Jiao Yao ([https://iif.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:53915097\\$217i](https://iif.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:53915097$217i)): 有小人，名曰焦侥之国，几姓，嘉谷是食 (Figure 1). The

translation explains that, “There is a state of dwarf, the residents of the state share a same family name ‘Ji,’ and they feed themselves on high-quality grains.” The document suggests that people in the state of Jiao Yao did not have short stature due to malnutrition, and they were more likely genetically related, probably having a dominantly inherited disorder. As the state of Jiao Yao was believed to be a farming society, one of the reasons that people had high quality grain to eat was because they were capable of producing it (Birrell, 1999; He, 1998).

2.1.2 | Zhou Yao

Another description and illustration of a “dwarf state” is that of Zhou Yao in the chapter entitled “*山海经·海外南经*” (*the Classic of Regions Beyond the Seas: the South*) ([https://iif.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:53915097\\$151i](https://iif.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:53915097$151i)): 周侥国在其东，其为人勤小，冠带，其人长三尺，穴居，能为机巧，有五谷食也” (Figure 2). The translation explains that “The state of Zhou Yao is located on the east. The people in the state are short in stature which is about 3 Chi (1 Chi equals 23 cm). They wear hats and belts as shown in the illustration ([https://iif.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:53915097\\$152i](https://iif.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:53915097$152i)), and live in caves. They are skillful and have multiple grains to eat.” This description also supports the premise that people with dwarfism were productive.

2.2 | Images of people with dwarfism in sculptures

2.2.1 | Pottery story-teller beating a drum

Due to the uncommon and diminutive figure, dwarfs often served as court entertainers (“俳优”) such as funny actors, dancers,

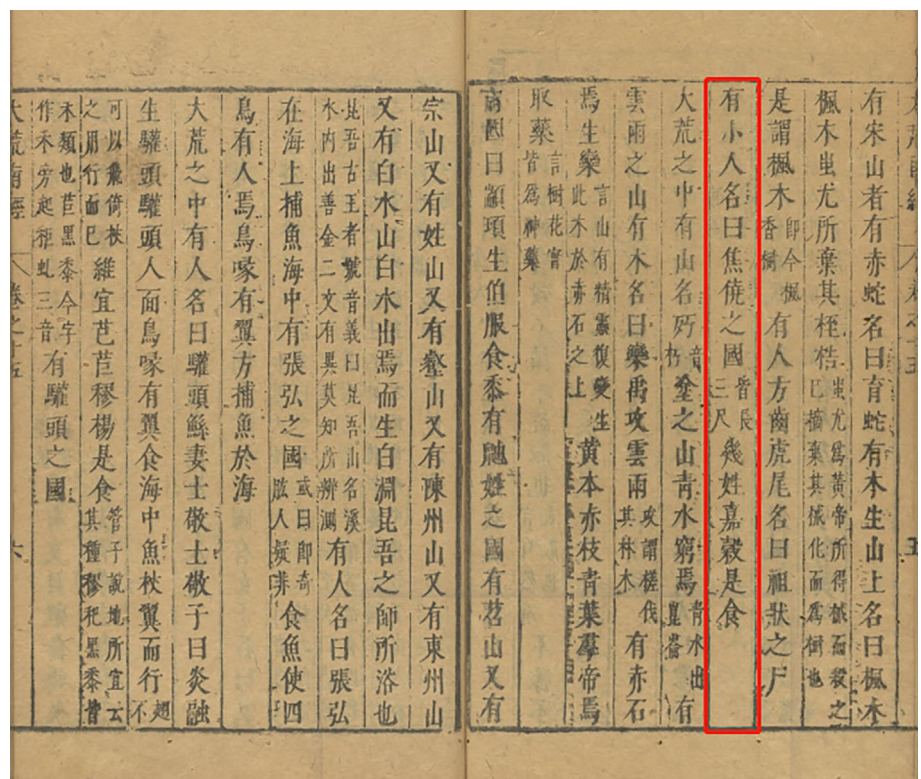


FIGURE 1 The red box highlights the sentence in the page 217 of the chapter entitled “the Classic of the Great Wilderness: the South” from “*山海经*” (*Shan Hai Jing*, translated as *the Classic of Mountains and Seas*) which describes the “dwarf state,” named Jiao Yao. It is part of the Harvard-Yenching Institute’s Chinese collection at Harvard University, Cambridge, MA ([https://iif.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:53915097\\$217i](https://iif.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:53915097$217i))



FIGURE 2 The red box marked in “(a)” is the sentence in the page 151 of chapter entitled “the Classic of Regions beyond the Seas: the South” from the same book as Figure 1 which describes the “dwarf state” of Zhou Yao in Chinese ([https://iif.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:53915097\\$151i](https://iif.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:53915097$151i)). The red circle marked in “(b)” is the drawing of a dwarf wearing a hat and belt in the state of Zhou Yao, which is in the same book ([https://iif.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:53915097\\$152i](https://iif.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:53915097$152i))

singers and story-tellers in ancient China (Wang, 1957; Yin, 2004), and their figures were frequently captured in Chinese sculptures. One of the most famous sculptures depicting a court entertainer with probable dwarfism is “Story-teller Beating a Drum” (http://www.chnmuseum.cn/zp/zpml/201812/t20181218_25869.shtml), a ceramic figure excavated from in a tomb which can be traced back to the Eastern Han Dynasty (25 AD–220 AD) (Liu, 1958). Figure 3 shows the story-teller wearing a headband with ornamental design on his forehead, and naked to the waist with bare feet. He appears to have disproportionately short arms and legs, suggesting a skeletal dysplasia, possibly achondroplasia, although he seems to lack a large head (macrocephaly). He waves a drumstick in his right hand, and beats the drum held by his left hand; the short limbs are outstretched. He looks happy with his mouth widely open. Pottery figures like this one were mass produced in the Han Dynasty (Rawson, 2001).

2.2.2 | Eastern Han Story-teller

Another pottery figure “Eastern Han Story-teller” (Figure 4) is part of a collection at the Sichuan Museum in China (<http://www.scmuseum.cn/thread-271-117.html>). The story-teller figure has a normal-shaped head and short proximal limbs, with a similar posture of drum-beating. However, he grimaces and sticks out his tongue as if he is trying to make his story more dramatic. These sculptures portray the artistic images of dwarf story-tellers through exaggerated and humorous facial expression and gesture, revealing their vivid performance skill (Wang, 1987).



FIGURE 3 The sculpture, “Pottery Story-teller Beating a Drum,” is 56 cm tall, and part of the collection at the National Museum of China, Beijing, China (http://www.chnmuseum.cn/zp/zpml/201812/t20181218_25869.shtml)

2.2.3 | Grey earthenware pilaster

The *Grey Earthenware Pilaster* (Figure 5) is an architectural column with ornaments of dragons, lozenges, and flower buds topped by a bearded man from the British Museum (https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A_1942-1010-1). It is part of a tomb chamber

whose occupant is unknown (Harrison-Hall, 2017). The height of the entire pilaster was 134 cm and can be divided into two parts. The figure on top is that of a bearded man, whose large head is out of proportion to the smaller trunk and limbs (Huo, 2020), creating an exaggerated image. This portrait suggests an individual with dwarfism features with a long face, upslanted palpebral fissures, large eyes,



FIGURE 4 The pottery sculpture entitled “Eastern Han Story-teller” measures 66.5 cm and is part of a collection at the Sichuan Museum, Chengdu, China (<http://www.scmuseum.cn/thread-271-117.html>)

prominent nose, square forehead and a slightly round chin. We acknowledge that these features may be an exaggeration of ethnic background, or artistic style.

2.3 | Images of people with dwarfism in paintings

Individuals with dwarfism in royal courts have been portrayed in Chinese paintings.

2.3.1 | Maid and Dwarf in the Tang Dynasty

Figure 6 portrays a painting named “唐侍女与侏儒图” (*Maid and Dwarf in the Tang Dynasty*). It is from the tomb of Prince Zhang Huai of the Tang Dynasty (654 AD–684 AD), now in the collection of the Shaanxi History Museum (<http://www.sxhm.com/index.php?ac=article&at=read&did=11550>). The painting reflects the daily life of “court dwarfs” in the Tang Dynasty (Wang, 2004). The three people appear to be marching, and the figure on the right is the court dwarf. He appears somewhat innocent, with his head turned to the maid on his right side who wears a red robe with wide lapels. The woman on the left appears to have the highest social status and wears an elegant green skirt with white shawl. The height of these individuals is a clue to their social status.

2.3.2 | The Great Nuo

The Great Nuo (Figure 7) is a silk painting (67.4 cm long, 59.2 cm wide) from the collection of the Palace Museum in China (<https://www.dpm.org.cn/collection/paint/229433.html>). It depicts a scene of Nuo

FIGURE 5 The “Grey Earthenware Pilaster” consists of ornaments of dragons, lozenges, and flower buds topped by “Bearded Man.” It measures 134 cm tall, and is part of the collection at the British Museum, London, UK (https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A_1942-1010-1)



“傩,” which is a traditional Chinese sacrificial activity to pray for blessings, to ward off disease and evil spirits (Huang, 2018). People with dwarfism were specifically selected for such an event as depicted in this painting which includes 12 characters with macrocephaly (large head) and short trunk (Kong, 2017). Their faces are exaggerated and some appear dysmorphic. They wear an assortment of odd clothes, hats and head bands, and hold various farm tools and instruments as their weapons, dancing and drumming as if dueling with evil spirits.

2.3.3 | Yan Zi's Visit to the State of Chu

In addition to figures portrayed as humble people in daily scenes, there is also a painting of a particular man with dwarfism who achieved important status (<https://www.cguardian.com/Auctions/>



FIGURE 6 “Maid and Dwarf in the Tang Dynasty” is a fresco in the tomb of the Prince Zhang Huai of the Tang Dynasty. It measures 168 cm by 102 cm, and is the collection of the Shaanxi History Museum, Xi'an, China (www.sxhm.com/index.php?ac=article&at=read&did=11550)



FIGURE 7 This silk painting of “The Great Nuo” is 67.4 cm long and 59.2 cm wide. It is part of the collection at the Palace Museum, Beijing, China (<https://www.dpm.org.cn/collection/paint/229433.html>)

ItemDetail?id=632061&categoryId=1902&itemCode=908). Luo Ping (1733 AD–1799 AD), a famous artist in the Qing Dynasty, portrayed a scene (Figure 8) based on a well-known Chinese historical story “晏子使楚” (*Yan Zi's Visit to the State of Chu*). The main subject of the painting (wearing blue clothing) was Yan Zi, a famous official in the Warring States Period (475 BC–221 BC). He is much shorter than the other men (Figure 8), and appears to have typical characteristics of achondroplasia.

3 | DISCUSSION

Our review of several selected Chinese works of art and illustrations in literature suggests that people with dwarfism can be seen with different social status in different historical periods. These artworks vividly portray them as ordinary residents, court entertainers and servants, and ritual performers and officials, which illustrate their living situation, skills, social status in societies, and suggest how societies in different historical periods perceived the roles of people with dwarfism.

The sculptures and paintings of the Han Dynasty (202 BC–220 AD) and the Tang Dynasty (618 AD–907 AD) frequently depict people with dwarfism as court entertainers and servants. It is believed that raising dwarfs was a fashion in royal courts during that period. In the Han Dynasty, some of the dwarfs were given as tribute gifts by

FIGURE 8 “Yan Zi’s Visit to the State of Chu” is a silk-painting by Luo Ping (1733 AD–1799 AD). Its length is 116 cm and width is 60 cm. A copy of the painting can be viewed in the online auction house catalogue which is in the public domain (www.cguardian.com/Auctions/ItemDetail?id=632061&categoryId=1902&itemCode=908). However, the authors were unable to obtain consent to use the original because the art collector is anonymous

嘉德四季第46期拍卖会 > 中国书画 (二) (lot 251-lot 1099) LOT 908



特别提示：图片仅供参考，所有拍品信息以实物为准。成交结果以本公司公布的成交价表为准。

foreign countries to Chinese royal families and noblemen for their entertainment and amusement, a role which dehumanized their autonomy by servitude, and in the Tang Dynasty, some foreign dwarfs were often referred to as “Kunlun slave” (Cheng, 2002). To some extent, they were valued for their performance skills and social abilities since they were popular among royal families and noblemen. Although well-accepted in royal court, they had relatively low social status. Their diminutive appearance in performance settings or alongside their masters or mistresses only served as a foil to the high social position and authority of the upper class.

In ancient China, structural differences such as birth defects or dysmorphic facial features often appeared in ritualistic settings. For example, the figure atop the *Grey Earthenware Pilaster* which was regarded as having an unpleasant appearance was believed to play a role in suppressing ghosts from tombs and accompanying the spirit of the deceased (Huo, 2020). These funerary contents in ancient tombs suggest that skeletal and facial differences were part of elements in ritual events in China. The painting of *the Great Nuo* also provides an artistic insight to a traditional Chinese belief that dwarfs may have supernatural power to ward off evil spirits and diseases (Lu, 2003), and bring peace and blessings from the divine, leading to the perception that dwarfism was associated with ritual significance (Huang, 2018). When combined with evidence from ancient Egyptian societies

(Kozma, 2006), we speculate that physical deformity was integrated into the ritualistic settings in both ancient civilizations, regarding dwarfs or individuals with deformities as communicators with divinity.

Although most of the figures with dwarfism in works of art seem to have low social status, Chinese artists were also fond of portraying an individual with dwarfism who was highly regarded as a figure of wisdom. This is Yan Zi (晏子) (578 BC–500 BC), a diplomat of the state of Qi during the Spring and Autumn period (770 BC–476 BC) in Chinese history. With a height approximating that of an adult with achondroplasia or pseudochondroplasia, Yan Zi was praised for his talents in diplomacy and linguistics (Jia, 2017). One of the most popular stories describes his diplomatic visit to the state of Chu. The Emperor Chu mocked Yan Zi’s short stature repeatedly with an attempt to humiliate him and the state of Qi, including a request for him to enter the state through a dog hole rather than the city main gate. With his outstanding diplomatic visions and linguistic skills, Yan Zi fought back cleverly, maintaining the dignity of the state of Qi.

The descriptions in *the Classic Mountains and Seas* recorded communities of ordinary citizens with dwarfism who were skillful in planting high-quality grains. We speculate that they were well-adapted to agricultural society by learning and mastering the knowledge and skills of farming that could support stable societies and decent lives.

4 | CONCLUSION

The works of art described in our study provide a glimpse into the history of people with short stature in China. These images also offer a perspective on one group of individuals with genetic syndromes who had physical differences, but are generally depicted as having normal intelligence and skills. Most appear to have achondroplasia, the most common form of skeletal dysplasia that results in marked short stature (dwarfism) and normal intelligence (Pauli, 2019). Of course, people who had severe skeletal dysplasia probably did not survive, and thus, were not portrayed in art.

As we learn more about the diverse genetic causes of short stature, we should also strive to improve medical care and provide psychosocial support. From a historic perspective, we acknowledge that efforts to promote respect toward individuals with short stature have just begun. There is much we should do to provide a better quality of life for these individuals in the era of genomic medicine.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This work was supported by National Natural Science Foundation of China (No. 82071276).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest which could be perceived as prejudicing the impartiality of the research reported.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Yiping Shen and **Aixia Liu**: Designed the research. **Liuyin Wu** and **Dan Zhang**: Collected and analyzed the materials. **Liuyin Wu** and **Ying Zhou**: Drafted the manuscript. **Yiping Shen** and **Aixia Liu**: Revised the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

This research article does not have “data” per se. The public domain resources (URLs) were provided.

ORCID

Aixia Liu  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8115-8234>

REFERENCES

- Birrell, A. (1999). *The classic of mountains and seas* (pp. 110–169). New York, NY: Penguin.
- Bukvic, N., & Elling, J. W. (2015). Genetics in the art and art in genetics. *Gene*, 555, 14–22. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gene.2014.07.073>
- Cheng, G. (2002). An examination on the phenomenon of the Kunlun slaves of the Tang Dynasty. *Journal of Jinan University (Philosophy & Social Science Edition)*, 05, 79–84.
- Fracasso, R. (1993). Shan Hai Ching. In M. Loewe (Ed.), *Early Chinese texts: A bibliographical guide* (pp. 357–367). Berkeley, CA: The Society for the Study of Early China and the Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California.
- Friedlaender, G. E., & Friedlaender, L. K. (2020). Art in science: Velazquez and dwarfism—the art of observation. *Clinical Orthopaedics and Related Research*, 478, 31–33. <https://doi.org/10.1097/CORR.0000000000001076>
- Harrison-Hall, J. (2017). *China: A history in object* (p. 71). London, England: Thames & Hudson.
- He, G. (1998). The study of the state of Jiao Yao. *Guangxi Ethnic Studies*, 54(4), 74–76.
- Huang, J. (2018). Supplementary proof of the Great Nuo picture based on folk ritual and symbol interpretation. *Journal of Zhejiang University (Humanities and Social Science)*, 48(6), 38–46. <https://doi.org/10.3785/j.issn.1008-942X.CN33-6000/C.2018.05.041>
- Huo, H. (2020). On the burial context and function of the human-shaped intaglio pictorial hollow brick in the collection of British Museum. *Palace Museum Journal*, 214(2), 66–83. <https://doi.org/10.16319/j.cnki.0452-7402.2020.02.005>
- Jia, H. (2017). Review about Yanying and Yanzi's Spring and Autumn Annals. *Journal of Shangrao Normal University*, 37(4), 73–84. <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1004-2237.2017.04.010>
- Kong, H. (2017). On the painting of “the Great Nuo” from the perspective of Yin-Yang culture. *Journal of Northwest University for Nationalities (Philosophy and Social Science)*, 5, 137–144. <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1001-5140.2017.05.022>
- Kozma, C. (2006). Dwarfs in ancient Egypt. *American Journal of Medical Genetics. Part A*, 140(4), 303–311. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajmg.a.31068>
- Kozma, C. (2010). The ancient Egyptian dwarfs of the Walters Art Museum. *American Journal of Medical Genetics. Part A*, 152A, 2556–2562. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajmg.a.33616>
- Liu, Z. (1958). Excavation records of the tomb in Tianhui Mountain in Chengdu. *Acta Archaeologica Sinica*, 01, 87–103.
- Lu, P. (2003). The interpretation of mask culture of Nuo. *Journal of Suchou University (Engineering Science Edition)*, 23(03), 37–38.
- Pauli, M. (2019). Achondroplasia: A comprehensive clinical review. *Orphanet Journal of Rare Diseases*, 14(1), 1–49. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13023-018-0972-6>
- Rawson, J. (2001). Tombs and tomb furnishing of the Eastern Han period (AD 25–220). In R. Bagley (Ed.), *Ancient Sichuan: Treasures from a lost civilization* (p. 297). Seattle, WA: Princeton University Press.
- Wang, G. (1957). *The Opera history of the Song and the Yuan Dynasty* (pp.54). Beijing: Beijing Yanshan Press.
- Wang, X. (2004). Research on the relation between dwarf and puppet images in opera. *Journal of College of Chinese Traditional Opera*, 25(2), 95–99. <https://doi.org/10.15915/j.cnki.cn11-1172/j.2004.02.025>
- Wang, Y. (1987). Research on pottery figures of the Han Dynasty in Sichuan. *Sichuan Cultural Relics*, 03, 4–10.
- Yin, J. (2004). Discussion on the dwarf sculptures in the tang Dynasty and their related problems. *Journal of Sichuan University (Philosophy and Social Science Edition)*, S1, 28–31.

How to cite this article: Wu L, Zhou Y, Zhang D, Shen Y, Liu A. The portrayal of people with dwarfism in Chinese art. *Am J Med Genet Part C*. 2021;187C:192–198. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajmg.c.31906>