

## FEATURES

THURSDAY, APRIL 8, 2010

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## Dwarves a big hit at China theme park

*A scaled-down version of China's imperial days lives on in southwestern Yunan Province*

BY DAN MARTIN  
AFP, HEIQIAOMU, CHINA

In an imperial yellow coat and stylish shades, China's dwarf emperor toddles from his tiny mushroom house to rapturous applause and a welcoming volley of ear-splitting techno music.

Barely 1m tall, the mini-monarch squats proudly on a royal stool as his court of dwarves and midgets — dressed as fairies, warriors, cooks and monks — regale hundreds of paying visitors with a high-pitched, syrupy ballad.

China's imperial days may be long gone, but this scaled-down version lives on at Dwarf Empire (矮人主题乐园), a popular attraction at a theme park that opened in September in southwestern Yunnan Province.

The "empire" — part of a butterfly park — has quickly become the site's main draw thanks to the popularity of dwarf performances that would likely evoke howls of protest in the West as an exploitative freak show.

It includes a mini version of *Swan Lake* and a male dwarf in leather pants and a punk hairdo hand-walking and gyrating his hips to thunderous hip-hop.

But the more than 100 dwarves — known in China as *xiao ai ren*, (小矮人) or "little small people" — who range in height from 79cm to 1.3m, dismiss suggestions that the park demeans them.

Several call it a haven in a country where their kind often face harassment and mistreatment and rarely get to mix with like-sized comrades.

"Before coming here, most of us faced discrimination. But here, we are equal and respected. We have our dignity," said Ou Jieli, 24, who sold clothing in the southern province of Guangdong before coming to work at the park.

Nestled in rugged hills about 40km west of the Yunnan capital Kunming, the park is the brainchild of flamboyant businessman Chen Mingjing, who made his fortune in electronics, real estate and other ventures.

His hair slicked back and wearing a high-collared Chinese jacket not unlike that of the dwarf emperor, Chen said the idea came to him after he encountered midgets on a train.

"We felt their lives were hard and bad, so we wanted to build a great place for them to live and a platform for them to work," said Chen.

Employees get room, board and free English lessons — to chat with a hoped-for flood of overseas visitors. Few can get past "Hello," however, except for one who introduced himself as being from the empire's "Foreign Ministry."

Altruism aside, dwarves are good business.

On a recent day, Chen's empire heaved with hundreds of mostly respectful teen students from Kunming, cheering wildly and posing for photos with dwarves.

Chen is expanding the "empire," which now consists of more than a dozen mushroom homes from which the dwarves emerge and descend to their performance area.

A nearby hill is topped by a fortress-like emperor's "castle" opening later this year. New dwarves arrive weekly.

"We will build a team of 800 to 1,000 dwarves and make it the biggest wonderland for dwarves in the world," Chen proclaimed.

Dwarves acknowledge the park could be seen as demeaning in the West, but say it is a step up for "little people" in China, whose opportunities in life are sometimes quite limited.

Chinese dwarves need to be tough, said Pi Fasi, who faced bullying and was even robbed in his previous job driving a three-wheeled transport vehicle. He says he has fought to defend himself his whole life against schoolmates and even adults.

"Some would even be crying after I used my fists and legs," he said proudly.

Fittingly, he is now the emperor's personal bodyguard, vowing to "stay at the park until I am too old to work."

Homesickness hurts, but life with fellow dwarves has changed the fate of people like Ou, who fell in love with another of the dwarf employees and hopes to marry.

"I feel this is our destiny. We came from different places in China but have come together to live as a family. We are all very happy," she said.



▲ The dwarf emperor, above, in an imperial yellow coat and stylish shades, walks through Dwarf Empire, a popular attraction at an amusement park in China. Employees dismiss suggestions that Dwarf Empire demeans them.  
◀ A performer dances to techno at Dwarf Empire. PHOTOS: AFP

[ SOCIETY ]

## Rwandan pygmies slowly fading into oblivion

*The Twa people face a deadly trifecta of social and economic exclusion, poor healthcare and widespread discrimination*

BY HELEN VESPERINI  
AFP, BWIZA, RWANDA

Rwanda's rapidly dwindling Twa pygmies, considered the original inhabitants of this central African nation, now live on the fringes, facing squalor, discrimination and general exclusion.

A small community eking out a frugal living on the flank of an impossibly steep hill in Bwiza in the center of the country embodies the problems they face in post-genocide Rwanda.

Bwiza's residents came to look for a field, having lost the land their families owned decades back.

They are plagued by alcoholism, lose up to two children for every one born and have little or no access to healthcare. "A lot of children die. I used to have nine, now I have three," said

Jowas Gasinzigwa, leaning on a crude walking stick.

There are 46 families and just 50 children in the hamlet, 15 of whom attend school. All this in a country where most women produce five or six children.

I now have three and I used to have six," said Celestin Uwimana, 38. "Many die of malaria because they don't go to hospital when they have it. Others get meningitis."

The nearest health center is a two-hour walk away. The pygmies live in leaf huts and respiratory diseases are a major scourge due to leaky roofs and damp.

Zephirin Kalimba, the head of an organization that helps Twa communities through development projects, says they make up between 33,000 and 35,000 of Rwanda's 10 million people.

Whereas the overall population of Rwanda is on the rise, the number of pygmies is declining, a development likely linked to their displacement from their original forest lands and the end of their traditional hunter-gatherer lifestyle.

Though Twa used to own land, more than 40 percent of Twa households in Rwanda are today landless. They were forced out of forests that were turned into natural parks. It was only after eviction from their ancestral land that they turned to farming in fits and starts.

In Bwiza, the men, in gumboots or plastic sandals, sit in the shade complaining. It is the women who hoe a nearby field belonging to a Twa widow who inherited it from her late non-Twa husband, babies strapped to their backs in the blazing sun.

Both groups occasionally burst into laughter, start dancing and make up a song as they go along: about how "the minister said the Twa need iron sheets for the roofs of their houses" and how "Rwanda has many doctors, but none near Twa villages."

Kalimba said the community should be afforded benefits given to handicapped people or women in Rwanda. Instead, the Twa are practically excluded from government poverty alleviation measures, he claimed.

The pygmies even had to change the name of their organization, the Community of Indigenous Rwandans, as the government argued that identification along ethnic lines contributed to the 1994 genocide that killed some 800,000 people.

The first recorded reference to pygmies appears to be in a letter written in 2276 BC by the boy pharaoh Pepi II. More recently the French American explorer Paul du Chaillu wrote at length about his encounter with pygmies in the rainforests of Gabon in 1867.

But their short stature has long set them apart, and at times seen them stigmatized. Pygmies were on occasion displayed in zoos or circuses as curiosities and are often considered in their native Africa as either sub-human or possessed with special powers.

The present day Twa try to eke out a living from casual labor and pottery.

When the Twa, who are also found in neighboring Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda, can get work it is usually on their neighbors'

land and the pay is a pittance.

They complain of persecution both at work and in school.

"If we go to look for labor where someone is building a house, they'll only take us if there are no non-Twa workers," Uwimana said.

"When we earn some money cultivating a communal field ... and we try to put it into the bank, we go to the bank counter and they say, 'Ha, you're a Twa' and refuse to open an account," he added.

In despair, some of them have turned to drink.

Asked if the same holds true in schools, 14-year-old Justin Nzabandora said the main reason Twa children so often drop out of school is because "they get tired of having other children point to them saying 'look it's a Twa.'"