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# Yang Naimei

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**Also Known As:**

楊耐梅, Yang Lizhu/楊麗珠

**Lived:**

1904 - February 27, 1960

**Worked as:**

costume designer, film actress, film company owner, producer, screenwriter

**Worked In:**

China

**by S. Louisa Wei**

Born to a wealthy Cantonese merchant father, Yang Naimei was named Yang Lizhu and attended the first girl's school founded by the Chinese in Shanghai: Wuben. As a student, Yang witnessed [Pearl Ing](#)'s stunning appearance in her screen debut—*Sea Oath*—in 1922. When Star Film Company's *Orphan Rescues Grandfather* was playing in theaters in 1923, she was deeply moved by [Helen Wang](#)'s role. According to her biographer, Shen Ji, Yang immediately had the urge to perform on screen herself (100).

By the time Wang started working on her second film, *Jade Pear Spirit*, in early 1924, Yang already managed to get herself on the set, playing Liniang's sister-in-law, Junqian. The film was adapted from a modern romance novella of the same name, which mildly criticizes the Confucian restriction of a women's second marriage, by depicting the tragic life of a beautiful widow Liniang—played by Wang. After Liniang dies of a broken heart, Junqian succeeds in traveling a long distance with her orphaned nephew to find his tutor and Liniang's love, Mengxia. The three eventually form a new family in memory of Liniang. Bing Xin, a prominent female writer at the time, was impressed with Yang's fresh-faced, sassy portrayal of Junqian. From the spoiled daughter of a rich family to a determined young woman showing strength and responsibility, the cinema first-timer revealed a genuine talent for acting. Some critics challenged the possibility of Junqian traveling with a child in such a chaotic time, but Bing declared, "Most people simply underestimate what Chinese women are capable of!" (1112).

After her screen debut, Yang played three very different roles for Star in the same year, including an evil landlady in *The Poor Children* (1924); a vain young woman in *Lured into Marriage* (1924); and a selfish rich widow in *Good Brothers* (1924). Lily Film Company then invited her to

play one of the two female leads in *Tea Picking Girl* (1924), which was quite successful with its story pattern of two contrasting female roles. Star followed suit and offered Yang the chance to play the second female lead with Zhang Zhiyun in *Orchid in an Empty Valley* (1925), which was an immediate success, followed by an equally successful sequel. After her success in these films, Yang became a top-billed actress. She gained greater popularity with *Confession* (1926), a film adapted from Tolstoy's 1899 novel, *Resurrection*. Her unreservedness made her a perfect candidate to perform live in theaters screening the films in which she starred, a publicity stunt film companies used in the silent film period. For example, in a scene in *Family Heirloom* (1926), when her character is about to sing a lullaby, the screen would cut to black and the stage lights would turn on. In her character's full costume, Yang would sing the sentimental song on stage and, afterwards, the film would resume. Such a performance was, of course, planned by Zhang Shichuan, founder and director of Star Film Company, who was also a shrewd businessman, trying to get more people into the theater. Yang's mother was deeply affected by seeing her daughter on both stage and screen when she sat in the audience (Shen 138-9).

Zhang Shichuan noted that Yang's personality was almost the opposite of Helen Wang's. While Wang was quiet and reserved, Yang loved parties and the spotlight (S. Zhang 405). In fact, among Star's "four amazons," or its four biggest stars—Wang, Zhang Zhiyun, Xuan Jinglin, and Yang (Shen 149)—Yang was the opposite of the other three. While they mainly played tragic victims of society, Yang was the only anti-heroine. Her specialization was in playing amorous seductresses and social butterflies. In *April Roses* (1926), for instance, there were three female roles: a wife, a concubine, and a seductress with three lovers. Yang was praised for showing different manners and attitudes while facing each of the three lovers (J. Gu 1143). In *A Flower of Passion* (1927), she also succeeded in portraying the transformation of an innocent daughter into the top-billed courtesan of the pleasure quarter (W. Zhang 317). She was typecast in a string of seductress roles, and like other leading actresses at the time, was also given a Hollywood nickname: the "Chinese Marlene Dietrich" (C. Zhang 93). At the height of her film career, Star Film Company published a special pictorial issue on Yang, with several articles on the art of her performance in order to promote the film *Her Sorrows* (1926).

In a film entitled *Spring Dream by the Lakeside* (1926), written by Leftist playwright Tian Han, and directed by a top director, Bu Wancang, Yang played the unusual Li Yibo. When the writer Sun Pijiang first meets her on a train, she sits beside a rich man, elegantly holding a cigarette in a long holder with a coquettish smile. When he arrives at a lakeside house, he has a hallucination, in which Li Yibo becomes his sadistic lover. In the lakeside house, she wears a man's shirt and tie, holding a whip in front of the shirtless male lead. She dresses as a man, whips him until he is bleeding, and then licks off the blood, all to his pleasure. Later, she puts a gun in his hand and urges him to kill for her. He then wakes up in a hospital and the nurse tells him that he had a high fever. When he recovers, he goes to look for the lakeside house. Instead of seeing a beautiful woman, there is only an old lady with white hair (Qian 1168-9). Yang played the "dream woman" with two faces in this film. While the earliest female roles in Chinese films made in the 1910s and early 1920s were mostly played by men, Yang was perhaps the first actress to dress as a man on screen. In *Ashes of the Lotus* (1928), we also see her in a military uniform. The leftist writers of

China, who were largely influenced by nineteenth-century Western literature, created images of Chinese women never seen before; but such female characters could only come alive onscreen with the embodiment of actresses like Yang, the very rare *femme fatale* of the 1920s.

As her career and popularity soared, Yang readily took up the role of celebrity without shying from the public eye. Star Film Company director Zhang Shichuan recalled that in the social circle of Shanghai, “she was quite notable, with her hair styled to a crazy height. Every Shanghainese knew her” (405). He also commented, that because she lived a wanton and unrestrained personal life, she was most fit to play those dissolute and unconventional women (408). Several sources support the fact that she lived a comfortable life “as a trend-setter on the Shanghai fashion scene” (Chang 137):

The reputations of stores such as Yong’an Company and the Huiluo Company located on the Bund were based upon the patronage of stars such as [Helen] Wang and Yang [Naimei]. All eyes at the Carleton Dance Hall fell on Yang Naimei, decked out in her sequined dresses; and within a week everyone who was anyone was dressed to match (Chang 137).

In fact, Star also took advantage of Yang and Wang, asking them to prepare their own costumes. Even when not making films, Yang knew how to make news. She once famously asked a young department store salesman to take off her stockings for her and help her to try on the new style. Reporters were called in to take photographs, and again she generated tabloid news, including one titled “Romantic Female Star Trying Stockings in the Public Eyes,” which, at the time, was also free advertising for *Spring Dream by the Lakeside* (Shen 147-8).

Even though Yang generated great box office income for Star, her poor professional attitude, which consisted of often being late or absent on the set, eventually cast her in a bad light (S. Zhang 408). In 1928, Star decided not to renew Yang’s contract. According to Shen, other film companies did not offer her contracts either in later 1928, as her poor work ethic became well-known (149-150). Zhu Fei, a frequent co-star and lover, encouraged her to set up her own company and make her own films. To raise funds for the Naimei Film Company, she accepted an invitation to Jinan in Shandong Province by Warlord General Zhang Zongchang, a well-known womanizer. Although many in Shanghai’s film circle did not expect her to come back to Shanghai in one piece, she did raise a great sum of money and safely returned within a month (Shen 154-64). As a result, she was able to hire some of her acting friends, including Zhu Fei, who played Meiyuan’s true love, and move into production.

The story she chose for her film was a real-life event that generated a great deal of news coverage: Yu Meiyuan’s suicide. While reading a report titled “Strange Encounters of a Strange Woman,” Yang first learned about the stories of Meiyuan (Shen 153), whose parents forced her into an arranged marriage even though she already had a lover. Shortly after the wedding, her husband left home to do business overseas. She then lived the next decade as a dissolute playgirl, during which she reportedly met more than 3,000 men while traveling throughout Southeast Asia and

other countries. Among her amorous stories, there was one about a rich man who wanted to date her. She asked him to bring 3,000 silver coins, but he brought only half of the agreed amount. Despising him, she opened her hotel window and threw the money out, causing a mad scramble in the street below. In 1928, tired of her life and hopeless about her future, she consulted a journalist on how to commit suicide. Near Shanghai, she jumped into the sea from a Canadian cruise ship, leaving one last letter “to all women,” telling them that she spent years rebelling against her fate as a woman, but still could not marry the man he loved. She warned other women not to follow her example, revealing the complex psychology of a “new woman” still chained by strong patriarchal Confucian ethics (Hou 252-3).

Cai Chusheng, also from Guangdong Province like Yang and Meiyang, and later a prominent director, highly praised the former’s choice for her film’s subject (Yang 6). Fully realizing the sensation created by Meiyang’s playgirl life and planned suicide, Yang wrote the screenplay based on Meiyang’s life encounters that would eventually become *A Wondrous Woman* (1928). According to some sources, in her self-promotional ads, Yang claimed that she could play Meiyang very realistically as she knew her personally. Yang invited Shi Dongshan, a director famous for making women’s films, to direct her production. From a photo of the lavish set, we can see that this film was quite an investment. With the publicity surrounding the real-life events that it was based on, the film was a huge box-office success.

Although the filming of *A Wondrous Woman* began a little later than Wang’s *Revenge of an Actress* (1929), thanks to the funds that Yang raised, she managed to complete her film first and thus became the first woman producer in the history of Chinese cinema. During the making of this film, the whole crew took opium to relax between tight shooting schedules. In the end, Yang squandered her earnings from the film on her opium addiction. Yang herself was not able to make more films as she soon ran out of money. Her fate seemed to be heading steadily downhill until a young man who had been educated in America proposed to her. Eventually they married, and she finally retired from filmmaking after producing *Han Xiuwen, the Shanghai Beauty* (1932). Hong Kong’s *The Industrial and Commercial Daily News* (which later adopted the English title of *Kung Sheung Daily News*), published an article titled “The Lovers of Yang Naimei” in 1932, detailing her relationship with three husbands, praising her film art, yet disapproving of her personal lifestyle (Can B1).

Yang attempted a comeback in the early 1940s, but did not succeed. Her last film attempt was a small role in *Beauty Contest* (1954). In February 1957, *The Industrial and Commercial Daily News* ran a series of brief articles on her, after news reporters spotted her near the Shaw Studio in Kowloon, Hong Kong, where extras were lining up for daily jobs. It seemed that people who recognized her gave her money out of compassion, but Hong Kong’s newspapers reported that she had been seen “begging in the streets” (“Chen Junjing” 6). Eventually, her daughter and son-in-law in Taiwan were in the news, telling reporters that they did send money to her though their own income was quite modest. Apparently, she was still addicted to drugs and her daughter needed her mother to declare that she would get sober before an organization could help to make arrangements for a move to Taiwan (“Yang Naimei’s Daughter” 5). Yang died in Taiwan on

February 27, 1960 at the age of 56. Her death was reported by newspapers like *Ta-Kung-Pao* (“Queen” 4), *Kung Sheung Daily News* (“Yang Naimei Died” 6), and others.

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## Filmography

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### B. Filmography: Non-Extant Film Titles:

#### 1. Yang Naimei as Producer, Co-Screenwriter, and Actress

*A Wondrous Woman/奇女子*, 1928.

#### 2. Yang Naimei as Actress

*Jade Pear Spirit/玉梨魂*, 1924; *The Poor Children/苦兒弱女*, 1924; *Tea Picking Girl/採茶女*, 1924; *Lured into Marriage/誘婚* / *Love and Vanity/虛榮與愛情*, 1924; *Good Brother/好哥哥*, 1924; *Family of the Newly Weds/新人的家庭*, 1925; *Orchid in an Empty Valley/空山蘭*, 1925; *Confession*, 1926; *April Roses/四月裏底薔薇處處開*, 1926; *Her Sorrows/她的痛苦*, 1926; *Three Girls in Shanghai/上海三女子*, 1926; *Resurrection/良心的復活/Conscience Revived*, 1927; *Spring Dream by the Lakeside/湖邊春夢*, 1927; *Reciprocity/俠鳳奇緣*, 1927; *A Flower of*

*Passion/ 花國大總統 /She Wants to Be a Free Woman, 1927; Imperial Concubine Yang of Beijing/ 北京楊貴妃, 1927; Ashes of the Lotus/ 美人關, 1928; The Mistress's Fan/ 少奶奶的扇子, 1928; Last Love/ 最後之愛, 1931; Pleasures of the Dance Hall/ 歌場春色, 1931; Han Xiuwen, the Shanghai Beauty / 上海小姐韓秀雯, 1932; Beauty Contest/ 天堂美女, 1954.*

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