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COMMENT ON  
“YANG NAIMEI – LIFE PRACTICE OF A CHINESE ‘FLAPPER’  
OF WOMEN’S DEVELOPMENT IN CHINA”

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Commented Article: XU, Yanrui; WANG, Junwei. Yang Naimei - life practice of a Chinese “flapper” of women’s development in China. **Trans/Form/Ação**: Unesp journal of philosophy, v. 46, Special Issue, p. 325 - 342, 2023.

Yang Naimei was a Chinese movie star in the first half of the 20th century. Xu and Wang (2023) discuss Yang Naimei’s life practice and significance as a Chinese flapper. Flapper refers to the modern girl who rose in Europe and America in the 1920s and challenged the traditional lifestyle. Yang Naimei is good at acting as an unruly woman on the screen. She has had many relationships in her life. She has accumulated wealth and a reputation with her acting career, which fully embodies the flapper’s characteristics. However, society at that time did not provide enough space for the sustainable development of Yang Naimei’s generation of women in economic, political and personal life. After her youth was no longer, she was eliminated by the film industry and suffered from poverty and disease in the latter half of her life. Taking Yang Naimei as a silhouette of the times can reflect the twists and turns of Chinese women’s development path (Title “YANG NAIMEI

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– LIFE PRACTICE OF A CHINESE ‘FLAPPER’ OF WOMEN’S DEVELOPMENT IN CHINA”).

In China, women’s development means that women enjoy equal opportunities with men to participate in social development, including the social creation of environment and conditions for women’s development. Among the early Chinese female film stars who first appeared in the 1920s, Yang Naimei stood out, especially for her flamboyant character and behavior. There is a strong intertextual relationship between her personal life and her screen image. Her ups and downs have been as legendary as the films she has starred in Chinese cinema for more than 100 years. This article takes Yang Naimei as the silhouette of *The Times* and explains the context and development of the women’s movement since the 20th century in plain language. Similarly, using her tragic ending also shows the difficulties of women’s individual development in the difficult transition process from tradition to modernity in China (BAO, 2014, p. 520).

The overall structure of this article is very clear. Initially, the term “flappers” introduces the genesis of women’s liberation. Using the opinions of renowned scholars on flappers and Yang Naimei, women’s emancipation draws attention. She then elaborates on the foreign life experiences of a few western ladies to illustrate the similarities between Yang Naimei and these women. Lastly, it describes in depth Yang Naimei’s entire life, from her early influence through her death on the street. She neither is like the conventional women of before 1911, who stayed at home to be nice; nor is she like the women who succeeded in their careers after 1949; nonetheless, she is a vital component of the women’s growth.

The feminist movement is also called the women’s Liberation Movement or the women’s Movement. It is a feminist revolutionaries’ social goal or social activity who oppose discrimination against women, enable women to obtain the social status and social power they should enjoy, and achieve complete equality of gender rights. Its movement involves politics, economy, culture, society and family. Feminist activists put forward the slogan of fighting for women’s freedom and rights, which made certain historical achievements in the social background of anti-feudalism and anti-patriarchy at that time. The idea of equality between men and women still exists today, two thousand years later.

To some extent, it promoted the progress of society and the development of history. In the social environment of “acting is a cheap thing,” Yang Naimei resolutely carries on the self-expression, willing to devote herself to the film career despised by the general famous family and ladies with the educated women’s education, and even at the cost of running away from home and breaking up with her family. At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, when the Chinese women’s modernization was far from complete, it can be said that some women’s body and consciousness had already arrived in the public space before their social status was substantially improved. Yang Naimei was one of the vanguard representatives (BERNARD, 2000, p. 19).

True equality does not need social and legal constraints, but a natural equality everyone is willing to follow. True civilization does not necessitate confrontation with nature, but it permits us to do so when deemed necessary. The less personality and social psychology constrain individuals, the more they will naturally follow the trend of The Times. The less an individual’s personality or social psychology holds them back, the more they will naturally follow the lead of The Time. The nature does not impose its will on humans as it does on animals. This is the fundamental meaning of equality, and it is also a society backed by the public. Since the end of the nineteenth century, Chinese society has been socially modernizing women. The liberation of the mind has brought about the opening of the gender concept, and women can enter the public space and perform on the stage. Some excellent female movie stars even have considerable social attention, and Yang Naimei is one of the outstanding ones. To some extent, Yang Naimei’s screen image and personal achievements opened up the limits of women’s abilities in the 1920s. They became a typical sample for the successful women’s study at that time.

Adept at playing social butterfly roles without affectation, Yang Naimei became the first female star in Chinese film history to be known for her womanizing. It’s hard to say whether this is an affirmation of an actress’s acting prowess or a woman’s subtle moral satire. But on the other hand, Yang’s characters, from Junqian, the obsessive and unruly little aunt in “Soul of the Jade Pear” to Qiang Wang, the comic girl who juggled three men in “Everywhere the Roses Bloom at the End of April,” both Yang Naimei and Yu Meiyuan, the bold love pursuer and social rebel in the *Strange Woman*, broke through the consistent group images of miserable, depressed and helpless female characters in early Chinese films to some extent (FENG, 2013, p.

124). Combined with displaying her talents and beautiful images off-screen, Yang Naimei realized the successful women's image building in various fields of social stage and public media.

There is no doubt that Yang Naimei's screen image and private life have a clever intertextual relationship with Yu Meiyun, her leading lady in the film. Eager to break through the traditional barriers and pursue self-liberation and expression, Yang Naimei is also a "strange woman" in the era, although she does not follow moral discipline and obey the family arrangement: she studied abroad to become an elite intellectual woman. Nor was it more successful in his career: Nai Mei Films eventually became a one-film company. However, Yang Naimei's practice and success of "all the pioneering actions of female actresses in South Asia" can also be regarded as an unconscious revolution of the female body (SAN, 1936, p. 4). The weakness of women's power determined by The Times makes it impossible for strange women like Yang Naimei to find a real way to break through the environment. Still, the personal history they strive to write is worth rediscovering and studying.

This article is well written, detailed and clear in all aspects, fluent and not boring. The whole story is told. The language is clear, and every woman should read it. Moreover, they should also realize that participation in social labor is a right that countless predecessors have won for us and a prerequisite for their liberation. Without economic independence, they can only be a vassal for their life. Without independence, there is no freedom (WU, 1928, p. 23.).

Yang Naimei's character and behavior at that time and later were an anomaly among the early Chinese female film stars. Her unique family background and the era atmosphere of gradual urban modernization of Shanghai Tang have cultivated her capricious and bold character. Her legendary life is itself another legend under one screen. As Lu Xun reminded me, in those days, women who defied convention and were unconventionally faced the same dilemma: what to do once Nora left? Either descend or return. The contemporary metropolitan women's modernization appears to begin with the body revolution, but where may this path lead? In Yang Naimei's period, the question of how women should approach innovation has long loomed large. The traditional consciousness and the town of nothing in the patriarchal society have reduced their power to break through the encircling momentarily. They are leaving only historical facts and citing the achievement of a living legend (ZHOU, 2004, p. 118).

Even now, gender equality is still a long-term goal. However, the sad fact is that traditional family values are still deeply rooted since the founding of the People's Republic, and women who give up childbearing and family for career and art (in Yang Naimei's case) are still stigmatized by society. Fortunately, we still have time. I want to witness the awakening of women's independent consciousness in the socialist environment and learn to think independently in compulsory education. I hope that all women in the coming years can improve their independent consciousness in such a socialist environment and help themselves to be liberated.

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