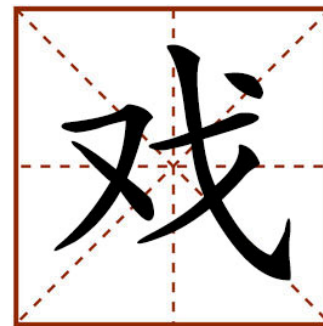


# Yang Jiang: staying positive in hardship

CHINESE WISDOM



xì

When used as a noun, this character refers to a drama, play, game, or a sport. When used as a verb, it usually means “to play tricks on.”

烽火戏诸侯

fēng huǒ xì zhū hóu

*Feng hu* describes warning beacons, or the fires lit at the top of a watchtower to warn of enemies. In ancient China, this system was set up in the face of an external threat. *Xi* means “to make fun of” or “to play tricks on.” *Zhu hou* refers to the rulers of vassal states and fiefs.

This term is derived from a story about the last king of the Western Zhou Dynasty (c. 1046–771 BCE), King You of Zhou. It is said that the king was dazzled by a woman named Baosi and made her his concubine. Baosi was an icy beauty who did not laugh a lot. After trying many methods and failing, a courtier provided an idea: light the beacons to mock the nobles. King You adopted it. On seeing the signal fire all the *zhuhou* ran to the palace thinking that the much-feared moment had finally arrived—the Quanrong nomads were about to attack—only to find that everything was a prank intended to make Baosi laugh. Even after he had impressed Baosi, the king continued to abuse his use of warning beacons and lost the trust of the *zhuhou*.

King You deposed Queen Shen and Crown Prince Yijiu. He made Baosi the new queen and their son Bofu the new crown prince. Furious at the deposition of his daughter and grandson Crown Prince Yijiu, Queen Shen's father, the Marquess of Shen, mounted an attack on King You's palace with the help of the Quanrong nomads. King You called for his nobles using the previously abused beacons, but none came. In the end, King You and Bofu were killed and the Western Zhou was overthrown.

King You of Zhou has become a cautionary tale in Chinese history. His story was used to warn rulers explicitly against the pursuit of an indulgent life of pleasure seeking. However, this story may not be true. According to an archaeological discovery from the Warring States Period (475–221 BCE), the Shen family cooperated with Quanrong nomads to attack King You of Zhou because King You first attacked the vassal state of Shen.

## EDITOR'S NOTE

Yang Jiang (1911–2016) was a renowned Chinese writer, playwright, and translator. She was married to Qian Zhongshu (1910–1998), one of the greatest writers in 20th century China, the author of the novel *Weicheng (Fortress Besieged)*. Yang and her husband were seen as a model couple. These two individuals, each with strong spirits but delicate hearts, fell in love. In their 63 years of marriage, the small family of three members (the couple and their daughter), went through wars, political turmoil, and illness, but they were always there for each other.

By LUO YINSHENG

During the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression, Shanghai was occupied by the Japanese invaders from 1937 to 1945. In this occupied city, Yang Jiang, already a well-known writer, began to write plays. These plays met huge success. After their stage debut, her plays were widely praised by critics and ordinary audiences alike.

Instead of directly depicting the war, Yang's plays focused on human stories, revealing people's bright, indomitable spirits during wartime. Yang Jiang said, “For the Chinese people who lived under Japanese heel, if their unwillingness to compromise and to yield [to the Japanese invaders] was a form of resistance, and if the absence of sadness and depression represented their tenacity, then, the laughter from my two comedies shows that we kept our faith during the long, dark night, and we still stay positive in hardship.”

## From Yang Jikang to Yang Jiang

During the wartime, people who stayed in the occupied Shanghai suffered on a daily basis. Their experiences were epitomized by Yang's statement in her memoir, *Women Sa (The Three of Us)*: “The flour that the Japanese rationed to citizens was black and all sorts of stuff came out when it was sifted and even then it was still mostly bran, while the rice rations were just rice husks, mixed in with white, yellow, and black grit. The black grit was easy to pick out. But the white and yellow grit had to be removed with tweezers.....I taught elementary school and wrote plays, all for fuel and for rice.” However, this small family still maintained optimism in those difficult days.

Under friends' encouragement, Yang wrote her first stage play, *Chenxin Ruyi (Heart's Desire)*, which premiered in the spring of 1943. Yang Jiang's original name was Yang Jikang. She adopted Yang



Yang Jiang and her husband Qian Zhongshu Photo: FILE

Jiang as her pseudonym before the premiere of *Heart's Desire*. After that, she became commonly known as Yang Jiang, and her original name was seldom mentioned. “Almost overnight, I was turned to Yang Jiang from Yang Jikang,” Yang said.

It was not an accident that Yang started a career playwriting. She had a gift for writing plays, which was stimulated by her friends' encouragement. Moreover, Yang had rich experiences watching the urban petty bourgeois and intellectuals live their lives. Shanghai, a metropolis where the old co-existed with the new and the East met the West, was the muse which fueled her playwrights' inspiration.

*Heart's Desire* begins with a recently orphaned young woman, Li Junyu, whose three aunts call her to return to Shanghai from Peking (present day Beijing) to live with her wealthy maternal relatives. Despite their ostensible charity, Junyu soon realizes that these well-heeled Shanghai aunts and uncles have their own selfish designs, and have clear visions of how she can best serve them. First, each household tasks her with a litany of chores. Then, Junyu is bounced from one household to the next, because her relatives fear that she may cause trouble. With her well-developed comic talent, Yang humorously depicted the various tensions and conflicts of life. She was quite familiar with the mediocrity hidden behind the bourgeois life, in a world steeped in obsessive materialism. Her audience could feel the embarrassment and weakness of elite life in Shanghai at that time. The characters in her play, portrayed with a comic tone, reveal the vicissitudes of life.

Junyu is finally sent to the family of her Great Uncle, Xu Langzhai, an odd, stubborn, and childless man with a sizable fortune. Xu's great wealth has been coveted by these relatives, who scramble to introduce their own children to him as his inheritor. All these greedy calculations, however, are declined by Xu. Junyu is sent to live with her Great Uncle because her three aunts, after taking advantage of her, want to drive her away. They believe that Junyu will not bear Xu's bad temper and she will be forced to leave. Ultimately the play concludes on an upbeat note: Junyu wins the affection of Xu and is named as his heir. An ironic series of mishaps causes stars to align for Junyu.

## Forging the Truth

After the success of *Heart's Desire*, Yang went on to write three plays, the comedies *Nongzhen Chengjia (Forging the Truth)*, *Youxi Renjian (Sporting With the World)*, and a tragedy titled *Fengxu (Windswept Blossoms)*.

*Forging the Truth* was finished in October, 1943. With her acute observation and artistic creativity, Yang captured a snapshot of 1940s' society in her play. Her abiding interest in ordinary life, which was usually ignored, can be found in her plays.

Zhou Dazhang, the main character of this play, is a charming man. Born in a poor family, Zhou has to live with his mother in a small attic above a grocery, the owner of which is his brother-in-law's family. Zhou works in an insurance company, but he doesn't work hard. Instead, his plan for success is to dump his lover, Zhang Yanhua, and to con his way into the upper class by courting

the daughter of a wealthy business tycoon. But the business tycoon doesn't agree to marry his daughter to Zhou. Meanwhile, Zhang Yanhua, the business tycoon's niece who occupies a marginal existence among her wealthy relatives, is an ambitious woman. She sets her sights on this con man, mistaking him for the real deal, and eventually tricks him into marrying her instead. These two fortune-hunters, Zhou and Zhang, finally end up with living in the small attic where Zhou and his mother used to live.

*Heart's Desire* and *Forging the Truth* became smash hits in Shanghai after they were staged. Yang wrote her third comedy *Sporting With the World*. Unfortunately, this script didn't survive.

*Windswept Blossoms* was the only tragedy that Yang wrote. Fang Jingshan, the main character of this play, is an activist passionate about social reform. He settles in a poor village with his wife, Shen Huilian, to promote rural education. Since most of Fang's time and energy are invested in his career, Shen feels ignored. Fang is arrested on false charges and is thrown into prison because he offends the local authorities. He is finally released thanks to the tireless efforts of Shen Huilian and Tang Shuyuan, Fang's dear friend. The play opens with Fang's release from prison.

After one year in prison, Fang is high in spirits and is ready to rebuild his career. Suddenly, he finds that his wife, in her husband's long absence, has grown close to Tang, and Tang has the same feelings for Shen. However, Tang refrains from his affection of Shen out of loyalty to his friend. It is a great blow to Fang. He writes a suicide note and plans to drown himself in a pond. In the mistaken belief that Fang has committed suicide, Tang openly declares his love for Shen and embraces her. However, Shen is miserable because she feels guilty about Fang's death. At that moment, Fang gives up on his plans to kill himself and comes back. On seeing the two lovers together, Fang threatens to kill Shen for her “affair.” In the hysteria of the moment, Shen seizes his gun and fatally shoots herself, leaving Fang weeping bitterly and Tang standing transfixed. The curtain slowly descends.

If *Heart's Desire* and *Forging the Truth* reflect Yang's cynical view of human affairs and her adept use of humor to confront the absurdities and cruelties of society, then *Windswept Blossoms* marks a shift from social criticism to a further exploration of life. The name of the play, *Windswept Blossoms*, indicates that people cannot control all of the events that happen to them.

The article was edited and translated from Guangming Daily. Luo Yinsheng is a biographer of Yang Jiang.