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Reimagining Elite Women's Culture in Late Imperial China: Social Networks, Literary Legacies, and the Transition to Modernity

“Talented women’s culture” (*cainü wenhua* 才女文化) has emerged as a popular topic in Chinese women’s history since the 1990s, perhaps exemplified best by the works of Dorothy Ko and Susan Mann which have served as inspiration for successive generations of scholars and led to a surge of research on elite women’s culture during late imperial China.¹ Notably, there are at least 423 monographs and articles covering 89 individual female writers from the Ming-Qing period (1368–1911), with 82% of these works being published after 2000.²

Scholars have largely assessed elite women’s culture, whether concentrating on individuals (or their individual works) or grouping them and/or their writings based on common attributes, from two approaches: their biographical backgrounds and literary works. Moreover, the locality and association of elite women have been important points of analysis. For instance, in Jiangnan, where wealth and culture thrived, literati families invested in the education of their daughters, creating a reservoir of elite women with writing talents and access to publishing, a phenomenon which has resulted in previous research on elite women predominantly centering around Jiangnan. Scholars have also noted that Ming-Qing elite women were not confined to prescribed domestic roles but actively engaged in various social arenas,

1 Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994); Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997). When reviewing the studies of women’s literature in the Qing dynasty, Hu Siao-chen 胡曉真 also credits these two books as “laying a significant foundation for literary research.” Hu Siao-chen 胡曉真, “Yiwen shengming yu shenti zhengzhi: Qingdai funü wenxue shi yanjiu qushi yu zhanwang” 藝文生命與身體政治 – 清代婦女文學史研究趨勢與展望 [Literary experience and body politics: Directions in the study of women’s literature of the Qing], *Jindai Zhongguo funüshi yanjiu* 近代中國婦女史研究 13 (December 2005): 29.

2 This survey includes works in Chinese, English, Japanese, and Korean. The well-known female writer and martyr Qiu Jin 秋瑾 (1875–1907), however, is not included as the surveyor claims that the scholarship on her is enormous. Kelvin Yu-hin Ho 何宇軒, “Ming Qing nüxing zuojia zhi gebie yanjiu lunzhu zhijianlu” 明清女性作家之個別研究論著知見錄 [A selected bibliography of scholarship on individual studies of Ming-Qing women writers], *Shumu jikan* 書目季刊 50, no. 4 (March 2017): 75–114.

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such as Jiaoyuan shishe 蕉園詩社 (Banana Garden Poetry Society).³ Dorothy Ko's observations even indicate that some poetry clubs in which women participated were neither kinship-based nor gender-exclusive, suggesting that elite women may have played larger roles in public than previously believed.⁴ When examining the literary works of elite women, scholarship has tended to analyze them by their subjects or themes, including homecoming, dreams, friendship, travel, illness, suicide, lamenting the dead, and teaching children, among many others.⁵ Overall, regardless of the research approach adopted, the study of Ming-Qing elite women's culture has evolved into a salient sub-field within the history of Chinese women.

While current scholarship on elite women continues to flourish, there regrettably remain few clues about the size and extent of their communities and connections beyond these localities and organizations. In short, understanding the macro view is essential for accurately estimating the influence of elite women's culture. Moreover, since the beginning of the twentieth century, as China sought modernization, the classical training and cultural achievements of elite women were mostly disdained and deemed "useless" for the betterment of the state and society in the new era. The concept of the "talented woman" came to symbolize the "old tradition," whereas the "new woman" (*xin nǚxing* 新女性), who had received a modern education and wrote in the vernacular, represented the new cultural trend of the time, all of which further clouded the impact of the "old" talented woman. This chapter aims to explore shifts in elite women's culture, particularly examining different patterns in the social networks of talented women, to in part lift the cloud obscuring their larger communities. Scholars have pointed out that Ming-Qing women relied on patronage from male kin and teachers to publish their works.⁶ However, the late Qing period also saw the emergence of new institutions, such as newspapers and periodicals, which became available to women, enabling a greater visibility of their writings and transformations in social networks as well as ultimately reshaping women's culture. To detect these social networks of talented women, this study selects female writers engaged in classical literature circles and utilizes network analysis tools for visualizing their connections, including kinship,

3 Daria Berg, "Negotiating Gentility: The Banana Garden Poetry Club in Seventeenth-Century China," in *The Quest for Gentility in China: Negotiations beyond Gender and Class*, ed. Daria Berg and Chloe Starr (London: Routledge, 2007), 73–93.

4 Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, 179–250.

5 For a bibliography of elite women in late imperial China, see Kelvin Yu-hin Ho 何宇軒, "Ming Qing nǚxing zhuzuo yanjiu qushi chutan: Fu Ming Qing nǚxing zuopin zongji, nǚxing biejì zhijian-lu" 明清女性著作研究趨勢初探 – 附明清女性作品總集、女性別集知見錄 [An overview of scholarship on Ming-Qing women's writings and record of anthologies and collected works of Ming-Qing women's text], *Shumu jikan* 書目季刊 51, no. 4 (March 2018): 101–2.

6 Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, 29–67; Ellen Widmer, "The Epistolary World of Female Talent in Seventeenth-Century China," *Late Imperial China* 10, no. 2 (December 1989): 1–43.

educational institutions, employment, social activities, and literary exchanges. These insights shed light on how women leveraged social and cultural capital to enhance their positions while contending with the challenges brought about by the “new woman” of the New Culture Movement, as well as revealing the divergent paths of women's culture during the transition from the late Qing period to the Republican era (1912–1949).

Attributes of Talented Women

Unlike the groups discussed in other chapters, the category of “talented women” lacks a distinct identity or boundary. In Chinese official histories, the women listed in the biographical section (*lienüzhuan* 列女傳) were primarily chosen based on their character and chastity rather than their talent. Fortunately, since the Qing dynasty, scholars spanning several generations have dedicated great efforts to compiling women's literary works, an endeavor which allows us to define the community of talented women in this chapter as those who had received classical training and published their poems and prose.⁷

For this study, we established the research platform Modern Women's Biographies (*Jindai funü zhuanji* 近代婦女傳記; hereafter MWB) in collaboration with the Ming Qing Women's Writings database (hereafter MQWW), which includes 2,722 biographical entries: 886 on talented women, 501 on female professors, and 1,333 on authors of women's journals.⁸ Our selection includes 826 women, whose biographies have been outlined and relations with others have been tagged, born during the period from the reign of the Jiaqing Emperor (r. 1796–1820) to the Xuantong

7 For the boom in the compilation of talented women's works in the Qing and the early Republican era, see Kang-I Sun Chang, “Gender and Canonicity: Ming-Qing Women Poets in the Eyes of the Male Literati,” in *Hsiang Lectures on Chinese Poetry*, ed. Grace S. Fong (Montreal: McGill University Press, 2001): 1:1–18; Ellen Widmer, “The Rhetoric of Retrospection: May Fourth Literary History and the Ming-Qing Woman Writer,” in *The Appropriation of Cultural Capital: China's May Fourth Project*, ed. Milena Dolezelova-Welingerova and Oldrich Kral (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001): 193–225.

8 This database, founded by the Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, establishes the biographical entries of women from the late Qing period to the Republican era. Its sources include *Qing-dai guige shiren zhenglüe* 清代閨閣詩人徵略 (Brief Biographies of Qing Women Poets of the Inner Chambers), and *Minguo guixiu ji* 民國閨秀集 (*Collection of Genteel Ladies's Works during the Republican Era*), *Zhongguo lidai cainü shige jianshang cidian* 中國歷代才女詩歌鑑賞辭典 (*Dictionary of Poetry by Talented Women in Chinese History*), and the Ming Qing Women's Writings database. The MQWW, founded by McGill University under Grace Fong's supervision, draws data from 426 collections of poetry in which the works of 5,240 female poets are included. The project is ongoing and the open data are updated annually. See <https://digital.library.mcgill.ca/mingqing/english/introduction.php> <https://digital.library.mcgill.ca/mingqing/english/introduction.php> (accessed on May 16, 2023).

emperor (r. 1908–1911). It is important to note, however, that this selection represents only a portion of the entire population of talented women. For example, the book *Ming Qing Anhui funü wenxue zhushu jikao* 明清安徽婦女文學著述輯考 (*Compilation of Literary Works of Ming-Qing Women from Anhui*), edited by Fu Ying (傅瑛), includes 654 female poets,⁹ but the MQWW only has records of 225 women from Anhui. The omission of this collection as a source means that Anhui's representation within the entire population of talented women has been underestimated, a stark reminder that it is impossible to unearth all the literary works of women. Nonetheless, this above sample allows us to sketch general patterns regarding talented women to a degree of certain confidence.

Regarding the biographical information of the selected 826 talented women, their native places, to begin, are distributed as shown in Table 1. The table indicates that these women hailed from various provinces across China, yet there is a notable concentration in the Lower Yangzi region. Among the 783 known samples with identifiable birthplaces, 519 (66%) were from Zhejiang or Jiangsu, the two provinces renowned for their flourishing literary culture and well-developed printing industry. This finding aligns with previous research that emphasizes the significance of these regions in nurturing talented women.¹⁰

Table 1: Numbers of talented women and their native places during the Qing dynasty.

Native place	Talented women	Native place	Talented women
Zhejiang	259	Jilin	8
Jiangsu	257	Henan	5
Hunan	52	Guizhou	4
Anhui	42	Shaanxi	3
Fujian	38	Shanxi	3
Guangdong	34	Gansu	3
Zhili	19	Fengtian	3
Jiangxi	18	Yunnan	2
Hubei	11	Mongolia	2
Sichuan	9	Guangxi	2
Shandong	9	Unknown	43
		Total	826

9 Fu Ying 傅瑛, ed., *Ming Qing Anhui Funu Wenxue Zhushu Jikao* 明清安徽婦女文學著述輯考 [Compilation of literary works of Ming-Qing women from Anhui] (Hefei: Huangshan shushe, 2010), 1.

10 Susan Mann uses Hu Wenkai's 胡文楷 *Lidai funü zhuzuo kao* 歷代婦女著作考 (A Survey of Woman Writers through the Ages) to identify the place of birth of 3,181 women in the Qing and has discovered that 2,258 (70.9%) came from the lower Yangzi region. Mann, *Precious Records*, 230.

Table 2: Numbers of talented women and periods of their birth during the Qing dynasty.

Imperial reign(s)	MQWW	Annual average	MWB	Annual average
Shunzhi (1644–1661)	31	1.8	–	–
Kangxi (1662–1722)	92	1.5	–	–
Yongzheng (1723–1735)	13	1.0	–	–
Qianlong (1736–1795)	250	4.2	–	–
Jiaqing (1796–1820)	157	6.5	169	7.0
Daoguang (1821–1850)	181	6.2	185	6.4
Xianfeng–Tongzhi (1851–1874)	82	3.7	93	4.0
Guangxu–Xuantong (1875–1911)	54	1.5	99	2.8
Unknown	2,280		280	
Total	3,140		826	

Secondly, Table 2 presents the numbers of talented women in each reign of the Qing dynasty. Due to the lack of accurate birth dates for most women in the MQWW and the MWB, imperial reigns are used to identify the period in which they were born. As indicated here in Table 2, the majority of women recorded in the MQWW (73%) are known to have been born during the Qing dynasty. In the MWB, the “unknown” category refers to those women who were verified to have been born in the period from the reigns of Jiaqing to Xuantong, which represents 34% of the talented women in said period. According to the data of the MQWW, the reign of the Qianlong Emperor (r. 1735–1796) witnessed the first upsurge of talented women’s culture, with 250 female poets being recorded during a span of 59 years. This trend continued into the reigns of the Jiaqing and Daoguang (r. 1820–1850) emperors, during which 157 and 181 women writers were recorded, respectively. The annual average number of talented women in the three reigns was 4.2, 6.5, and 6.2. The MWB indicates a similar trend; that is, 169 female writers were recorded during the reign of Jiaqing, averaging 7 per year. In other words, Qing elite women’s culture reached its peak in the first half of the nineteenth century. This trend, however, was interrupted by the Taiping Rebellion from 1850 to 1864, a time which saw Jiangnan gravely devastated, to the extent that many elite families could no longer afford to cultivate the literary talents of their daughters. Simultaneously, a new type of education emerged where classical poetry was just one of the subjects for women. By the end of the Qing dynasty, the number of talented women never reached its pre-Taiping level.

Table 3: Marital status of talented women.

Status	Number	Percentage
Primary wife	495	60%
Second wife	71	9%
Betrothed	24	3%
Concubine	24	3%
Unmarried	20	2%
Courtesan	3	0%
Unknown	189	23%
Total	826	100%

Continuing to a third element of their identity, Table 3 presents the marital status of the talented women. Out of the 826 samples, only 23 individuals are unmarried, which includes 3 who have been identified as courtesans, indicating a marriage rate of over 75%. As shown in Table 3, elite families preferred to marry their daughters “out” as primary wives as it represented prestige and a certain status. The status of being a second wife was legally recognized, and the woman would be enshrined in the ancestral hall after her death. Betrothed here refers to those who were engaged, but either party died before the two were wed. Concubines, only 3% of sampled talented women, did not hold a formal status within Chinese households, and even if they bore sons, were not necessarily honored in the ancestral shrine following their death. As a result, most elite families were reluctant to marry their daughters out as concubines. The underrepresentation of courtesans in our data set does not mean that courtesans in the Qing dynasty did not write or publish poetry – some adoring clients did indeed preserve their works. However, when the Qing poet Yun Zhu (惲珠) (1771–1833) compiled *Guochao guixiu zhengshi ji* 國朝閨秀正始集 (*Collection of Writings Conforming to Custom of Genteel Ladies of the Qing*), she deliberately omitted the writings of Buddhist nuns and prostitutes, separating them from “genteel ladies” (*guixiu* 閨秀) who not only possessed literary talents but also adhered to wifely respectability. As Susan Mann points out, Yun Zhu’s views “were widely shared in the High Qing era,” and “mid-Qing courtesans – unlike the *guixiu* – had no kinsmen who were able or willing to preserve and publish their work.”¹¹ This also explains why so few poems by courtesans circulated during the mid-Qing.

But this survey of talented women’s marital status also raises an intriguing question: Did marriage hinder women from literary creativity? Undoubtedly, a daughter-in-law’s responsibilities over domestic affairs might have occupied her time for writing, and a demanding mother-in-law could potentially stifle her creative pur-

¹¹ Mann, *Precious Records*, 122–3.

suits. A case in point is the renowned poet Wang Duan (汪端) (1793–1839), who was once criticized by her mother-in-law for disorderliness in domestic affairs. She noted that while Wang Duan “possessed sufficient knowledge of ancient practices as the wife of Peizhi, she lacked the talent to navigate change.”¹² However, the presence of so-called “singing in harmony” poetry between husbands and wives in the Qing serves as evidence that talented women persisted in their writing endeavors even after marriage.¹³ This suggests that despite potential challenges, these gifted women continued to express their literary talents, demonstrating resilience and determination in pursuing their artistic passions within the constraints of married life.

Social Networks of Talented Women in the Early nineteenth century

In exploring the intricate interconnections among talented women, we utilize the network analysis tool Gephi to visually represent these relationships. This process involves constructing multi-mode networks for analysis, incorporating three types of nodes: individuals, texts, and organizations. The texts under scrutiny specifically include *Qiaoying* (喬影) [*The Fake Image*] by Wu Zao (吳藻) and the journals featuring publications by Chen Xiaocui (陳小翠) – both instances will be extensively discussed later. Organizations (N = 314) encompass those highlighted in the biographies of talented women, while individuals are categorized into five groups based on their attributes, as outlined below.

1. Talented Women (N = 770): These are the central figures of this study.
2. Female Teachers (N = 56): While talented women generally shared a common background characterized by domesticity, a few also served as teachers within the inner chambers. Furthermore, during the late Qing period, educated women working outside their homes became increasingly common, leading us to further distinguish female teachers from the category of talented women.

¹² Chen Wenshu 陳文述, *Yidao tang wen chao* 頤道堂文鈔 [Writings of Yidao Hall] (1807), *juan* 14, 4.

¹³ See Weijing Lu, “Writing Love: The *Heming ji* by Wang Zhaoyuan and Hao Yixing,” in *Gender and Chinese History: Transformative Encounters*, ed. Beverly Bossler (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015), 83–109; Xiaorong Li, “‘Singing in Dis/Harmony’ in Times of Chaos: Poetic Exchange Between Xu Can and Chen Zhilin during the Ming-Qing Transition,” *Jindai Zhongguo funüshi yanjiu* 近代中國婦女史研究 19 (December 2011): 215–54. Sufeng Xu, “Domesticating Romantic Love during the High Qing Classical Revival: Poetic Exchanges between Wang Zhaoyuan (1763–1851) and Her Husband Hao Yixing (1757–1829),” *Nan Nü: Men, Women and Gender in China*, Volume 15, Issue 2 (January 2013): 219–264.

3. Related Talented Women (N = 46): This group, born before the reign of Jiaqing, comprises female seniors who were predecessors or influential figures to the above main protagonists.
4. Related Degree Holders (N = 67): Those who had passed the imperial civil service examinations and held degrees of *juren* or *jinshi*.
5. Related Persons (N = 5,889): This category includes individuals connected to the talented women but who lack specific degrees or notable designations.

To explore the intricate networks among talented women, three principal categories of affiliations have been delineated: family, friendship, and organization. The familial ties expounded in the biographies of these talented women predominantly encapsulate immediate family connections, including parents, grandparents, siblings, and progeny. Additionally, a subset of narratives delves into the impact of more distantly related kin, such as aunts, uncles, and cousins. To systematically distinguish between these variants of familial bonds, they have been designated as either “family” or “family (distant).” The sphere of friendship is also stratified into two groups. The friendship (writing) relationship pertains to instances where individuals have contributed prefaces, epigraphs, postscripts, or concise biographies, or have engaged in collaborative poetic endeavors with the focal subjects of scrutiny. Conversely, the term friendship, in its exclusive sense, denotes a mutual acquaintance devoid of the aforementioned literary collaborations.

In instances where multiple connections coalesce between two individuals, precedence is distinctly accorded in the sequence of family, friendship (writing), family (distant), and plain friendship. In contrast, organizational relationships exclusively pertain to connections between an individual and an organization. Comprehensive quantitative details for each type of connection, including the number of edges for each, can be found in Table 4.

Table 4: Types and numbers of social network edges.

Type of edges	Number of edges retained (k = 3)	Total number of edges	Percentage of the total
Family	300	1,792	17%
Friendship (writing)	264	2,544	10%
Family (distant)	141	144	98%
Friendship	281	952	30%
Organization	264	2,507	11%
Total	1,250	7,939	16%

In an effort to streamline the network analysis, the focus has been on selecting nodes connected to at least one talented woman. The size of a node is determined by the count of its edges, with larger nodes indicating a higher number of connections. This approach, along with its visual representation, allows for estimating the extent of connections a talented woman had, interpreting her influence and level of activity within the network(s), and discerning nuances between influences originating from family ties or writing connections, as well as associations with other talented women, degree holders, ordinary related persons, or organizations.

Subsequently, nodes linked to a minimum of three other nodes ($k = 3$) are meticulously isolated to enhance lucidity, resulting in a total of 403 nodes (5.6%) and 1,250 edges (15.75%), as detailed in Tables 4 and 5. In essence, each node, on average, maintains six edges, with at least one connecting to a talented woman. Following this filtration, nodes exhibiting three or more connections are retained, while those linked solely to one talented woman are eliminated. This process ensures the preservation of more dynamically engaged nodes, contributing to a refined and robust network representation.

Table 5: Types and numbers of social network nodes.

Type of node	Number of nodes retained ($k = 3$)	Total number of nodes	Percentage of the total
Talented woman	107	770	14%
Female teacher	31	56	55%
Degree holder	67	67	100%
Related person	147	5,889	2%
Related talented woman	8	46	17%
Organization	43	314	14%
Total	403	7,142	6%

After the filtration process, only 14% of talented women's nodes are retained, in contrast to the 55% retention rate for female teachers. This decrease arises because numerous talented women were solely connected to a single individual, thus making them vulnerable to exclusion during filtration. When talented women concurrently assumed the role of educators, however, their engagement spanned a broader array of organizations and individuals, thereby fostering a more dynamic and expansive social interaction. The number of nodes representing degree holders remains unchanged post-screening, reflecting their sustained and active engagement within the network. In contrast, the number of related person nodes falls substantially to 2%, as the vast majority were only connected to a single talented

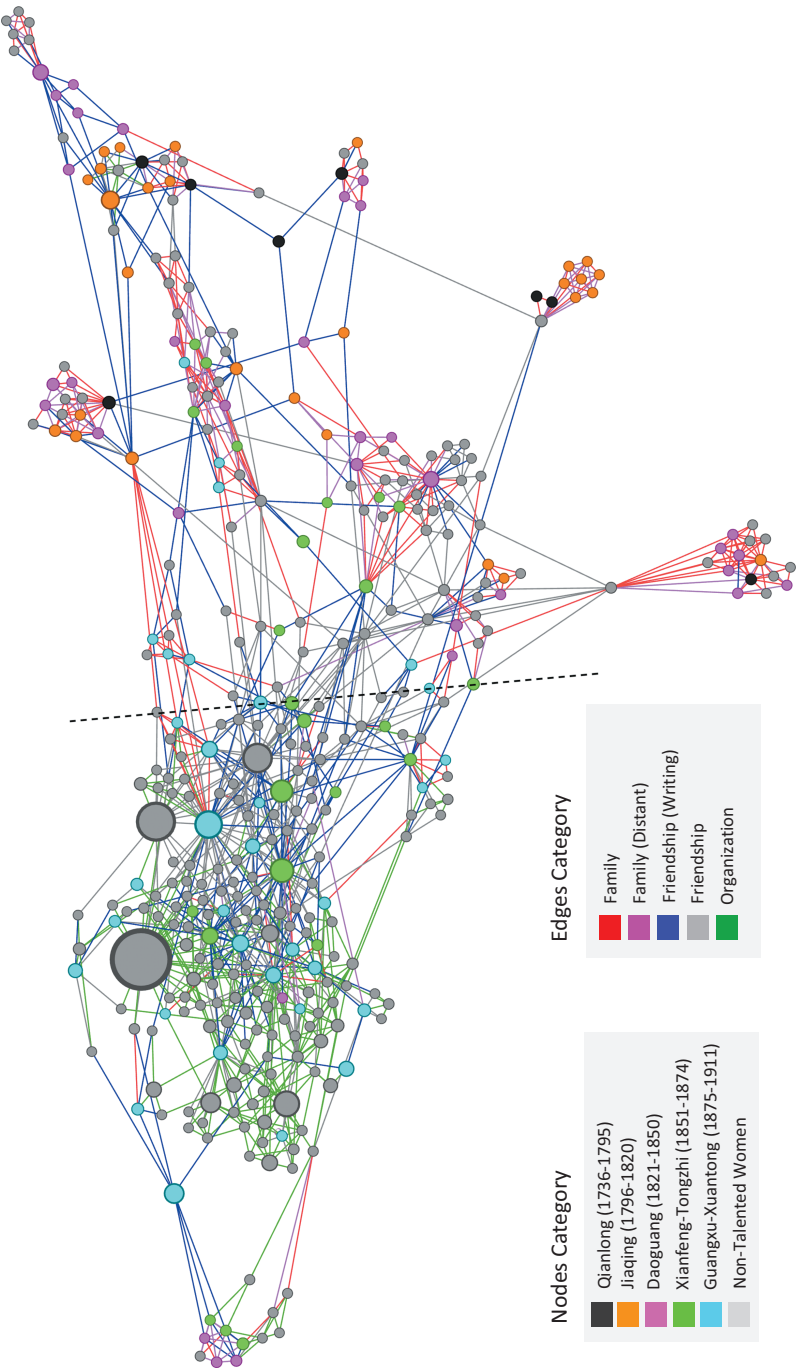


Figure 1: Social network of talented women: Periods of birth.

woman.¹⁴ Likewise, the count of organization nodes declines to 14% post-filtering, as it suggests that the prevalence of many of these organizations in the network results from the involvement of a solitary talented woman.

The nodes and edges are visually represented in the social network diagrams using Gephi, as illustrated in Figures 1 and 2. In Figure 1, node colors are assigned based on the birth era of talented women. Orange and pink nodes denote individuals born during the Jiaqing and Daoguang periods, primarily located on the right side of the graph. Meanwhile, green and blue nodes represent those born during the Xianfeng-Tongzhi and Guangxu-Xuantong periods, predominantly situated on the left side of the graph. Gray nodes signify entities of non-talented women, including related men and organizations. Besides the variation in color (corresponding to different time periods), there is also a noticeable difference in size between the nodes on the left and right sides. Nodes on the right are relatively uniform and generally smaller, creating well-defined clusters. In contrast, the left side features several considerably larger nodes with intersecting lines connecting them.

When applying color to the nodes based on their roles, the network diagram depicted in Figure 2 reveals intriguing patterns. The right half of the network predominantly consists of pink nodes representing talented women, accompanied by blue nodes denoting degree holders. On the left side, dominant nodes are in red, signifying female teachers, while numerous green nodes representing various organizations where talented women and female teachers participated are scattered throughout. The ensuing discussion focuses on the six clusters identified on the right side of the diagram, delving into the patterns of social relationships among talented women during the reigns of the Jiaqing and Daoguang emperors. To make the cluster networks more accessible and understandable, the cluster diagrams are

Figure 1 (continued)

Notes:

1. Node colors are based on the period of birth of talented women. The gray nodes refer to non-talented women.
2. Edge colors are based on the types of relationships between individuals. The green edge refers to the relationship between an organization and an individual.

14 It must be noted that there is a high possibility of underestimating the connections of male related persons as the relationships recorded within biographies and related sources are invariably from the perspective of talented women. For example, Zeng Guofan (曾國藩) (1811–1872) shares a connection with 16 nodes, but scholarship is aware of significantly more relationships. We have used Jin xiandai renwu zixun zhenghe xitong (近現代人物資訊整合系統) (Integrated Information System of Modern Figures) to broaden the associations of talented women, but the risk of underestimating men's roles within the network undoubtedly remains.

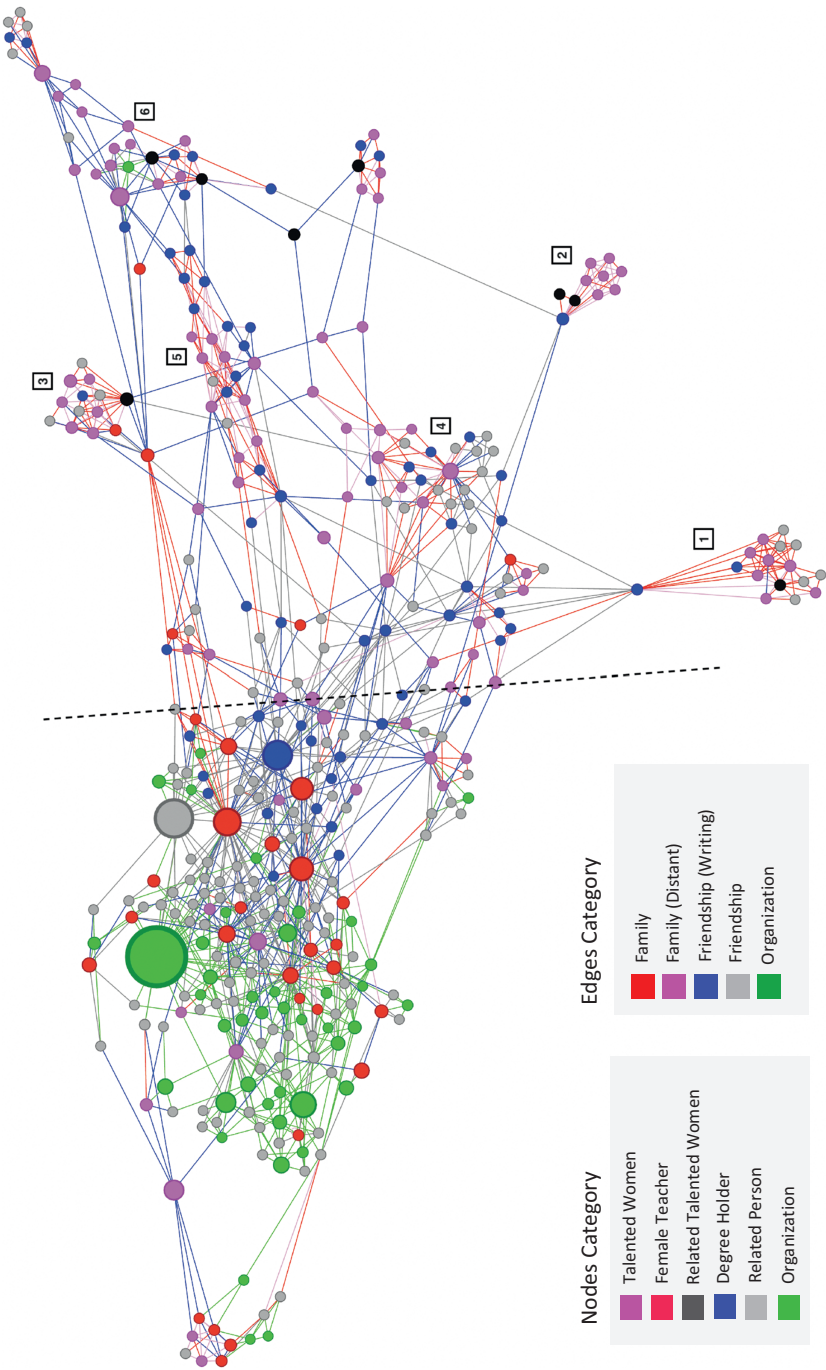


Figure 2: Social network of talented women: attributes and clusters.

portrayed in the form of ego networks centering on individuals with higher degree centrality. This exploration aims to shed light on their roles, contributions, and interactions within their respective clusters and the broader network.

Clusters 1 and 2 display a strong internal cohesion, relying exclusively on male members to establish connections with the outside world. Cluster 1 specifically represents the Zhou family of Hunan, whose matriarch, Lady Wang (王氏), assumed the responsibilities of educating her daughters and granddaughters. In acknowledgment of Lady Wang's achievements, Zuo Zongtang (左宗棠) (1812–1885), a son-in-law who was taken into the Zhou family, sponsored the publication of the anthology *Ciyun ge shichao* (慈雲閣詩鈔) (*Poetry of Ciyun Pavilion*), which is a collection of poems authored by Lady Wang and her pupils, including Zuo's wife Zhou Yiduan (周詒端) (1812–1870) and three daughters.¹⁵ Notably, Zuo Zongtang did not rely on his political associations to contribute commendations, as many literati typically did. Instead, he personally wrote a preface to honor the talented women of his extended family descended from Lady Wang. But the anthology served more so as a family memento rather than a publicized work and, resultantly, Cluster 1 had very few literary connections, with the talented women from both the Zhou and Zuo families solely dependent on Zuo Zongtang as their intermediary to the outside world (see Figure 3).

Cluster 2, in which talented women of Fujian became known through high-ranking official Liang Zhangju (梁章鉅) (1775–1849), shows a similar networking pattern to that of Cluster 1. Initially, Liang sought to compile an anthology featuring poems by Fujian poets, and to this end, he entrusted his cousin Liang Yunshu (梁韻書) (1780–1850) with the task of collecting works of female poets. Upon receiving the collection from Yunshu, Zhangju decided to publish a separate edition entitled *Minchuan guixiu shihua* (閩川閨秀詩話) (*Poetry of Genteel Ladies from Fujian*), which is divided into four *juan*, with the third focusing on Liang Zhangju's family and

Figure 2 (continued)

Notes:

1. Node colors are based on the attributes of individuals in the biographies and related sources pertaining to talented women.
2. The numbers indicated on the right of the graph denote the clusters of talented women, representing: (1) the Zhou of Hunan; (2) the Liang of Fujian; (3) the Zhang of Changzhou; (4) the Zuo of Changzhou; (5) the Xu-Yu marital liaison; (6) the poetry society Bicheng xianguan (碧城仙館).
3. The legend of this figure, unless otherwise specified, applies to the following figures of cluster and individual networks as well.

¹⁵ Zuo Zongtang 左宗棠, ed., *Ciyun ge shichao* 慈雲閣詩鈔 [Poetry of Benevolent Clouds Pavilion] (1873).

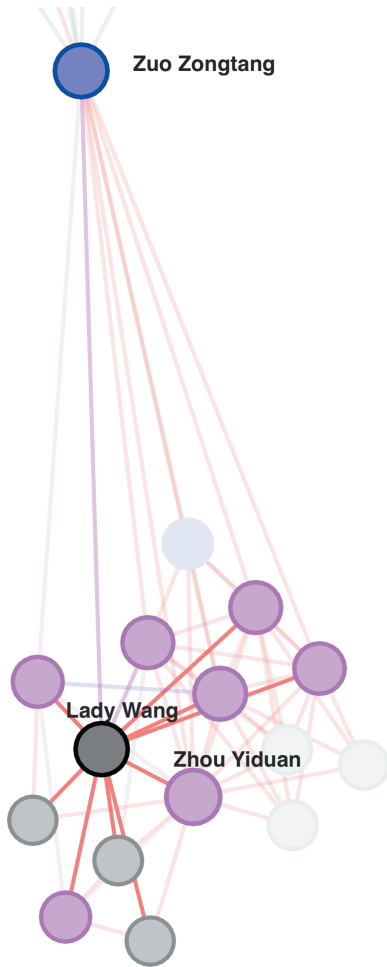


Figure 3: Cluster 1 network centered on Lady Wang.

the fourth containing works of Liang's relatives and acquaintances. Among the 103 featured female poets, 43 have been identified as being acquainted with Liang.¹⁶ Similar to Cluster 1, the talented women associated with Liang Zhangju had limited connections outside the family. This more insular network is thus characterized by

¹⁶ Wang Chia-Hung (王嘉弘), "Liang Zhangju *Minchuan guixiu shihua xuanji celüe*" 梁章鉅《閩川閩秀詩話》選輯策略 [Liang Jhang-jyu Min Chuan gui xiu shi hua's editor strategy (sic)], *Guoli Taizhong jishu xueyuan tongshi jiaoyu xuebao* 國立臺中技術學院通識教育學報 1 (December 2007): 7.

red and pink edges, indicating strong family ties and a reliance on Liang for external contacts and recognition (see Figure 4).

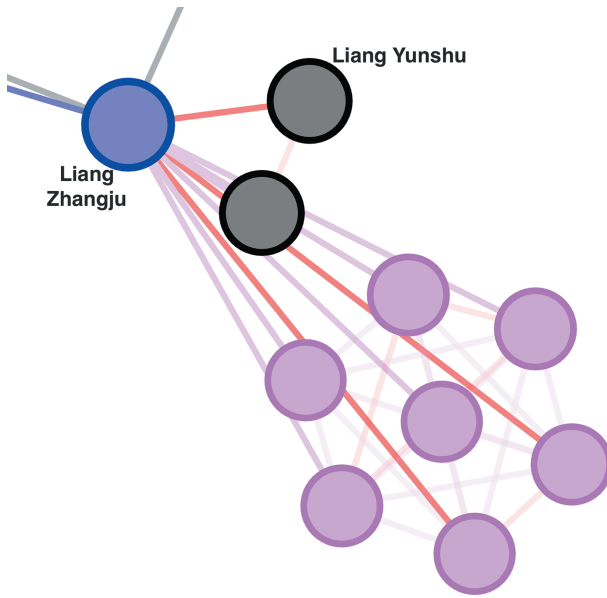


Figure 4: Cluster 2 network centered on Liang Zhangju.

A different type of network where talented women gained more publicity, however, is demonstrated by Clusters 3 and 4. More specifically, Cluster 3 represents the Zhang family of Changzhou, whose patriarch Zhang Qi (張琦) (1765–1833) dedicated many years to preparing for the imperial civil service examinations while practicing medicine and calligraphy before finally obtaining his *juren* degree. In a similar manner to the Zhou family in Cluster 1, it was Tang Yaoqing (湯瑤卿) (1763–1831), the wife of Zhang Qi, who took charge of their daughters' education while Zhang Qi frequently moved to different posts on his own. All four of their daughters became well-known poets, and the Zhang family had the remarkably unique tradition of marrying “in” sons-in-law to preserve the legacy of their talented women. Aside from the third and fourth daughters, whose husbands moved in to live with the Zhang family, the eldest daughter Zhang Qieying (張縉英) (1792–1862?) likewise remained in her natal home for 20 years after marriage. However, this was not a typical uxori-local marriage where the offspring, particularly sons, would inherit the wife's surname. Instead, the children of the Zhang sisters bore the surnames of their husbands. Lu Weijing points out that uxori-local marriage among the Qing literati served several purposes: it functioned as a reproductive tactic to

uphold patrilineal lines, a means to ascend social ranks via marital connections, and a mechanism to extend parental protection to married daughters.¹⁷ Evidently, through uxorilocal residence, the Zhang family aimed to assist their daughters in adapting to their new roles as daughters-in-law.

The Zhangs faced a scarcity of male heirs, with the eldest of Zhang Qi's two sons dying prematurely, and consequently, the younger son Zhang Yaosun (張曜孫) (1807–1863) took on the patriarchal role following his father's death. Given that his sisters and their children resided together under his estate, Yaosun assumed the responsibilities of educating his nieces, particularly the four daughters of Zhang Wanying (張訥英) (1800–1881) and of Wang Xi (王曦).¹⁸ Zhang Yaosun also actively supported the talented women in his family by publishing anthologies for his sisters, daughter, nieces, and concubine, seeking inscriptions from well-known scholars to celebrate the Zhang women's talents, demonstrating his ability to maintain connections within the literati circle despite lacking a formal degree.¹⁹ Notably, the talented women in Cluster 3, as depicted in Figure 5, exhibit a comparatively higher presence of blue edges in the network diagram, reflecting an increase in external literary connections facilitated by their male kin, setting them apart from Clusters 1 and 2. However, it is noteworthy that many of the literary connections displayed in women's publications were often linked to their father or brother, which suggests that as talented women gained more recognition, their literary ties often reflected the relationships established by their male family members.

Cluster 4 represents the Zuo family of Changzhou, with the sisters Zuo Xixuan (左錫璇) (1829–1891?) and Zuo Xijia (左錫嘉) (1831–1895) being particularly well-known poets, who are both recognized and documented in several women's biographical dictionaries, such as *Qingdai guige shiren zhenglüe* and *Lidai funü zhuzuo kao*. Growing up, they were surrounded by a community of talented female seniors: their mother Wang Yunhe (汪雲和), their mother's sister, their father's sister Zuo Cifen (左次芬), and their uncle's wife Chen Yunlian (陳蘊蓮) (1799–1869), all of

17 Weijing Lu, "Uxorilocal Marriage Among Qing Literati," *Late Imperial China* 19:2 (December 1998), pp. 64–110.

18 Susan Mann, *The Talented Women of the Zhang Family* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

19 The anthologies edited by Zhang Yaosun include Tang Yaoqing's *Pengshi ouyin* 蓬室偶吟 (Casual Rhymes from a Modest Cottage), Zhang Guanying's *Weiqing yi gao* 緯青遺稿 (Surviving Poems of Zhang Guanying), Zhang Lunying's *Lühuai shuwu shi gao* 綠槐書屋詩稿 (Collected Poems from Green Tree Studio), Zhang Qieying's *Danju xuan shi chugao* 澹菊軒詩初稿 (Collected Poems from Pale Chrysanthemum Studio), and both Zhang Wanying's *Canfeng guan wenji chubian* 餐楓館文集初編 (Collected Prose from Maple Studio) and *Linyun youyue zhi ju shi chugao* 鄰雲友月之居詩初稿 (Collected Poems from the Residence of Neighboring Clouds and Amicable Moon).

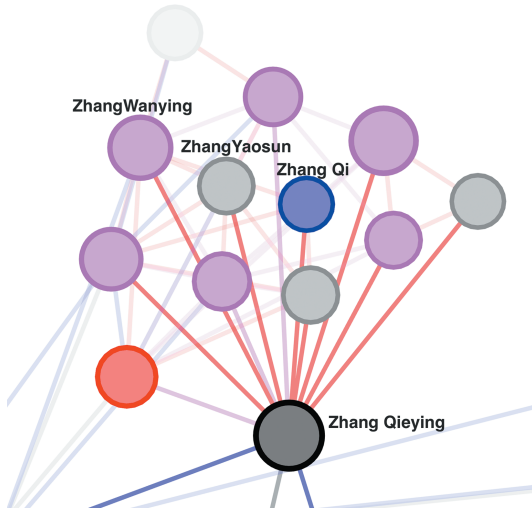


Figure 5: Cluster 3 network centered on Zhang Qieying.

whom were poets and/or painters.²⁰ The tradition of talented women was further reinforced through intermarriage with cousins. As shown in Figure 6, Xijia's daughter Zeng Yi (曾懿) (1853–1927) married Xixuan's son Yuan Xuechang (袁學昌) (1834–1876), and Xixuan's son Yuan Xuehao (袁學灝) married Zuo Wanxun's (左婉洵) daughter Zhuang Zhiqing (莊芷卿). Tragically, both Xixuan and Xijia became widowed and had to raise their children as single mothers around the age of 30 due to the Taiping Rebellion: Xixuan's husband, Yuan Jimao (袁績懋) (1818–1858), was killed by the Taiping army, and Xijia's husband, Zeng Yong (曾詠) (1813–1862), died of illness in a military camp. In 1891, on Xijia's sixtieth birthday, her sons Zeng Guangxu (曾光煦) (1836–1884?) and Zeng Guangmin (曾光岷) published the collection of their parents' poetry entitled *Zeng Taipu Zuo Furen shi gao he ke* (曾太僕左夫人詩稿合刻) (*Joint Collection of Poetry of Zeng Yong and Lady Zuo*) and sought contributions from 54 people to write prefaces or inscriptions for the collection. Except for Zuo Xixuan, Zuo Xihui (左錫蕙) (Xijia's sister, 1830–1900), Zuo Xingsan

²⁰ The dictionaries and databases we have referenced do not include the poems of Wang Yunhe, but Zuo Xijia mentioned that she did use the rhymes of her mother's poetry. Zuo Xijia 左錫嘉, "Yueye mingqin yong xianci ti tingqin zhuyue tu yun" 月夜鳴琴用先慈題停琴佇月圖韻 [The poem of "Playing Guqin in the Moonlit Night" uses the rhymes of the poem on the painting "Stop Playing Guqin and Anticipate the Rise of the Moon" by my deceased mother] and "Bai hudie yong xianci yong bai qiangwei yun" 白胡蝶用先慈詠白薔薇韻 [The poem "White Butterflies" uses the rhymes of the poem "White Roses" by my deceased mother], in *Lengyin xian'guan shi gao* 冷吟仙館詩稿 [Collected poems from Lengyin xian'guan], *juan 1*.

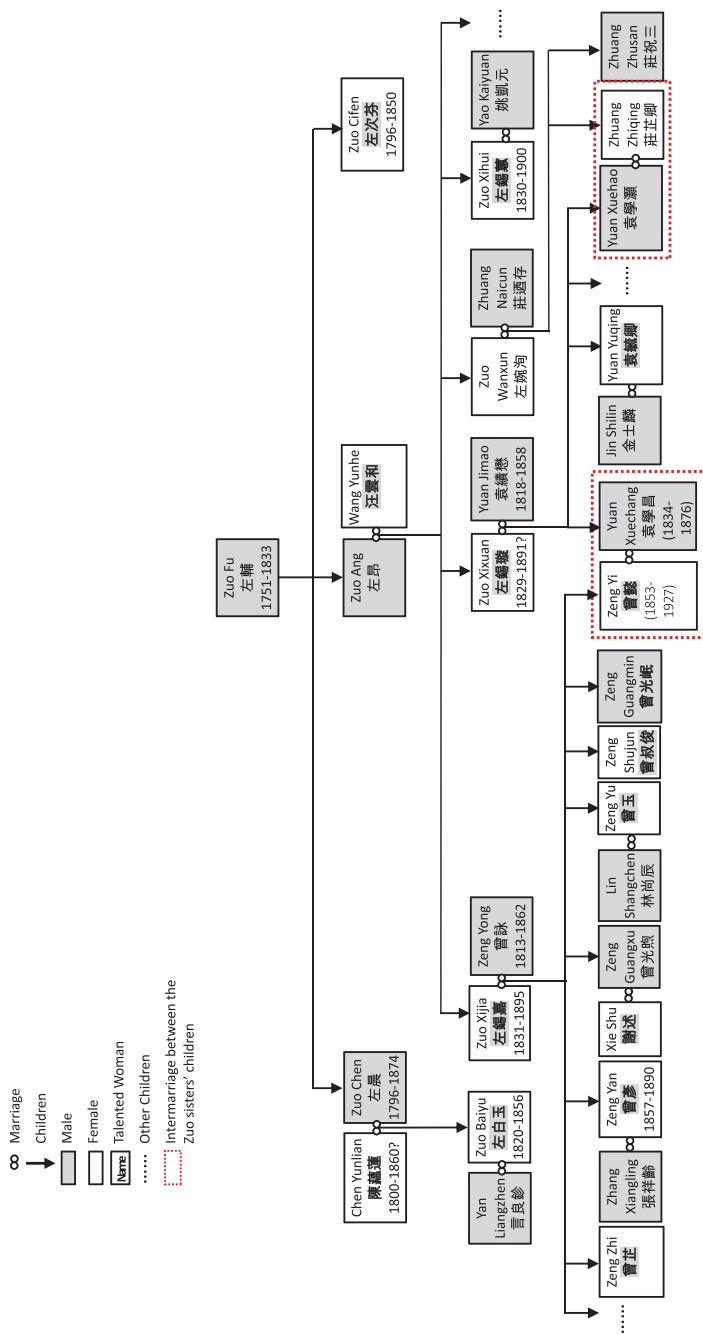


Figure 6: Zuo family tree.

Sources: Lin Mei-yi 林義敏, “Shilun Yanghu Zuoshi erdai zhi jiazou guanxi” 試論陽湖左氏二代才女之家族關係 [The Talented Women of the Zuo Clan of Yanghu and Their Family Relationships], *Zhongguo wenzhe yanjiu jikan* 中國文哲研究集刊 30 (March 2007): 193.

(左省三) (Xijia's cousin), and Lin Shangchen (林尚辰) (Xijia's son-in-law), the other contributors are all acquaintances of Zeng Yong or Zeng Guangxu. Notably, these non-familial relationships were geographically widespread, ranging from Jiangsu and Sichuan to Hebei and Shanxi. Most of the contributors were men, with the three exceptions of Zuo Xihui, Zuo Xixuan, and Zhao Yunqing (趙韻卿). Once again, the literary connections of the talented women of the Zuo family shown in the network of Figure 7 highlight the extensive relationships of the Zeng men, connections which played a crucial role in disseminating the works of the Zuo sisters and elevating their prominence within literary circles.

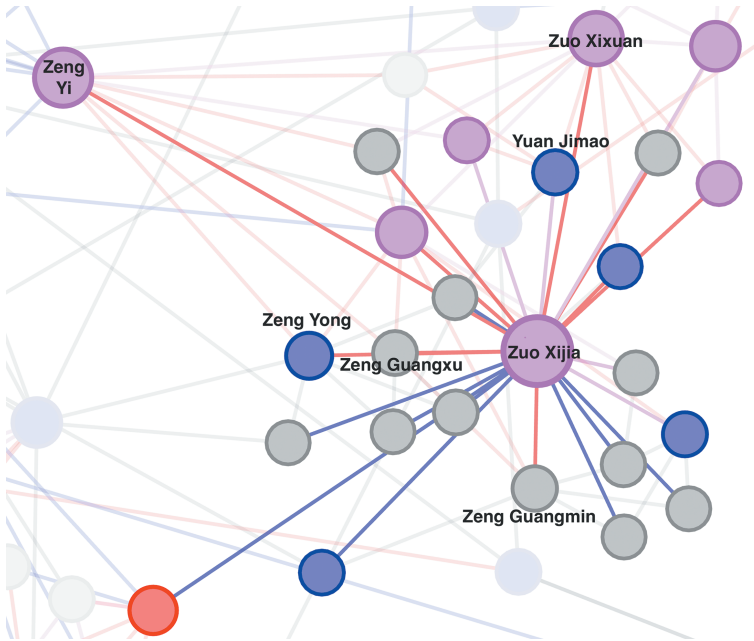


Figure 7: Cluster 4 network centered on Zuo Xijia.

Moving our attention to Cluster 5, this network illustrates the intermarriage between the Yu and Xu families, highlighting the significance of familial bonds and resources in cultivating talented women. While the networks in Clusters 1 to 4 typically stretch outwards from a core family of talented women, Cluster 5 stands out for having two centers, representing the distinct origins of talented women from both the Yu and Xu families.

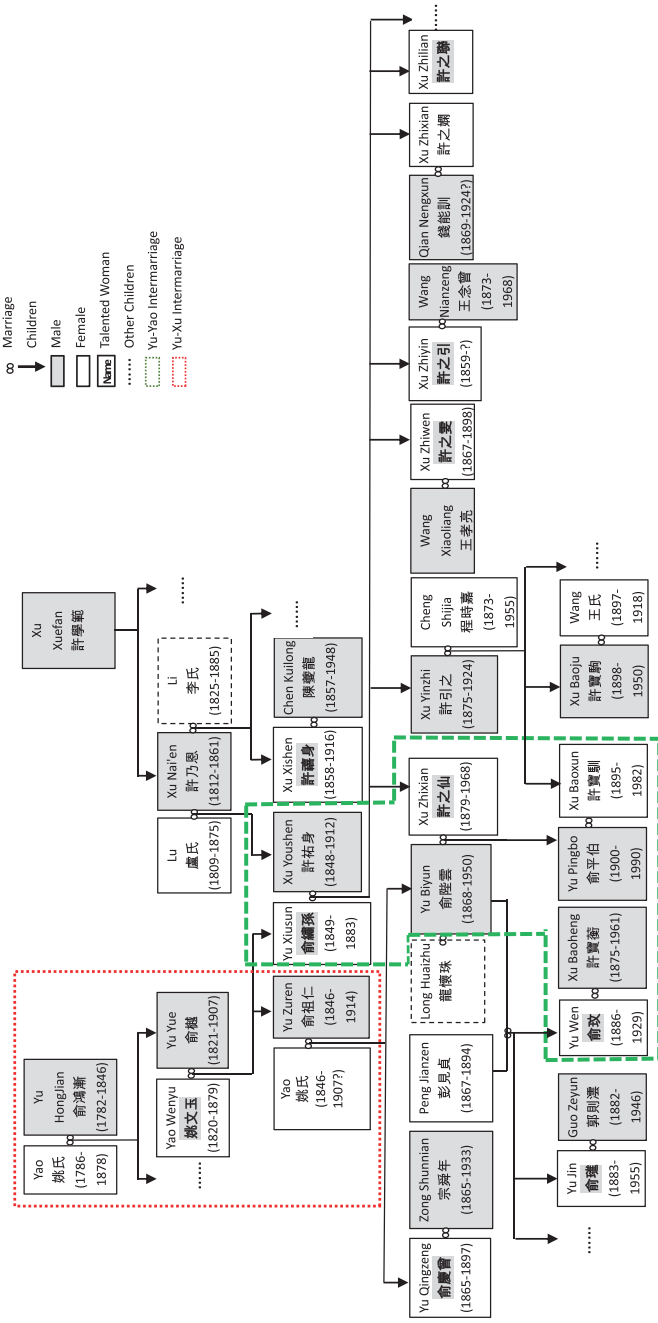


Figure 8: Yu-Yao and Yu-Xu intermarriages.

Note: Xu Baoheng (許寶衡) (1875–1961) is the grandson of Xu Baoshen (許葆身) (1816–1862), who is the cousin of Xu Youshen.

Sources: Rania Huntington, *Ink and Tears: Memory, Mourning, and Writing in the Yu Family* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018), 206, 208; see Figures A-2, A-3.

The patriarch of the Yu family was Yu Yue (俞樾) (1821–1907), who came from a literati family in Zhejiang and attained his *jinshi* degree, and his wife Yao Wenyu (姚文玉) (1820–1879) similarly belonged to a literati family in Zhejiang and was his mother's niece. The two families had a history of intermarriages for three consecutive generations (see the red-dotted area in Figure 8). In large thanks to the guidance of Yu Yue, several talented women emerged in the Yu family, including his daughter Yu Xiusun (俞繡孫) (1849–1883), granddaughter Yu Qingzeng (俞慶曾) (1865–1897), and great-granddaughters Yu Jin (俞瑾) (1883–1955) and Yu Wen (俞玟) (1886–1929).²¹ Among them, Xiusun and Qingzeng were the most renowned. The former was Yu Yue's second daughter and displayed her poetic talents as early as ten years old. She married Xu Youshen (許祐身) (1848–1912) and gave birth to six daughters and two sons, but sadly passed away at the age of 34 due to illness soon after childbirth. In memory of his beloved daughter, Yu Yue published the anthology *Huifu lou xingcao* 慧福樓幸草 (*Flattened Grass of Huifu Hall*). Qingzeng, who lost her father early and was raised by her grandparents, showed a love for reciting poetry at a young age. She married Zong Shunnian (宗舜年) (1865–1933) but could not conceive, regrettably leading to mistreatment by her in-laws. She then tragically chose to end her life by consuming opium at the age of 33. In commemoration, her grandfather Yu Yue and her brother Yu Biyun (俞陛雲) (1868–1950) collected her works and published the anthology *Xiumo xuan shici gao* (繡墨軒詩詞稿) (*Poetry of Xiumo Studio*) to honor her short-lived brilliance.

On the other side of Cluster 5 is the Xu family, an eminent clan boasting many degree holders. From the patriarch Xu Xuefan (許學範) to the generation of his great-grandson, there were five *jinshi* and thirteen *juren*. The relationship between the Xu and Yu families began with the marriage of Xu Youshen, the grandson of Xu Xuefan, to Yu Xiusun, and this Yu-Xu intermarriage occurred four times over three generations (see the green-dotted area in Figure 8). Beyond being known for producing numerous degree holders, the Xu family also generously invested in the education of their daughters, and Xu Xishen (許禧身) (1858–1916), Youshen's youngest sister, was particularly renowned. Married to Chen Kuilong (陳夔龍) (1857–1948), Xu Xishen dedicated time to teaching her daughter, Chen Changwen (陳昌紋) (1889–1905), the art of composition. When Changwen tragically passed away at the young age of 17, Xishen was heartbroken and wrote numerous poems in remembrance of her daughter, which were later published by her husband. The inscriptions found within these anthologies demonstrate that Xu Xishen played a

²¹ Yu Yue's wife Yao Wenyu was also well-versed in literature, but she did not produce many works. She left behind only one set of poems as her literary legacy. Yao Wenyu 姚文玉, "Tici" 題詞 [Inscription], in *Dongqing Shushi Yingao* 冬青書室吟稿 [Poetry of Dongqing Studio], by Yan Suzhen 晏訴真 (1849).

leading role in the literary community of both the Yu and Xu families. Not only did several nieces, nephews, and in-laws contribute inscriptions to her anthologies, but she also often composed “singing harmony poems” with them. In light of the above, Xu Xishen was a remarkable figure who served as the center of the Xu talented women’s network (Figure 9).

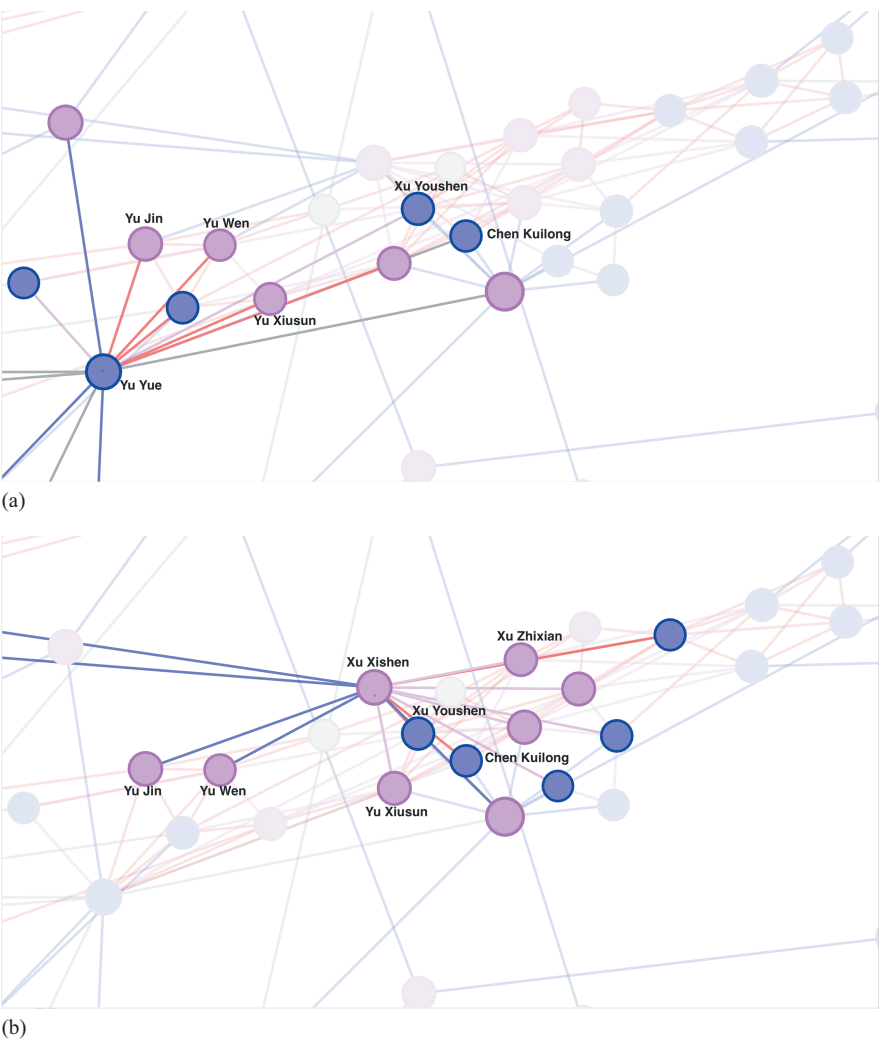


Figure 9: Cluster 5 network centered on Yu Yue and Xu Xishen.

It is worth noting that the Yu and Xu families were not just connected through marriage, but also provided significant support to one another during challenging times. For example, when Yu Xiusun passed away, her eldest child was only fourteen years old, and the youngest was just one month old. The family then decided that the eldest son, as well as the second and sixth daughters, would be raised in the house of Yu Yue, their maternal grandfather in Hangzhou. It is thus no surprise that Xu Zhixian (許之仙) (1879–1968), the sixth daughter, was arranged to marry Yu Yue's grandson, Yu Biyun. Meanwhile, the second son and the fourth and fifth daughters followed their second uncle to Yunnan; the first daughter was raised by her fourth uncle in Shandong; and the third daughter was sent to live with her aunt in Beijing.²² Another notable aspect is that while previous research on the influence of families on talented women often emphasizes vertical relationships, this network reveals the significance of horizontal relationships, namely siblings, cousins, or in-laws. In fact, the cultivation of talented women heavily relied on learning from one's sisters and/or cousins, especially when the mother felt reluctant to pass down literary skills (assuming she had developed her own) or died at a young age. When Xu Xishen's daughter passed away, for instance, her cousins reminisced about the enjoyable times they had during their childhood, which included the reciting and exchanging of poems.²³ These close familial ties, both vertical and horizontal, played a crucial part in shaping the literary abilities of these talented women.

Finally, Cluster 6 represents a different type of relationship where literary connections (blue edges) take prominence. The major figures in this group include Wu Zao (吳藻) and Ling Zhiyuan (凌祉媛) (1831–1852). Unlike the talented women discussed earlier, Wu Zao received no family support for her literary pursuits. Born in a merchant family and married into one in Renhe, Zhejiang, she cultivated her literary talents through self-learning. Figure 10 represents a social network diagram derived from her writings, revealing that Wu Zao's connections were exclusively literary in nature and devoid of familial ties, which implies that her family played no role in her accomplishments in literature. Noteworthy is the three-mode nature of this network, encompassing connections between individuals, between individuals and organizations, and between individuals and literary works. Among the nodes linked to her, nearly half are associated with literary interactions concerning the play *Qiaoying*, as indicated by the black edges in Figure 10, thereby underscoring the pivotal role of this work within her literary network. *Qiaoying* is a drama

²² Rania Huntington, *Ink and Tears: Memory, Mourning and Writing in the Yu Family* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018), 155.

²³ Xu Zhiyin 許之引, "Honggui du zuozhen ri wuliao jing fu fenghuai gongcheng cizheng" 紅閨獨坐鎮日無聊敬賦奉懷恭呈慈政 [Offering a poem to a benevolent aunt from the lonely and boring red chamber], in *Xieyuan yin cao* 偕園吟草 [Poetry of Xie Gardens], Xu Xishen 許禧身, (1891) *juan* 5.

primarily centered around the character Xie Xucai (謝絮才), who assumes a male guise, contemplates her own portrait in men's attire while perusing the work *Lisao* (離騷) (*Encountering Sorrow*), and ponders her existence as a woman constrained by unfulfilled potential and ambitions.²⁴ Wu Zao's brother Wu Mengjiao (吳夢蕉) shared this piece with his friends Ge Qingzeng (葛慶曾) and Wu Zaigong (吳載功), both of whom lavished high praise upon it. Wu Zaigong even dubbed it a “timeless masterpiece” and then enlisted Gu Lanzhou (顧蘭洲) to compose music for a theatrical presentation to be performed in the town square.²⁵ The play achieved enormous success, resulting in widespread acclaim and recognition.²⁶

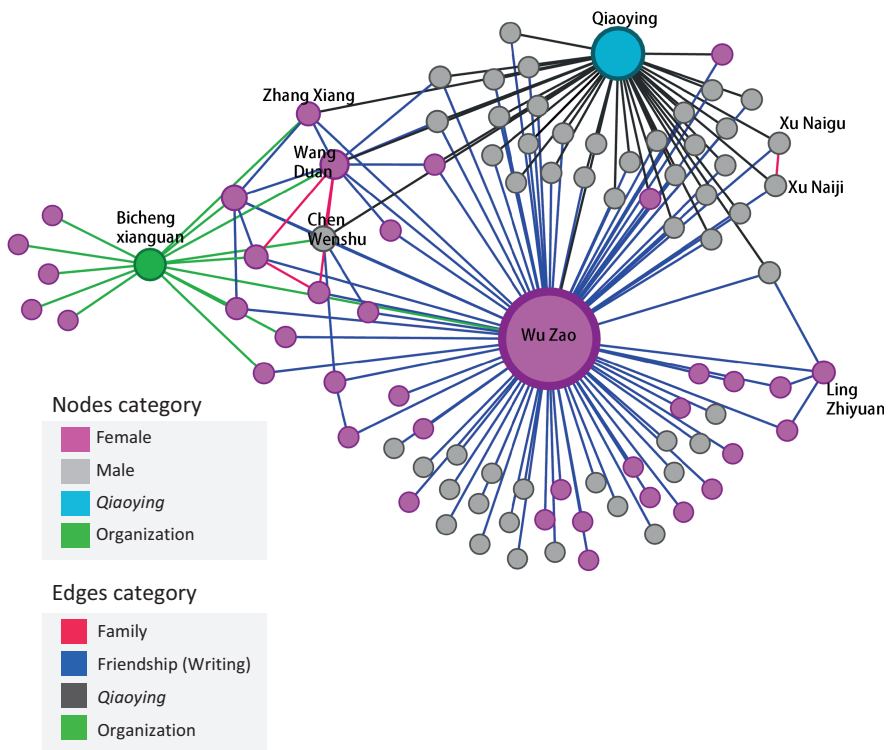


Figure 10: Social network of Wu Zao.

²⁴ For an analysis of *Qiaoying*, see Chung Hui-ling 鍾慧玲, “Wu Zao zuopin zhong de ziwo xingxiang” 吳藻作品中的自我形象 [The self-image from Wu Zao's works], *Donghai Xuebao* 東海學報, no. 37 (1996): 114–20.

²⁵ Wu Zaigong 吳載功, “Ba” 跋 [Postscript], in *Qiaoying* 喬影 [The fake image], by Wu Zao 吳藻 (1825).

²⁶ Wei Qiansheng 魏謙升, “Xu” 序 [Preface], in *Hua lian ci* 花簾詞 [Poems of the florid screen] of *Linxia yayin ji* 林下雅音集 [Collection of elegant sounds from Linxia], ed. Mao Jun 冒俊 (1884).

Subsequently, Wu Zaigong published the work and extended invitations to as many as 36 distinguished officials and scholars to contribute prefaces, including Yu Hongjian (俞鴻漸) (1781–1846), father of Yu Yue, Xu Naigu (許乃穀) (1785–1835), and Xu Naiji (許乃濟) (1777–1839), uncles of Xu Youshen and Xu Xishen. Diverging from the conventions of other literary works by female figures, this work not only embraced a dramatic script – an art form less frequented by female poets from the inner chambers – but also subverted gender norms through its narrative. What adds further intrigue is that, while many works by talented women were often published in commemoration by their families, *Qiaoying* earned its opportunity to be published due to its widespread popularity. Most of the preface authors were unacquainted with Wu Zao, resulting in minimal attention given to her virtues or personal connections; instead, their emphasis was entirely on the literary merits of the work. This approach, leveraging the praise of socially accomplished individuals to enhance both the work's visibility and the author's recognition, clearly showcases a commercial aspect, even further distinguishing it from the works produced by other female talents.

Bicheng xianguan (碧城仙館) stands as a significant node within Wu Zao's social network. The Qing dynasty witnessed a thriving culture of literary societies, which welcomed both men and women as participants, exemplified by Bicheng xianguan which was founded by Chen Wenshu (陳文述) (1771–1843) and his female disciples. Wu Zao officially became part of this gathering in 1826, but it is known that she had already exchanged poems with its members prior to her joining. As early as 1818, for instance, Wang Duan, Chen Wenshu's daughter-in-law, composed a poem on Wu Zao's painting.²⁷ In 1825, when Wu Zao published *Qiaoying*, core members of Bicheng xianguan, including Chen Wenshu, Wang Duan, and Zhang Xiang (張襄), contributed inscriptions for the work (see the nodes with blue, green, and black edges in Figure 10). Becoming a member of Bicheng xianguan further fueled Wu Zao's active involvement in literary circles. Her works were featured in several poetry collections associated with the society, such as *Xiling gui yong* 西泠閨詠 (*Poems from the Inner Chambers in Hangzhou*), *Hualin xin yong* 畫林新詠 (*New Poems on a Forest of Paintings*), and *Bicheng xianguan nüdizi shi* 碧城仙館女

27 Wang Duan 汪端, "Ti Pingxiang nüshi caiyao tu" 題蘋香女史采藥圖 [On Lady Pingxiang's painting of herbal gathering], in *Ziran haoxue zhai shi chao* 自然好學齋詩鈔 [Collected poems from Nature and Assiduousness Studio], juan 3; Chung Hui-ling 鍾慧玲, *Qingdai nüzuojia zhuan*: Wu Zao ji qi xiangguan wenxue huodong yanjiu 清代女作家專題 – 吳藻及其相關文學活動研究 [Special Topic on female writers in the Qing dynasty: Wu Zao and her literary activities] (Taipei: Lexue shuju, 2001), 51.

弟子詩 (*Poems by Female Disciples of Bicheng xianguan*).²⁸ She also nurtured literary relationships with numerous members of the society (see the pink nodes in the left half of Figure 10 connected by both blue and green edges).

It is noteworthy that the nodes indicating female figures linked to Wu Zao through literary relationships are primarily located on the left and lower sections of the network diagram, extending beyond the network of *Qiaoying*. However, Wu Zao's other works, namely *Hua lian ci* (花簾詞) (*Poems of the Florid Screen*) and *Xiangnan xuebei ci* (香南雪北詞) (*Poems of Fragrant South and Snowy North*), did not attract as many inscription writers as *Qiaoying*. The former received prefaces from three individuals, namely Chen Wenshu, Wei Qiansheng (魏謙升) (?–1861?), and Zhao Qingxi (趙慶熺) (1792–1847), while the latter only has Wu Zao's own preface. Nevertheless, within these two works, Wu Zao composed numerous poems for others, particularly her fellow talented women, a form of literary exchange which differs from what is observed in *Qiaoying* – as a cultural product, her drama required preface authors with cultural influence to ensure successful sales. From the publisher's standpoint, well-known male literati were deemed more suitable for this role. The literary exchange between Wu Zao and her female counterparts not only displays the literary prowess of women but also conveys a profound sense of female companionship, an aspect which held special significance for Wu Zao personally. Moreover, in contrast to other female poets from similar social circles, Wu Zao's poems never mention her husband or children, implying her dissatisfaction with her marital and family life.²⁹ Her poetic interactions thus offered both intellectual and emotional support, further highlighting the unique nature of her literary relationships.

Ling Zhiyuan, with numerous non-familial connections, on the surface mirrors the scenario of Wu Zao, but as our discussion suggests, the nature of these associations takes quite a different shape. She was born to a family of low-ranking official Ling Yong (凌詠) in Qiantang, Zhejiang. Under her mother's guidance, she studied *Mao shi* (毛詩) (*Mao Heng's Commentary on the Classics of Poetry*) and “Neize” 內則 (“The Pattern of the Family”) in the *Book of Rites* at the age of seven and showed a good command of writing poetry by the age of ten. When she married Ding Bing (丁丙) (1832–1899) at 20, she composed “singing harmony poems” together with Ding and encouraged him to study for “self-cultivation” rather than merely focusing on the imperial civil service examinations. Despite her marriage, Ling remained a devoted and filial daughter, frequently returning to her natal family to take care

28 Chung Hui-ling 鍾慧玲, “Chen Wenshu yu Bicheng xianguan nǚdizi de wenxue huodong” 陳文述與碧城仙館女弟子的文學活動 [The literary activities between Chen Wenshu and his female students in the Bicheng xianguan], *Donghai zhongwen xuebao* 東海中文學報, no. 13 (July 2001): 153–7.

29 Chung, “Wu Zao zuopin zhong de ziwo xingxiang,” 109–10.

of her ailing mother. In a heartfelt expression of love and grief, Ding lamented that she had been living with her parents longer than with her in-laws and that she even made vows at local shrines to be a substitute for her sickly mother. Miraculously, Ling's mother gradually recovered, while Ling suddenly became very ill and died at the age of 22. To commemorate his wife's virtue and talents, Ding printed a collection of her poems in the anthology *Cuiluo ge shici gao* 翠螺閣詩詞彙 (*Poems of Cuiluo Pavillion*), which intended to "affirm his deep love" and "ensure her 'immortality' through her words [yan 言]." ³⁰

The anthology received contributions from 64 individuals, with only 4 of them being family members, namely her husband Ding Bing, younger brother Ling Dechu (凌德初), paternal uncle Ling Yu (凌譽), and maternal uncle Zhu Cheng (朱城). Unlike the networks discussed earlier, Ling Zhiyuan appears to be the only talented woman in the Ling family despite receiving early training from her mother and studying with her sister Ling Qiangyuan (凌蕤媛) and cousin (Ling Yu's daughter) Ling Xinyuan (凌苾媛). ³¹ The reality is that without her husband's dedication to the publication, the name and talents of Ling Zhiyuan may very well have faded into obscurity. Considering the motivations driving Ding, it is interesting that the occasions of birth and death often prompted men's urgency in publishing the works of women that had been close to them.

But what really sets Ling Zhiyuan apart is the participation of women in her anthology, with Ding Bing even creating a special section entitled "Inscriptions by Talented Women": 2 women wrote prefaces and another 11 wrote inscriptions. Among these 13 women, one was from Yanghu, Jiangsu; a second hailed from Hanyang, Hubei; and the remainder were all from Hangzhou, Zhejiang. As Grace Fong points out, while all the male preface writers appreciated the efforts of Ding Bing, the female writers instead focused on Ling Zhiyuan's skills and praised her as standing out from the local literary community. ³² Most of the female contributors were recognized female poets and had their works published elsewhere outside of Ling's anthology. Ding Bing's intention to seek out talented women to pen inscriptions was evidently to promote Ling Zhiyuan as a star through the voices of her peers and cohorts.

The analysis above highlights key patterns in elite women's social networks during the early nineteenth century. Firstly, the presence of black nodes across all clusters, denoting talented women from the Qianlong era, is notable. These women,

³⁰ Grace S. Fong, "The Life and Afterlife of Ling Zhiyuan (1831–1852) and Her Poetry Collection," *Journal of Chinese Literature and Culture* 1, no. 1–2 (November 2014): 142.

³¹ Ling Yu 凌譽, "Ba" 跋 [Postscript], in *Cuiluo ge shici gao* 翠螺閣詩詞彙 [Transcribed poems of Cuiluo Pavillion], by Ling Zhiyuan.

³² Fong, "The Life and Afterlife of Ling Zhiyuan," 142–3.

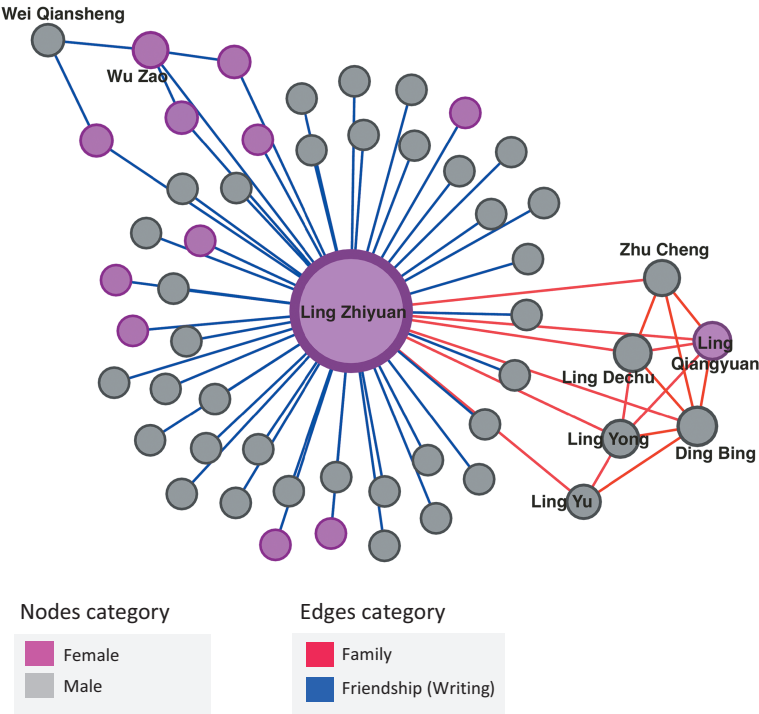


Figure 11: Social network of Ling Zhiyuan.

serving as predecessors to the subjects of this study, not only took on the primary responsibility of educating gifted girls but also fostered a communal atmosphere aimed at nurturing their intellectual development and potentially broadening the social networks of elite women. Secondly, the significance of support and patronage from degree holders, particularly in the realms of collecting and publishing women's literary works, is evident. Indeed, the enthusiasm of these patrons for promoting women's writings is decisive in determining their visibility and recognition. The extent of their connections within literati circles directly correlated with the circulation possibilities of these works. Thirdly, notwithstanding the pivotal role played by male degree holders, a subset of women persisted in their writing pursuits and efforts to secure publication. Some relied on their writing prowess for sustenance due to a lack of support from male guardians, while others, exemplified by figures like Wu Zao, actively sought to showcase their talents in the public sphere. Finally, these elite women were much more interconnected than previously believed. While those in Clusters 1 and 2 appeared more internally connected, counterparts in other clusters expanded their networks more extensively. For instance,

Zhang Qieying in Cluster 3 had ties with Zuo Xixuan in Cluster 4, while Wu Zao in Cluster 6 was associated with the Yu and Xu families in Cluster 5. These trends persisted into modern times, aligning with new developments and coinciding with the increasing opportunities available to women in the public domain.

Transformations of Talented Women's Social Networks

In contrast to the social networks of talented women prior to the outbreak of the Taiping Rebellion, the post-Taiping era presents a different structure where female teachers, who enjoyed a certain fluency in classical writings, replaced conventional talented women as the main figures within networks, as indicated in Figure 2. While a few of these talented women resorted to teaching jobs to supplement their income during the reigns of the Jiaqing to Daoguang emperors, the transition often signified a lack of family support and was regarded as a less desirable means of earning a living. In the late Qing period and Republican era, however, being a teacher evolved into a new identity for women, symbolizing independence and autonomy. Consequently, female teachers relied more on connections outside the family, which, within our analysis, has led to a reduction in the number of red and pink edges on the left side of the network diagram.

Furthermore, the transition from the pre-Taiping to post-Taiping period brought significant changes in the networking patterns of talented women. Whereas pre-Taiping talented women often relied on male degree holders, such as Zuo Zongtang in Cluster 1, Liang Zhangju in Cluster 2, and Yu Yue in Cluster 5, to establish ties with the outside world, their post-Taiping counterparts – particularly late Qing and Republican female teachers – adopted a different approach by relying on organizations for networking. These organizations can be broadly categorized into three types: revolutionary societies, women's rights associations, and educational institutions where women either studied or taught. To best illustrate this shift, we use the examples of Lü Bicheng (呂碧城) (1883–1943), Zhang Mojun (張默君) (1884–1965), and Chen Xiaocui (陳小翠) (1902–1967).

Lü Bicheng was born into a literati family,³³ where her father Lü Fengqi (呂鳳岐) (1837–1895) attained *jinshi* as well as holding various positions in the court,

33 For Lü Bicheng's life, see Li Baomin 李保民, "Lü Bicheng nianpu" 呂碧城年譜 [Chronicle of Lü Bicheng's life], in *Lü Bicheng ji* 呂碧城集 [Anthology of Lü Bicheng], by Lü Bicheng (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2015), 801–24.

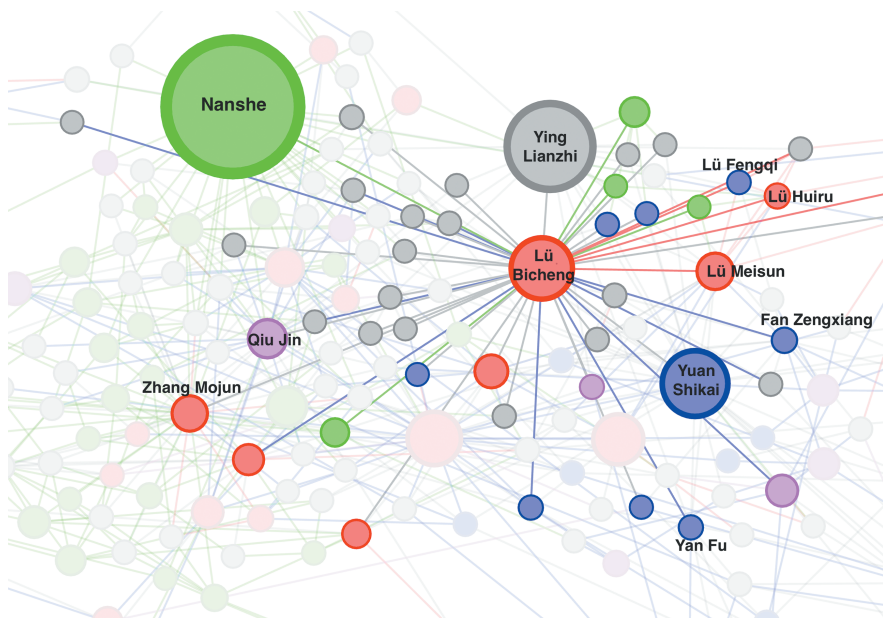


Figure 12: Social network of Lü Bicheng.

and her mother Yan Shiyu (嚴士瑜) came from an even more prestigious clan with several degree holders and officials. Lü Bicheng and her sisters, like many of the talented women discussed in this chapter, had received classical training and displayed their talents in both writing and painting from an early age. However, the untimely loss of their father and brothers disrupted the conventional trajectory of the lives of these elite women. Unable to secure their inheritance, the surviving widow had no choice but to return to her natal family with her young daughters. Lü's fiancé thus broke the marriage contract, leaving her to seek independence and eventually decide to remain celibate for the rest of her life.

Living such a life of autonomy invariably required building extensive connections, and Lü Bicheng did just that, as evidenced by her social networks in several areas, as revealed in Figure 12. To begin, she came to know Manchu journalist and publisher Ying Lianzhi (英欽之) (1867–1926), who became her steppingstone into the public arena by publishing Lü's poems in *Dagong bao* (大公報) and promoting her literary fame. Largely through Ying, she established connections with officials and scholars (see the blue nodes in Figure 12) such as Yuan Shikai (袁世凱) (1859–1916), Fan Zengxiang (樊增祥) (1846–1931), and Yan Fu (嚴復) (1854–1921). These links not only provided her with financial support to launch a girls' school in Tianjin but also led to her appointment as the secretary of President Yuan. Ying

Lianzhi was essentially the most crucial connection in the early development of Lü's career.

Apart from her male associations, Lü Bicheng's public persona also led her to establish connections with talented women (see the pink and red nodes in Figure 12), exemplified best by Qiu Jin. After reading Lü's articles in *Dagong bao*, Qiu Jin paid her a visit, and as if old friends, the two instantly felt a connection. Qiu Jin invited Lü to join her in Japan for their revolutionary activities, and while Lü declined the invitation, she wholeheartedly supported Qiu Jin's endeavors by writing a foreword for her periodical *Zhongguo nübao* 中國女報 (*Chinese Women's Journal*) in 1907. Years after Qiu Jin's execution by the Qing court, Lü Bicheng composed a poem in her memory: "After countless cycles of life and death, shame lingers even beyond the grave; the elegant wanderer, burdened with sorrow, passes by the tomb's entrance."³⁴ The poem reflects the profound impact that Qiu Jin had on Lü Bicheng, acknowledging the sacrifices and struggles of a brave and talented woman who fought for her ideals even in the face of adversity.

There are several notable organizations (see the green nodes in Figure 12) within Lü Bicheng's social network, including Nanshe (南社) (Southern Society) and Columbia University. Originally, Nanshe started as a gathering of literati who supported the anti-Manchu revolution during the late Qing period, but over time, it grew to become the largest literary society in modern Chinese history, boasting more than a thousand members. Lü joined in 1914 and published some of her works in the collection *Nanshe congke* 南社叢刻 (*Collection of the Southern Society*). During her involvement with Nanshe, Lü encountered Zhang Mojun, a prominent, talented woman who was able to stand out even among her contemporaries. Although the exact extent of their relationship eludes us, both were present at Nanshe meetings in August 1914 and April 1917, and they even traveled together to Suzhou in February 1917. Additionally, both women were alumnae of Columbia University, with Zhang being enrolled from 1918 to 1920 and Lü being registered at the university in 1921.

Directly compared with Lü Bicheng, Zhang Mojun relied on her family members, especially her father and husband, to a higher degree to build her social networks throughout her life.³⁵ Born into a literati family in 1884, Zhang began to study the

34 Lü Bicheng 呂碧城, "Xiling guo Qiunüxiaci ci hanyun yun" 西泠過秋女俠祠次寒雲韻 [Visit Qiu Jin's temple in Hangzhou and use the rhyme of hanyun], in *Lü Bicheng ji*, 283.

35 For Zhang Mojun's life, see Gao Mengbi 高夢弼, "Daning tang nianpu" 大凝堂年譜 [Chronology of Daning Hall], in *Zhang Mojun xiansheng wenji* 張默君先生文集 [Anthology of Zhang Mojun], ed. Zhongguo guomindang zhongyang weiyuanhui dangshi weiyuanhui 中國國民黨中央委員會黨史委員會 (Taipei: Zhongguo guomindang zhongyang weiyuanhui dangshi weiyuanhui, 1983), 515–55.

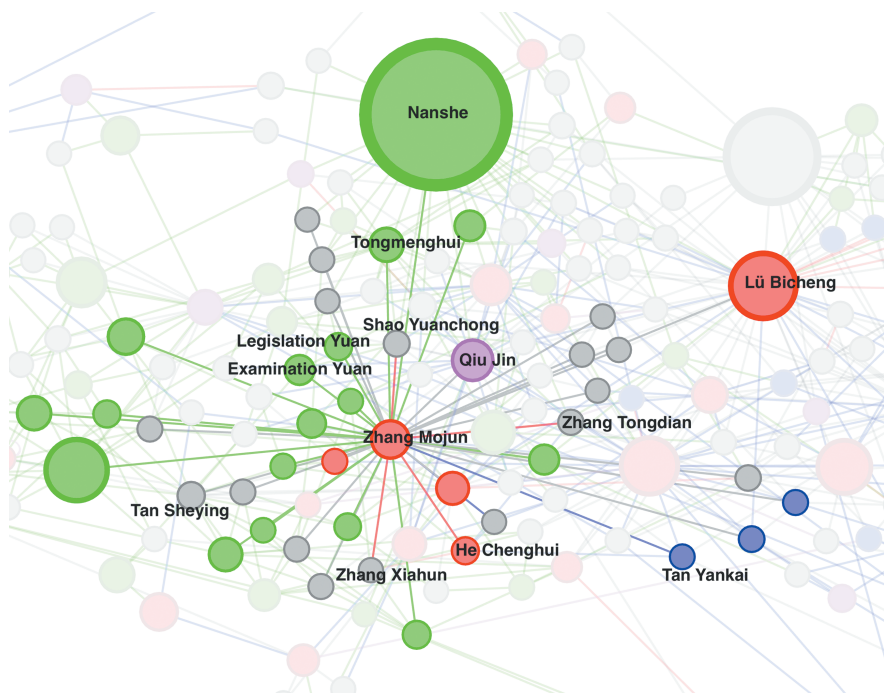


Figure 13: Social network of Zhang Mojun.

Classics of Poetry at the tender age of three and learned to compose couplets at the age of four under her mother He Chenghui's (何承徽) (1858–1941) guidance. Her father Zhang Tongdian (張通典) (1859–1915) was passionate about social and political reforms and thus played a significant role in shaping her worldview, an influence which led her to align with the anti-Manchu revolution and join Tongmenghui (同盟會) (Revolutionary Alliance) in 1906. Zhang Mojun further embraced her revolutionary spirit by becoming the editor of the revolutionary newspaper *Dahan bao* 大漢報 (*Great Han News*) and organizing the Girls' Militia (Nüzi junshi tuan 女子軍事團) in 1911. However, after the 1911 Revolution, her focus shifted towards education, once again inspired by her father and his dedication to learning, who had established several schools, including Yangzheng School (Yangzheng xuetang 養正學堂), Yangzheng Girls' School (Yangzheng nüshu 養正女塾), Hunan School at Nanjing (Hunan lü Ning gongxue 湖南旅寧公學), and Wanjiang Middle School (Wanjiang zhongxue 皖江中學). In 1901, he appointed his wife and daughter as teachers at Yangzheng Girls' School, marking the beginning of Zhang Mojun's long and distinguished career in education (See the green nodes in Figure 13).

Zhang Mojun's husband, Shao Yuanchong (邵元冲) (1890–1936), was also a crucial figure in her social network, especially within political circles. Mirroring many Chinese men in the late Qing period, Shao passed the first level of the imperial civil service examinations while receiving his education in the new style of schools popular at the time. He also joined Tongmenghui in 1906, but it seems that he and Zhang were not yet acquainted at this point. In 1911, Shao went to Japan to further his studies, and after returning to China following the 1911 Revolution, he became actively involved in the political arena. He took the editorship of Guomindang's newspaper, for example, and participated in the party's "Second Revolution." As he climbed the ladder within the party, he held various important positions, including serving as Sun Yat-sen's confidential secretary, a member of the Central Executive Committee, head of the Ministry of Propaganda, and eventually president of the Legislative Yuan. It was after their marriage in 1924 that Zhang Mojun's political career began to take shape, with her husband playing a significant role in her advancement. For instance, when Shao served as the mayor of Hangzhou City in 1927, he appointed Zhang as the director of education, and in 1929, when Shao held the position of vice chairman of the Selection Committee of the Examination Yuan, Zhang was enlisted with a focus on educational affairs. Furthermore, anytime Shao was overwhelmed with his legislative duties, Zhang was recommended to take his place.

Despite Zhang Mojun's entry into a political career being facilitated by her husband's connections, once she had entered said circles, she skillfully extended and strengthened her networks on her own, which would prove to be particularly important after her husband was assassinated in 1936. As the Republic of China transitioned into a constitutional government in 1946, Zhang Mojun's capability was acknowledged, and she was appointed as a member of the examination committee and elected as a representative of the National Congress. After relocating to Taiwan, she continued to actively engage in political and social activities, demonstrating her commitment to public service, and she even served on the Central Committee of the Guomindang. At her 79th birthday celebration, over 1,400 people attended, including the vice president, who left their signatures after an inscription penned by Yu Youren (于右任) (1879–1964). The above exemplifies that Zhang Mojun's recognition and influence were not merely derived from her status as the wife of Shao Yuanchong; instead, she earned respect and admiration through her own dedicated efforts and accomplishments.

Another significant figure that unveils the transformations in talented women's culture is Chen Xiaocui, whose background rivals that of Lü Bicheng and Zhang

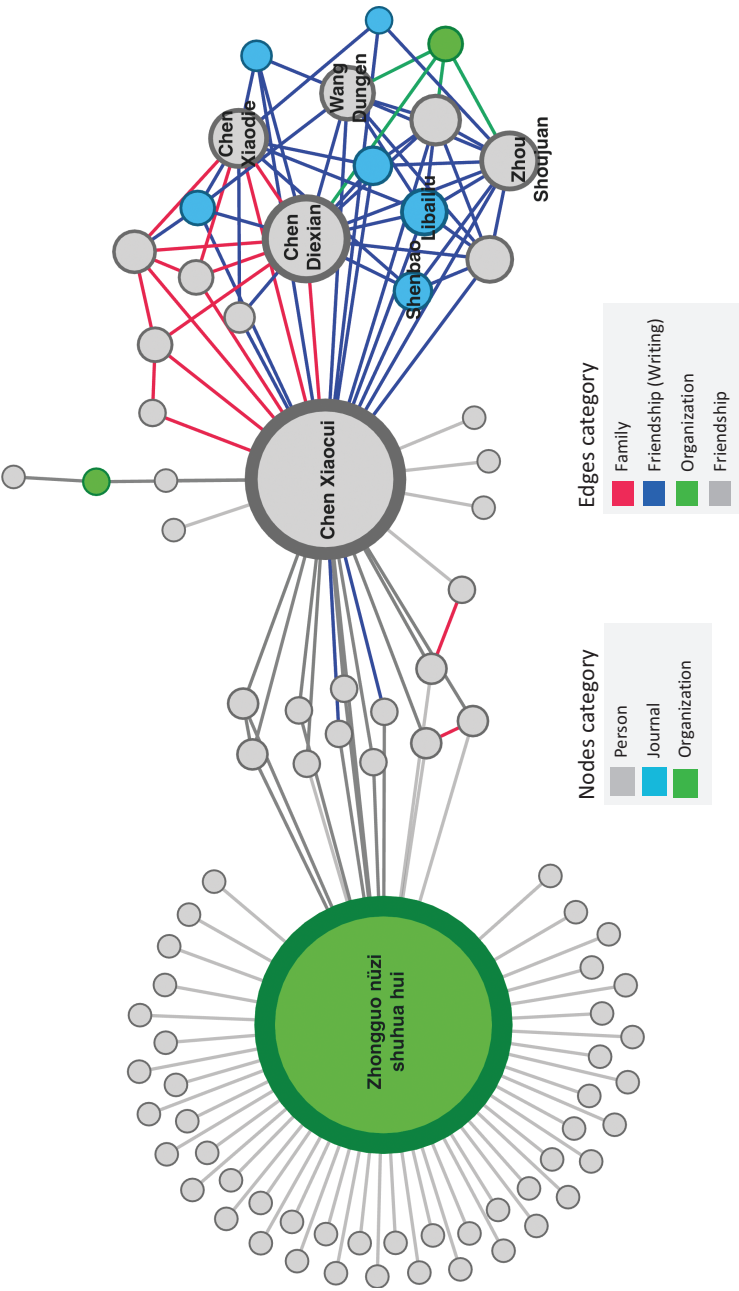


Figure 14: Social network of Chen Xiaocui.

Mojun.³⁶ Her father, Chen Diexian (陳蝶仙) (1879–1940), was a renowned novelist responsible for several bestsellers and held an editorship at several significant literary periodicals and newspaper columns. Xiaocui's mother, Zhu Shu (朱恕), was also a writer and took on the role of tutoring their children when her husband was away. Growing up in this intellectually rich environment, Chen Xiaocui received a classical literary education. At the age of ten, she had already learned to compose couplets, and by thirteen, she was writing letters on behalf of her mother, all without formal schooling. Before her marriage in 1927, Chen was even contributing to the family's income through writing, alongside her father and brother, and proving to be adept in various endeavors, also assisting in producing perfume at her father's business Jiating gongyeshe (家庭工業社). Given her family's literary background, it should come as no surprise that most of Chen's works can be found in journals edited by her father, including *Nüzi shijie* 女子世界 (*Women's World*), *Youxi zazhi* 遊戲雜誌 (*Game Magazine*), *Wenyi congbian* 文藝叢編 (*Compiled Literature and Art*), and "Ziyu tan" 自由談 ("Free Discussion"), a well-known literature column in *Shenbao* 申報.

Thanks to her father's esteemed reputation within certain literary circles, particularly in the community of the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies (yuanyang hudie 鴛鴦蝴蝶) literature, Chen Xiaocui was able to establish valuable connections with literati in this school of writing. For instance, Wang Dungen (王鈍根) (1888–1951), a colleague and close friend of her father, dedicated an entire column of his series titled "A Brief History of Famous Authors of this Weekly" solely to Xiaocui. Additionally, Zhou Shoujuan (周瘦鵑) (1895–1968), a dear friend of Diexian, played a significant role in promoting Xiaocui's literary name by publishing her poems in various periodicals such as *Banyue* 半月 (*The Half Moon Journal*), *Ziluolan* 紫羅蘭 (*Violet*), *Libailiu* 禮拜六 (*Saturday*), and *Xin jiating* 新家庭 (*New Family*). Furthermore, Chen Xiaocui engaged in poetic exchanges with Zhou and participated in discussions about the esthetics of poetry, demonstrating that Xiaocui inherited not only her family's writing talent but also the invaluable social relationships that furthered her literary career (see Figure 14).

At the age of 25, Chen Xiaocui agreed to her parents' arranged marriage and wed Tang Yanqi (湯彥齋) (1901–1952), whose grandfather Tang Shouqian (湯壽潛)

36 For Chen Xiaocui's life, see Huang Jin-chu 黃錦珠, "Xin shidai de guixiu zuojia: Chen Xiaocui qiren qishi" 新時代的閨秀作家：陳小翠其人其事 [A literary woman of the new era: The life and times of Chen Xiaocui], *Jindai Zhongguo Funushi Yanjiu* 近代中國婦女史研究33 (June 2019): 1–52; Liu Mengfu 劉夢芙, "Ershi shiji chuantong wenxue de yushu qihua: Chen Xiaocui zuopin zonglun" 二十世紀傳統文學的玉樹琪花—陳小翠作品綜論 [The jade trees and rare flowers in the traditional literature of the twentieth century: An overview of Chen Xiaocui's works], in *Cuillou Yincuo* 翠樓吟草 [Poetry of Cui Hall], by Chen Xiaocui 陳小翠 (Hefei: Huangshan shushe, 2010), 1–90.

(1856–1917) was the first governor of the Zhejiang military government during the 1911 Revolution. Although this marriage was viewed as an opportunity for upward social mobility for the family, Chen was discontent with her life and eventually requested a separation after giving birth to their daughter. Returning to her natal family, Chen found more freedom to pursue her public ventures, and together with her painter friends in 1934, she founded the Chinese Women's Calligraphy and Painting Society (Zhongguo nüzi shuhua hui 中國女子書畫會). This was a groundbreaking painter's association, in large part because it was exclusive to women, reaching a peak membership of 200 individuals. And regarding its activities, it held regular art exhibitions and actively promoted art education. Chen enthusiastically served on the executive committee and took up the editorship of the society's magazine. In addition, she also joined the Society of Preserving Classical Writings (Cunwen hui 存文會), launched by Jiang Kanghu (江亢虎) (1883–1954), to advocate for the inclusion of classical Chinese in middle school curricula.³⁷ All in all, these endeavors showcase Chen Xiaocui's commitment to promoting art and culture, as well as her dedication to advancing the education of her time.

As “the last generation of talented women writers,” Lü Bicheng, Zhang Mojun, and Chen Xiaocui made diverse life choices as they stepped into modern times. Lü Bicheng remained dedicated to writing in classical Chinese while embodying the spirit of an “independent new woman.” During her early years, she established girls' schools and later immersed herself in the study of Buddhism and advocated vegetarianism. Zhang Mojun, walking a different path, fervently embraced the revolutionary cause and wholeheartedly championed women's education. She held public office for an extended period and became an exemplary figure in the political realm, blazing a trail for women in politics. Meanwhile, Chen Xiaocui actively published poems and essays in print media and excelled in the world of painting, showcasing her multifaceted talents and contributions to the arts.

Despite the differing trajectories of their lives, these talented women share a number of common traits: First, family resources were crucial in their upbringing, especially the career paths of their fathers. All three fathers came from literary families themselves, which likely provided their daughters with an orientation from which to follow. Although the early death of Lü Bicheng's father prevented her from growing up under his wing, he had earned an imperial degree and embarked on an official career. Zhang Mojun's and Chen Xiaocui's fathers, on the other hand, initially aspired to pass the imperial civil service examinations during their youth but eventually abandoned that pursuit after the first level of testing, opting instead to work in various fields. Zhang Mojun's father leaned towards rev-

37 *Shenbao* 申報, April 22, 1935, p. 12.

olution and became involved with the Tongmenghui, an influence on Zhang Mojun which cannot be overstated. Chen Xiaocui's father, meanwhile, engaged in editing various publications, publishing poetry, essays, and novels while also running businesses, which exposed Chen Xiaocui to publishing works in print media from a young age. Despite varying to certain degrees, these family backgrounds nurtured their talents and shaped their interests and endeavors, leading to profound results.

Secondly, all three made unconventional marriage choices. In traditional Chinese society, women typically married and had children at a young age, to the extent that becoming a grandmother in one's thirties was not unusual. However, Zhang Mojun married at the age of 40, which was considered markedly late by conventional standards. Although Chen Xiaocui married at the age of 25 under her parents' arrangement, a seemingly traditional marriage pattern, she took the initiative to negotiate a divorce after giving birth to her daughter. Lü Bicheng, on the other hand, remained unmarried throughout her life. Their decisions to marry late, divorce, or even remain unmarried provided them with greater freedom to develop outside of the traditional confines of marriage and family life. Before getting married, Zhang Mojun was deeply involved in revolutionary activities, worked as a teacher, and even pursued her studies abroad. Following her divorce, Chen Xiaocui became active in the Shanghai art scene while continuing her poetry and literary compositions. As for Lü Bicheng, not being tied down by marriage allowed her to delve into the study of Buddhism, advocate for animal protection, and spend extended periods living or traveling abroad in the United States, France, Switzerland, Italy, Austria, Germany, the United Kingdom, Singapore, Thailand, and others. These unconventional choices allowed them to pursue their interests, careers, and passions without the typical prescribed societal constraints, making them exceptional figures in the changing landscape of women's roles in modern China.

Conclusion

It is generally believed that the culture of talented women began gradually declining with the rise of the Vernacular Literature Movement and revolutionary literature after reaching its pinnacle just before the late Qing dynasty. This research, however, shows that classical poetry – a common marker of the talented woman – and revolutionary undertakings – often linked to the new woman – were not incompatible and that women operating in this time of transition could simultaneously retain their talents in classical writing and pursue new ideals.

Beyond this slightly broader conclusion, however, this chapter has demonstrated that talented or elite women in two defined eras, namely the pre- and

post-Taiping Rebellion periods, employed different patterns in establishing their social networks. First, women in the late Qing period had more connections with men outside of their kinship groups. Before the Taiping Rebellion, apart from Wu Zao and Ling Zhiyuan, the male figures appearing in the networks of talented women (especially key nodes) were mostly male relatives. However, during the post-Taiping Rebellion period, talented women largely moved towards leaning on men unrelated to them, such as Lü Bicheng with Ying Lianzhi, Fan Zengxiang, and Yuan Shikai; Zhang Mojun with Chen Sanli (陳三立) (1853–1937), Tan Yankai (譚延闓) (1880–1930), and Li Yuanhong (黎元洪) (1864–1928); and Chen Xiaocui with Wang Dungen, Zhou Shoujuan, and Zheng Yimei (鄭逸梅) (1895–1992). These figures in their lives considerably expanded their social circles and provided resources for their development in the public sphere; but perhaps most notably, by being unrelated to these men, talented women of the late Qing era perhaps enjoyed more autonomy, as male relatives seemed to provide the most resources only at the death of a beloved mother, wife, daughter, etc.

Furthermore, during the late Qing period, talented women participated in a greater number of organizations, and the nature and significance of these societies differed from their earlier counterparts. Prior to the Taiping Rebellion, women's involvement in organizations was primarily in the form of family-based or social clubs. For instance, the Autumn Red Club (Qiu hong yin she 秋虹吟社) was a female poetry society formed around the core of the Xu Yanren (許延稔) and Xu Yanjin (許延錦) sisters, along with other female relatives and friends. Bicheng xian-guan was a mentor-student group led by Chen Wenshu and his disciples. In other words, these organizations relied on pre-existing relationships for their formation. However, starting in the late Qing period, organizations emerged that moved beyond these family and regional boundaries and had a more public nature; that is, as long as they went through established membership procedures, anyone could join, evidenced by Nanshe, which had both Lü Bicheng and Zhang Mojun in its ranks. Moreover, talented women during the late Qing period actively organized more social groups than before, gathering the strength of participants to achieve reform or promotional goals. For example, Lü Bicheng established the Chinese Animal Protection Association, Chen Xiaocui founded the Chinese Women's Calligraphy and Painting Society, and Zhang Mojun formed various women's rights groups. They not only relied on these organizations to expand their social connections but also consciously placed themselves at the core of these networks.

Lastly, talented women during the late Qing dynasty skillfully utilized new media as a platform for their writings, and some even took the initiative to publish their own magazines, serving as editors and gaining control over public discourse. Prior to this period, the publishing industry, including editing and printing, was dominated by men. Even someone like Wu Zao, who diligently wrote and

befriended literary peers, still needed to rely on male sponsorship for publishing. However, with the emergence of new media, publishing channels increased significantly, and the costs were greatly reduced. Although having a male intermediary to persuade editors made it easier to get published, it was not entirely impossible to directly submit manuscripts to newspapers and magazines for publication. These new media platforms thus became the most effective stages for expanding their social networks. It can also be argued that in this transitional phase, the talented women of the late Qing period transformed the organizations and media they controlled into resources for their social networks. This, in turn, allowed them to continue their artistic and literary pursuits, which closed the virtuous cycle.

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