

Pioneering Girls' Schools in Late Qing China (1898-1911): Lü Meisun (1881-1945) and her Socio-Professional Network

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In traditional China, girls had no access to formal school education. The pioneering schools for girls that opened in the late Qing Dynasty (1898–1911) were crucial in transitioning women from domestic roles to the realms of public affairs and national construction. Existing studies on such schools mainly examine their establishment from the perspectives of key officials and institutional founders, neglecting how they operated from the educational point of view. This gap is partly due to the lack of official records, as girls' schools were not legalized until 1907. In recent years, the massive digitization of late Qing newspapers has provided supplementary data, which can contribute to filling the lack of archival information.

To approach this understudied subject from an original perspective, my research takes one of the first women teachers, Lü Meisun (1881–1945), as a case study. Lü gave lessons in and administered four girls' schools from 1901 to 1911. A renowned poet, she interacted on the periodical press with famous intellectuals. Unearthing women's agency and reconstructing their socio-professional networks will provide a deeper understanding of how these early, non-authorized schools managed to operate and grow in number in a still hostile cultural climate, paving the way for gender equality.