In this book examining the transition from traditional to modern China and how literati of the period imagined the future, the central concept of family has three meanings: first, the Zhan family of the late Qing period Quzhou 衢州, consisting of the poets Zhan Sizeng 詹嗣曾 (1832–94) and Wang Qingdi 王慶棣 (1828–1902) and their two sons, Zhan Xi 詹熙 (1850–1927) and Zhan Kai 詹塏 (1861?–1911?), both novelists who wrote about themes related to social reforms; second, the Wei family, the main characters in a novel of Zhan Xi’s; and third, as referring to a “‘family’ of genres that helped to shape the reformist novels of Zhan Kai” (8).

Chapter 1 introduces the members of the Zhan family and the sociocultural background of the late Qing period, focusing on discourses on gender, the important role of fiction, and the significance of geographical locales. The second chapter focuses on the Zhan parents, who supported each other’s literary activities. Wang’s unpublished poetry describes a period late in their marriage when, during a long separation, Wang composed many verses about her discontent and resentment of her marriage and the couple’s poverty, works reflecting the increasing boldness of women writers at this time. Her sons’ sympathy with her feelings and with women in general became an important feature of their work. Zhan Xi helped Wang publish in the literary supplement of Shenbao 申報 (Shanghai Journal). Though the genre was traditional, Wang was one of the first women to contribute to China’s emergent news media at the time. Minguo Quxian zhi 民國衢縣志 (Republican Gazetteer of Qu County) records Wang’s criticism of the inequality in the length of the mourning period for male and female spouses. Widmer speculates that this suggests “a hint of generalized feminist awareness that ties in with the emerging discourse of the late Qing” (50). Wang’s experiences and viewpoint, Widmer argues, clearly influenced her sons’ attitudes on gender.

In chapter 3, the focus shifts to Zhan Xi, whose literary works reflect his family’s experiences, including those of the Taiping Rebellion. Hualiu shengqing zhuan
花柳深情傳 (Love among the Courtesans), a novel he wrote for a fiction-writing contest, presents a family living in a remote village, which partly resembles Zhan’s hometown. It describes “three evils” gripping the town: opium addiction, the “eight-legged” essay, and foot-binding. While the Taiping Rebellion devastated the area, the novel also presents it as the cure for the three evils. Some plots in the story draw on Zhan’s family’s experiences, which appear in his parents’ poems. Class also plays a role in the novel, in which lower-class women with unbound feet save the gentlewoman protagonist from looming danger by helping her relocate and, in the process, convince the maidens to unbind their feet. Widmer connects this to Zhan Xi’s activism against foot-binding and for women’s rights generally, which included founding a school for both children and women.

In chapters 4, 5, and 6, Widmer concentrates on three different kinds of writing by Zhan Kai: courtesan sketches, novels of reform, and editorials. His trilogy of collections of short biographies of courtesans, the subject of chapter 4, shifts in tone from the playful to the didactic, from addressing male readers to female ones, from texts without illustrations to books with photos, and from the descriptive to the conversational. The first book is a typical guidebook, to the world of entertainment and courtesans in Shanghai, and is addressed to a male audience. The other two celebrate traditional virtues, civic duty, and the patriotism of courtesans. For example, Zhan Kai describes Zhang Baobao 張寶寶, who appealed “to other courtesans to buy shares of Chinese railroads” (124). Zhan claims, “One can rely on courtesans to help inspire a spirit of diligence in overcoming difficulties, which would contribute to overall efforts to strengthen the nation” (116). Widmer argues that Zhan Kai hoped to inspire gentlewomen to learn morals and a patriotic spirit from these courtesans.

Chapter 5 focuses on Zhan Kai’s novels, Zhongguo xin nühao 中國新女豪 (China’s New Heroines) and Nüzi quan 女子權 (Women’s Power). As the titles suggest, they focus on women’s rights. Each is set forty years in the future. Their female protagonists receive an education, become activists for women’s rights, found a vocational school for women, and finally get married to men of their choice. Zhan Kai supported the establishment of a modern republican regime in China and advocated for the contemporary ideology that advancing women’s rights would strengthen the nation by liberating half of the population. His two novels call for educating gentlewomen to stand up for themselves and help other women who are less fortunate, including courtesans. However, in what may have been an effort to appeal to more conservative female readers, the second novel lacks the attention to radical movements and violent content, including assassinations, of the first novel. It presents gentlewomen characters who must cope with threats to their chastity and are helped and supported by their partners or partners-to-be in the face of these and other dangers. These themes, Widmer explains, made the novels palatable to gentlewomen. At the same time, the female
protagonists strongly resembled some of the courtesans Zhan Kai had described. Thus, Widmer argues that the novels relate to the courtesan sketches, each implying the other in a kind of chiasmus, even though one focuses only on courtesans and the other only on gentlewomen.

Zhan Kai’s career as a journalist is the subject of the last chapter. He authored editorials whose basic position was antiforeign. At the same time, he saw China as needing institutional reforms that could be best learned from Western nations, including technology and business practices. He believed that China could best gain in wealth and power through developing its businesses. The economics and sovereignty of China were the most prominent topics of his editorials; he was greatly concerned with the transportation and education systems, hoping that China would not cede control of either one to foreigners, and as a republican he advocated for a constitution and legislature. Curiously, he never discussed women’s issues in editorials. But his novels of reform include scattered editorial-like interludes, which can be regarded as fictional editorials.

In the conclusion, Widmer mentions Tang Baorong 湯寶榮 (1863–1935), who adapted Zhan Xi’s experiences in his novel and knew Zhan Kai personally and whose influence marks the transition from Xi to Kai. Both Tang and the Zhan brothers had experienced in childhood the long absence of their fathers and were strongly affected by their mothers in their literary compositions and their commitment to gender equality. Tang explored in his work issues like the relationship between women’s education and the unbinding of their feet, a relationship that Zhan Xi’s novel poses less explicitly, while women figures in Zhan Kai’s works are presented as traveling the world and promoting women’s vocational education. Though the connection Tang provided does not seem to be very strong, in all of these writings an evolution can be traced from traditional gentlewomen to modern women. The women progress from home manager to national reformer and international traveler, and from poets writing in the traditional style to writers and readers of journalism. As Widmer states, this study “uses one family’s experiences to provide a close-up of the changing literary landscape of the late Qing” (5). The Zhan brothers’ idea of the novel as a medium for changing people’s opinions, though not the most serious genre, may be “evidence of a period of adjustment—between earlier in the Qing, when the novel was regarded as a lesser (or more unmannerly) form, and the May Fourth period, when it became literature’s leading genre. It was an era with its own imperatives and rules” (230–31).

Overall, Widmer astutely treats a family history within a broader historical background. Her study illuminates the emerging trajectory from traditional gentlewoman to modern woman, as well as the ways male protofeminists were helpful in this progression. Also, it shows how gentlewomen mothers such as Wang served as inspirations to their novelist sons’ incorporation of notions of women’s advancement and gender equality in their work and advocacy. Widmer
effectively shows how the characteristics of women's culture in China from the seventeenth century carried over to the nineteenth: the importance of the role of men in promoting women's equality, but also that of the influence of mothers. That Wang's influence is more modern than her gentlewomen counterparts in the High Qing era helps makes this book an intriguing read.

CHUN-TING CHANG
University of Wisconsin–Madison