This book, expanded from an earlier M.A. thesis, is a valuable exploration of a significant topic whose importance has hitherto been largely ignored. It examines the social and political roles of imperial princesses in the centuries between the Han and the Tang dynasties. The argument is framed around the study of the “institution of the princess,” the tension between their nature as “women” and as “rulers,” and the grounds that allow their “participation in political discussion.” In her book Huang Zhiyan sheds new light on the evolving nature of the imperial state, the role of familial relations within that state, the reconfiguration of gender relations, the history of emotions, and the impact of the reconstruction of space on all of these aspects of society. It should be read by anyone interested in any of these topics, or in the period under examination.

The book is topically arranged. Chapter One, described as an introduction, discusses previous approaches to the study of women within the political realm. In the process of sketching this previous scholarship, this chapter makes two important points. First, Huang shows that previous studies of women in imperial Chinese politics have focused almost entirely on women as the wives and mothers of rulers or major political actors, i.e., people whose power has always been explained in terms of their kin relations to men of authority. Princesses, in contrast, were born into the imperial house and consequently could, as in the period that she is studying, be attributed power in their own right. Second, she cites the earlier work of Gan Huaizhen 甘懷真 who argued that in the Age of Disunion (220–589) people increasingly posited that the “ruler and state formed a single body,” and that both male and female imperial kin, on the basis of their being “identical qi energies in separate bodies (fen xing tong qi 分形同氣),” constituted elements of the state.¹

Chapter Two deals with the question of the definition of the term “princess” (gong zhu 公主) and the nature of the institution. The most important conclusion in this chapter is that “princess” was treated as a political title, in that not every daughter of an emperor became a princess, and not every princess was the daughter of an emperor. Instead the title had to be formally granted, like that of any other official. While the title was restricted to women born into the imperial house, this meant that women like Wei Lü 魏樑 became known as princesses.

imperial clan, it could be given to daughters of kings as well as the emperor, and it was further divided into a ranked series. Routinely the title was awarded shortly before the woman was given in marriage, which was (as will be noted below) a political action. It was accompanied with the granting of a fief as a source of income, and the title by which the princess was officially known, and for which she received a seal of office that was the name of the fief. This practice clearly marked the princess as a political figure with title and income independent from her husband. Although in the Northern Dynasties (386–581) it gradually became conventional in some contexts to identify a given princess by her husband’s surname, as a means of distinguishing her from siblings, her formal title as marked in her seal continued to derive from her fief. As Huang discusses in Chapter Six (see below), the holding of the fief also provided a crucial grounding for the political participation of the princess in court affairs.

Chapter Three deals with the problem of balancing the relations of a married princess between her husband’s family and her natal family. As previous scholarship has shown, the canonical ritual theory that the act of marriage formally transferred a woman into her husband’s family was often rejected in the Age of Disunion and the subsequent Sui-Tang period (581–907). The clearest demonstration of this was the widespread abandonment of the Han practice of the joint burial of a married couple. Instead, pious Buddhist women often opted for separate burial — in the form of exposure of the corpse or cremation — and it was not uncommon for a woman to return to her natal family if her husband died, or to have her corpse returned to the graveyard of her natal family for burial.2 In the case of princesses this continued identification with her natal family took the form of treating her (as noted above) as an embodiment or extension of the state, through the insistence that she was her father’s “inherited body,” or that she shared a common body with her male siblings. This resulted in high officials treating princesses’ well-being as a matter of political concern, and of defending her interests against those of her husband’s family. This continued identification of married princesses with the imperial family was also essential for the practice of using such marriages to secure political alliances with leading clans. Finally, Huang shows how these continued links to her male kin facilitated the practice of allowing princesses to participate in political discussions.

2 On the former practice, see Liu Shufen 劉淑芬, Zhonggu de fojiao yu shehui 中古的佛教與社會 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 2008), 244–89. On the latter, see Chen Ruoshui 陳弱水, Tangdai de funü wenhua yu jiating shenghuo 唐代的婦女文化與家庭生活 (Taipei: Yunchen wenhua, 2007), 23–196.