The term “fiction's family” as used in Professor Ellen Widmer’s new book has three referents: the family of the two late Qing novelists Zhan Xi 詹熙 (1850-1927) and Zhan Kai 詹塏 (1861?-1911?); the fictional Wei 魏 family in Zhan Xi’s novel, Hualiu shenqing zhuan 花柳深情傳 (Love among the courtesans) of 1897; and the “family” of genres that shaped Zhan Kai’s two reformist novels, Zhongguo xin nühao 中国新女豪 (China’s new heroines) and Nüzi quan 女子權 (Women’s power) of 1907. The three novels comprise the core material of this study, and the overall approach is a thorough contextualization: in terms of “viewing the parents’ work as background to the sons’ works, using each son's non-reformist writings as a way of contextualizing his reformist works, and using Zhan Xi's novel as one avenue toward understanding the fiction of Zhan Kai” (p. 15). The selection of this particular family is based on the fact that writings by and about them survive in a variety of sources and hence, can generate a “family portrait.” This family portrait, in turn, offers “a close-up of the changing literary landscape of the late Qing” (p. 5). A key concept underlying this study is the “business of women,” which has several referents but concerns in particular “sensitivity to women’s issues” shown in the lives and works of the Zhans (p. 13). The chapters proceed from the writings by the parents Wang Qingdi 王慶棣 (1828-1902) and Zhan Sizeng 詹嗣曾 (1832-94), a couple designated as “literary partners in changing times” (Chapter 2), to those by the elder brother Zhan Xi (Chapter 3), and then those by Zhan Kai (Chapters 4, 5, and 6). Zhan Kai was no doubt the most productive writer in his family. His courtesan sketches, novels, and editorials are examined in three chapters respectively, and also in relation to each other.

To provide a sense of how this approach of contextualization operates, I shall start with Chapter 3. The focus is Zhan Xi’s novel Hualiu shenqing zhuan. The novel was originally written in response to a fiction contest sponsored by John Fryer (1839-1928) in 1895, and was published two years later in Shanghai. The title was misleading because the subject was in fact social reform rather than courtesans. In two years the novel came out again under a new title, Chu sanhai 除三害 (Eliminate the three evils) which refer to the three evils of opium, foot binding, and eight-legged essays, and which better captured Zhan Xi’s scheme of reforming people’s backward mindset in a village. The locale resembles the Quzhou 衢州 area, the Zhan family’s place of origin, and the figures in the novel serve as symbols of China’s backwardness. With her careful
examination of the novel’s structure (the main story and the frame story), plotlines, and rhetorical maneuvers, Widmer reads the novel as “most likely a mixture of reality and invention” (p. 68) in the sense that Zhan Xi made use of his family history – notably their experience of the Taiping incursions and his parents’ biographical material – as the basis for his creation of plots and characters. Widmer also relates Zhan Xi’s reformist mindset to his career path and the accomplishments of his children: among other facts, Zhan Xi was a leading proponent of new-style education in the Quzhou area; his eldest son Zhan Linlai 詹麟來 (1877-1919) founded Quzhou’s first Tianzu hui 天足會 (Natural foot society), and joined the Tongmeng hui 同盟會 (Revolutionary alliance) while studying in Japan; together Zhan Xi and Zhan Linlai raised funds to finance Quzhou’s first school for women; Zhan Xi’s second daughter Zhan Yanlai 詹雁來 (1891-?) became a founding member of the Nüquan tongmeng hui 女權同盟會 (Alliance for women’s rights). Clearly this was a “progressive” family characterized by active engagement with social reform. The children built on the progressive ideas of the father. Yanlai, in particular, promoted equality for women by building on her father’s support of her own education and of women’s education generally; and the children’s accomplishments may have furthered the father’s prominence in the new regime after 1911. Reading the novel in such contexts enriches our understanding of its plot development and reformist scheme. At the same time, Quzhou, as a backwater during the late Qing, emerges into a broader picture of social transformation.

Some readers may find that this approach does not truly distinguish the present study from existing scholarship on late Qing novels, or on that period in general. But the true genius of this book lies in introducing unusual material in new contexts and, thus, offering new insights into otherwise familiar trends of social changes. In the case of Zhan Xi, the context in question was Quzhou qihuo ji 衢州奇禍記 (An account of Quzhou’s strange disaster), a report he wrote as eyewitness to a massacre in Quzhou incited by the Boxers uprising in 1900. Widmer pinpoints the four year time lapse between Zhan Xi’s novel and his report of the massacre as the reason for the sharp contrast between the two works. In so far as Hualiu shenqing zhuan 理求聖清轉 idealizes people’s willingness to embrace new learning1 and simplifies resolutions to backward practices such as the three evils, it was the product of a time when political reforms initiated by

1 The term “new learning” refers to the study of foreign languages and ideas, and the introduction of new practices, as opposed to “old” practices such as foot binding and opium addiction. Zhan Xi’s fictional mouthpiece Zheng Zhixin 鄭芝芯 is highly sympathetic to new learning, and hires foreigners to teach his sons. See Widmer, Fiction’s Family, pp. 64-65, 88-91.