The title of Susan Mann’s new book might initially suggest familiarity rather than innovation, after all, the issue of female ‘talent’ features in a number of studies on women in pre-modern China, but this is indeed a very different kind of book. This study focuses on the life experience of three women: the talented guixiu Yaoqing, born in 1763, her daughter the poet Qieying, and finally Qieying’s niece Caipin, who died in 1893. The first of these three women, nurtured and educated by her grandfather and father when she was little, married into a wealthy Changzhou family. Her husband’s brother passed an imperial degree just at the time when the Qianlong emperor died and the cronies of his favourite, Heshen, were removed from power, opening valuable opportunities for new blood to enter the civil service. While he lived, the extended family gained in social and economic status, and Yaoqing lived in relative luxury. The life of the last of the three women, Caipin, ended just before the defeat of the Chinese navy in 1895. With that event, the Chinese empire’s foundations, already profoundly shaken by the events of the second half of the century, crumbled away. The lives of the women of the Zhang family were profoundly changed by the Taiping rebellion, both by the iconoclasm of its followers and by the violence that followed in the wake of the imperial armies throughout mid-nineteenth-century China. While events like the death of Qianlong, or the Taiping rebellion, or the Chinese defeat at Japanese hands in 1895 are more than familiar to historians of late imperial China, Mann’s book allows us to see how these events shaped and altered the daily lives of the women in the Zhang family. By providing that perspective, the way we tell that story can be changed in important ways.

The lives of the three women are told in fluent narratives that fill in details that are normally absent in such stories. They are absent, because the documents we work with in Chinese do not provide the kind of detailed and personal insights one might gain from, say, the personal letters of the Brontë sisters or the diaries of servants working in a wealthy eighteenth-century household, sources that have allowed British historians of the period to know a great deal about the feelings, thoughts and personal ambitions that made up women’s private lives. Mann has decided here to draw on the expertise she has gained through (half) a lifetime of writing and researching the lives
of late imperial Chinese women, to ‘make it up’. It is extraordinary how much
difference this makes to the narrative. It is the nature of the writing in these chapters
that makes the real contribution to the work that has already been done on elite
women in this period.

The language is fluent and readable, and the women truly come to life in these
chapters, without the distractions and interruptions of constant footnoting. But there
are footnotes in the book, and those footnotes in fact provide a very useful base layer
to support the chapters that “set the scene” as Mann calls it. The footnotes, all fifty
pages of them, reveal how widely Mann has searched for the information that makes
up this book; she has drawn her insights from extensive readings in rare book rooms
throughout the world, where she has located the relevant gazetteers, poetry collections
in a variety of editions, private papers and literary collections. But here one also sees
the field Mann herself has helped shape: scholars working throughout North America,
Europe and Asia have benefited from Mann’s work, and have in turn produced work
that continues to deepen the field of research on pre-twentieth-century Chinese
women.

Perhaps most valuable for the readers of WAGRev, however, are the sections
of chapters that follow the life stories of Yaoqing, Qieying and Caipin. These
sections, written in the spirit of Sima Qian’s comments (“The Historian Says”), serve
to provide further reflection and contextualization. Here, together with the epilogue
that follows the three lives, the arguments of the book are developed. Rather than
singling out a particular argument to be substantiated, the book makes a series of
related claims. One of these claims relates to the marriage patterns of women in the
Changzhou area. Far from marrying out and losing contact with their native families,
the women in the Zhang family stay in close contact with their native families. Of
Yaoqing’s four daughters, two marry uxorilocally, one marries but does not join her
husband in Beijing until after her fortieth birthday, and only one daughter marries and
moves away. Mann argues that uxorilocal marriages were common rather than
exceptional in this area, emphasizing once again the importance of seeing local
variance rather than empire-wide uniformity.

Revealing is also Mann’s argument about the role of medicine in society.
Many of the, very Confucian, gentlemen in her story spend considerable time in their
private time but also in their careers developing their medical knowledge and skills,
putting paid to the idea that medicine was not a viable career option for the elite
families of late imperial China. Fascinating in this context is her claim that women were less likely to die of infectious diseases than men were: men’s lives were spent to a large extent on the road, mingling with people in different places, being exposed to a far wider germ pool than the women, who spent the majority of their lives in a more secluded and protected sphere. The mortality rates of the Zhang men is far higher than that of the women. Most renewing, perhaps, is Mann’s claim that women were not merely passive observers in the political climate of the second half of the nineteenth century, but played active roles through their writings and exchanges with men. She has identified poetry and essays by women that face the destruction and devastation caused by events such as the arrival of the Westerners on the coast or the Taiping rebellion head-on. The women whose lives she paints here were profoundly altered by these political events: over the course of the period their economic status dropped dramatically, forcing them to provide their own livelihoods; they were repeatedly asked to move away from familiar environments and into new and unknown communities, and their ability to express themselves through poetic writings and the exchange of personal letters was frequently affected by these circumstances. Mann has provided us with a fascinating study that will appeal to readers on many different levels.

(Anne Gerritsen, Warwick University)