Gender and Chinese Society is a four volume collection of 65 articles published within the Critical Concepts in Asian Studies series of Routledge. Editor Xiaowei Zang, Professor at the City University of Hong Kong, is an expert on ethnicity China. His publication record is strongest on minority issues in contemporary China, with only few contributions relating to gender. According to Zang’s introduction, the collection “aims to map the areas where the scholarship about women and gender in China is the richest” (p. 1). Furthermore, “[t]he choice of papers aims to provide both a context and background for future research on gender in China, illustrate the progress of research in this field, and highlight a range of qualitative and quantitative methods in the field” (p. 6). Providing an in-depth review of these 65 articles is impossible. My remarks on the collection relate to the introduction and in particular the choices the editor made in selecting topics and organizing the four volumes, based on his understanding of “gender” and gendered Chinese society.

In his introduction, Zang provides a “State of the field: women and gender in Chinese studies.” He defines gender as “a hierarchical division between women and men embedded in both social institutions and social practices” (p. 1). Gender, in this definition, is not an analytical category but a fact that characterizes societies in their institutional settings and social practices. This definition sets the tone for the following 24 pages where questions of theory are avoided and the “critical” potential of gender as a category of analysis remains unexplored. (Indeed, theory-oriented texts are not included in the volume.) The “critical” aspect of the collection seems to lie in the documentation of inequalities – one of the keywords of the introduction. The author is interested in “arguments and evidence about growing discrimination against women in contemporary China, and asks whether gender inequality is rising or declining in post-1978 China” (p. 1). Gender studies, in Zang’s understanding, are women studies, and “women” and “men” appear as fixed units which form the hierarchical binary that has marked Chinese society early on. (The indeed “rich” scholarship on men, homosexuals and transgender in China that has emerged over the last ten years is totally ignored in the introduction and almost missing in the collection.) The editor chose four major rubrics for examining the phenomena of inequality and organizing the 65 articles: Gender Norms in China: Changes and Continuities (Vol. 1), Gender Discrimination and Inequalities in China (Vol. 2), Gender and Migration in China (Vol. 3), and Women’s
Rights and Empowerment in China (Vol. 4). The volume covers scholarship from 1984 to 2012, with a heavy bias towards most recent publications. It focuses on the post-1978 period, with only a few articles covering earlier developments.

(In)equality in post-1949 China, in the editor’s eyes, is a matter of state policy – the state acting in favor of or against women’s interests – and ideology. More specifically, discrimination of women is predominantly caused by “the revival of gender role traditionalism” or “traditional gender role ideology” (p. 4). This ideology is an agent in itself. The market is absent in this narrative. Western feminism, Chinese NGOs and legislation are progressive forces in the fight for more equality. Ordinary women, by contrast, appear as victims of the above-mentioned sources of discrimination.

The introduction mentions all 65 articles, guided by the question of rising or declining inequality. Fortunately, it also reveals aspects that cannot be subsumed under this narrow focus, thus testifying to the multi-faceted reality of women in China and the critical and creative potential gender studies have. Indeed, the four volumes lead us through a great variety of phenomena, groups of women and fields of analysis (e.g. feminism, education, demography, internal migration, employment, political participation, the legal field) and include examples of excellent scholarship. Readers should not be misguided, though, that these four volumes exhaust what is available in the field and that the introduction is the most original view one can have on it.

(Nicola Spakowski, University of Freiburg)