He knew of ‘fallen women’ only by hearsay and from books, and never in his life had he been in their ‘houses’. He knew that there are immoral women, forced to sell their honor for money under pressure of dire circumstances—environment, bad upbringing, poverty and so on. They know nothing of pure love, they have no children, no civil rights. Their mothers and sisters mourn them as dead, science treats them as an evil, and men address them slightingly. Yet, despite all this, they have not lost the semblance and image of god. They all acknowledge their sin, hoping to be saved, and means of salvation are lavishly available to them. Society does not forgive people their past, true—and yet St. Mary Magdalene is no lower than the other saints in the sight of God. When Vasilyev chanced to recognize a prostitute on the street by her dress or manner, or to see a picture of one in a comic paper, he always remembered a story he had once read: a pure, self-sacrificing young man loves a fallen woman and offers to make her his wife, but she considers herself unworthy of such happiness and takes poison.\(^1\)

It would prove hard to fully understand the significance and the novelty of late Qing representations of courtesans, prostitutes and sex workers without bringing affect and sentiment into the picture. The courtesan had traditionally been constructed as the man of letters’ perfect match and had, thus, become a vital figure in the rhetoric of the beloved in both classic and vernacular male-authored sources, which extolled and explored the imagined affinity between these two social outcasts of sorts. It was of course, an uneven relationship, which posited the man as the one who would redeem the prostitute from her fate. In this

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\(^1\) A. Chechov, “The seizure” (1888), in *A Woman’s Kingdom and Other Stories* (Oxford University Press, 1989), 1.
chapter, we will try to explain the reasons for this ‘savior syndrome’ and what happened at the turn of the last century to disrupt these paradigms. In a second moment, we will see how in the dreamscapes of Shanghai, the ‘family romance’ that had propelled fictional trajectories in late imperial times crumble and a crowd of orphans appears to illustrate the predicaments of fictional masculinity. By fleshing out the changes that bring about this reconfiguration of fantasies about love and family, it will become clear how this transition mimics and reflects the progressive disempowerment of the man of letters in fields other than his erotic and romantic life.

I. Bonds That Matter: Musical Souls and the Sound of Heartbreak

There is always a little bit of testicle at the bottom of our most sublime ideals.²

When Zhong Ziqi died, Bo Ya never played his qin again. Why was that? A man does acts for the sake of someone who understands him, as a woman adorns herself for someone who is attracted to her.³

Chinese authors, for almost two thousand years, have written volumes to at once express their alienation from their contemporaries and the society they lived in and their urgent longing for an understanding Other, someone who, in hearing/reading their work could trace a path back to the writer’s original intent, and could crack open the code of entry to his xin (‘heart/mind’). In other words, a soul mate or, as the Chinese would say it, a zhiyin, the one who knows (zhī 知) the tone (yīn 音). The aural/acoustic/musical dimension, connected to what in the Western context is considered mostly a matter of spiritual resonance, is indeed fundamental in the context of Chinese culture.⁴

The term zhiyin first appears in the music section of the Li Ji (The Book of Rites”) to indicate somebody who knows the yinlù 音律

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² From Diderot’s letter to a friend, quoted in Juliet Flower MacCannell and Laura Zakarin, eds., Thinking Bodies (Stanford University Press, 1994), 230, no. 12.
⁴ For the importance of music in male homosocial bonding in late imperial culture, see Joseph Lam, “Music and Male Bonding in Ming China,” work in progress.