



The Flower Burial in *The Dream of the Red Chamber*

Intimacy of fate rather than intimacy of feelings



Introduction

The flower burial scene in *The Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Hónglóu Mèng* 紅樓夢), by Cao Xueqin (*Cáo Xuěqín* 曹雪芹), has had a profound impact on scientific literature and anthologists due to the evocative imagery, the enchanting simplicity of the concept, and the expansive realm of thought conveyed by this funeral scene, which leaves the reader in a dreamy reverie. (Yee, 1995, Lee, 1997, Wong, 2005, Stenberg, 2018, Yu, 2018, Borelli, 2021).

Yet, with the exception of brief passages dedicated to this moment, it appears that no study fully addresses the burial of flowers, at least in English, French, and Italian scientific literature (to the best of my knowledge).



Sources & Passages Commented

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<p><u>First mention of the flower burial</u></p>	<p>End of the chapter 23, composed of two scenes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Bao-Yu (<i>Jiǎ Bǎoyù</i> 賈寶玉) reading in the Prospect Garden, where Dai-Yu (<i>Lín Dàiyù</i> 林黛玉) found him (Cao, 1973, p. 460-465).- the return of Dai-Yu to his room, when she hears sung arias (Cao, 1973, p. 465-467).
<p><u>Second mention</u></p>	<p>End of the chapter 27 and the beginning of the chapter 28, when Bao-Yu surprises again at the flower-tomb place Dai-Yu lamenting in sung verses.</p>

Problem of interpretation & hypothesis

- Questioning the purpose and impact of the flower burial scenes in this novel is an initial inquiry. In this romance novel, one would naturally anticipate a love scene between Bao-Yu and Dai-Yu, as they are alone together, expressing budding emotions often beneath the veil of sarcasm or conveyed through ambiguous dialogue.
- Yet the flower burial, even as a metaphorical funeral, has a scent of tragedy and loss that seems hardly appropriate for romance or seduction, especially for young characters.
- This will be the hypothesis, in a nutshell, that the flower funeral is an act revealing an intimate and spiritual connection between Dai-Yu and Bao-Yu, rather than serving a romantic purpose.



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I. A Parallel Awakening of Romantic Sensitivity of Bao-Yu and Dai-Yu

a) A newly and increasingly love-tormented Bao-Yu

- **The background of the first flower-burial scene (i): Bao-Yu, the diligent dilettante.** The first sequence of the first scene consists then in depicting a life of leisure, of culture (Cao, 1973, p. 460). These "*dilettantish 'duties'*" kept him "*constantly busy*" (Cao, 1973, p. 461).
- **The background of the first flower-burial scene (ii): Bao-Yu's disruptive sentiments.** The idyllic life associated to the Prospect Garden does not last for Bao-Yu. The perturbation comes from Bao-Yu itself, who "*got out one day feeling out of sorts*" (Cao, 1973, p. 462). The only other one to notice is his page, Tealeaf. Whether he was indoor, into the garden, or outside, he remained "*bored and miserable*" (Cao, 1973, p. 462). A hint of his need for love of that is the only effective remedy found by Tealeaf is to give his master to read "*romantic comedies and the like*" (Cao, 1973, p. 462).
- **The background of the first flower-burial scene (iii): Bao-Yu sprawling attraction.** Nevertheless, one must be cautious in considering that the novel, at this stage, necessarily leads to a romantic scene between Bao-Yu and Dai-Yu specifically. When Bao-Yu's desire gradually awakens, he plays and is played by the girls in his company, and Dai-Yu is only one (Cao, 1973, p. 394, p. 398) of Bao-Yu's intimates among others, such as Aroma (Cao, 1973, p. 106, pp. 149-150, pp. 388-392), Musk (Cao, 1973, pp. 404-405) and Bao-Chai (*Xuē Bǎochāi* 薛寶釵). The figures of the four young women haunt Bao-Yu, but not equally. He scribbles, under tipsiness, a lamentation over its passions. While he is concise with Musk (*Shè Yuè* 麝月) and Aroma (*Huā Xīrén* 花襲人), inferior in social status but also in talent given the absence of praises that portrays Dai-Yu and Bao-Chai. At the top level are Dai-Yu and Bao-Chai. The former is distinguished by her intelligence, while the latter by her beauty.

I. A Parallel Awakening of Romantic Sensitivity of Bao-Yu and Dai-Yu

b) The love of poetry of Dai-Yu

- Dai-Yu, after the first flower-burial scene, as Bao-Yu before the scene, finds herself momentarily distressed, distraught, breaking an awaited idealistic and peaceful life in the Prospect Garden by inner self feelings' outbursts, without it being link directly with love.
- This outburst is provoked by the listening, sung behind a wall, as she was walking, of literature, poetry, arias, verses from the West Chamber, ancient poems as well as Tang poems (Cao, 1973, pp. 466-467).
- The fact that she surreptitiously hears these arias sung behind a wall, that she cannot see the singers in person, reinforces this focus of the narrative on the quoted verses and songs. It is not Bao-Yu or love that overwhelms her, but *"all these different lines and verses combined into a single overpowering impression"* (Cao, 1973, p. 467).
- Anthony Yu points out that Dai-Yu's distinction – her refined sensitivity, her poetic taste, her sagacity – are precisely the cause of her loss, her tragic fate (Yu, 2018).
- Transition: If the earlier scenes are coloured by romanticism, Dai-Yu after the first flower-burial appears troubled, certainly, by art, but not in love or subject to active passion. A closer examination of the flower-burial scenes is needed, in order to understand how what could have been strictly a love novel sees, for these passages, more a peril of interiority than a peril of relationship.

II. The first scene of the flower burial (Chapter 23): An anticipated love scene that transforms into a moment of spiritual communion between Bao-Yu and Dai-Yu.

a) A passage framed by an intertextuality of love stories

Notes: the tomb of flowers is to be found in the Prospect Garden (*Dàguānyuán* 大觀園) at the Drenched Blossom Weir (Cao, 1973, p. 463). The Prospect Garden *"is the central work of art, and the symbolic center, of The Story of the Stone. It is a miniature world that exists simultaneously on several levels: physical, metaphoric, allusive, and allegorical. Each level of the garden is interreferential in the world of the novel and metareferential in encompassing the world of the reader"* (Levy, 2012, p. 115).

- **The transtextuality** of the scene provides a strong romantic-coloration. The transtextuality covers everything that link the text, explicitly or implicitly, to other texts (Genette, 1982). Within the five types of transtextual relations, two are particularly relevant for the flower-burial scene.
- To begin with, **the paratextuality** (the relationship of a text with its surroundings: title, subtitle, preamble...) tends to normalize the scene as a childish encounter while emphasizing the artistic sensibility of Dai-Yu. The opening verses of the chapter 23, *"Words from the 'Western Chamber' supply a joke that offends / And songs from the 'Soul's Return' move a tender heart to anguish"* do not have a romantic character. The mention of the *Western Chamber* (*Xiyiāng Jì*, 西廂記), a play about love, may still nuance this absence of romance titles.

II. a) A passage framed by an intertextuality of love stories...

- Omnipresent, **the intertextuality (the literal presence of one text in another: citation, mention)** introduces, on the contrary, romantic references (in addition to the erotic novels of the precedent scene of the chapter 23). Bao-Yu ultimately brings to the garden the volumes of the *Western Chamber* (directly announced in the opening verses). The *Western Chamber* is a play by Wang Shifu (*Wáng Shífǔ* 王實甫), written under the Yuan dynasty, about two lovers overcoming parental disapproval in their union and at the end managing to legitimate and conduct their marriage.
- Verses of the *Western Chamber* are not simply quoted, but give rhythm to the scene. For instance, Bao-Yu just “reached the line ‘The red flowers in their hosts are falling’ when a little gust of wind blew over and a shower of petals suddenly rained down from the tree above, covering his clothes, his book and all the ground about him”. There is an exact correspondence between the flower fall in the line and in the flower fall of the Garden, and the fall of flower is the incident with which the scene begins.
- Quotations of the play are the cause of quarrel between Bao-Yu and Dai-Yu. The first quotation, by Bao-Yu, is from the song of the student Zhang Sheng (*Zhāng Shēng* 張生) (in love with Yingying – Yīng Yīng 鶯鶯 –, and they constitute the main characters), in the beginning of the fourth act of the first book of the *Western Chamber*, where Zhang Sheng is called for incense offerings and Brahma celebration following the decease of the father of Yingying. It is also the scene, at the end, where Zhang Sheng and Yingying exchange glances, and marks a starting point of their passion.

- “How can I, full of sickness and of woe, / Withstand that face which kingdoms could o’erthrow?” (Cao, 1973, p. 464)
- Reading the full original passage, the face can well be one of a woman. The praise is sufficiently exaggerated in relation to the childish context of Bao-Yu and Dai-Yu's conversation for the sarcasm to be transparent. The literal meaning could still persist given the use of a quoted, fictional text to indirectly express Bao-Yu's own sentiment. And this can be both sarcasm and praise.
- The quote of the same play by Dai-Yu in response is not less ironic: “Of silver spear the leaden counterfeit!” (Cao, 1973, p. 465) which may be interpreted quite obviously as depicting Bao-Yu like a false bright and sharp mind, who revealed to be a counterfeit.
- Legitimacy of the text is at stake: Bao-Yu tried to conceal his real reading whereupon Dai-Yu asked him what he was perusing. He attempts to pass it off for *The Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhōngyōng* 中庸) (attributed to the grandson of Confucius, Zisi - *Zī sī* 子思) and *The Greater Learning* (*Dàxué* 大學) (a small part is attributed to Confucius, followed by commentaries attributed to the disciple of Confucius - *Zēngzǐ* 曾子 - Zengzi), which constitutes respectively the chapters 31 and 42 of the *Book of Rites* (*Lǐjì* 禮記), compiled around the 3rd-2nd century BCE, and part of the Five Confucian Classics defined as the imperial canon during the Han dynasty (Cheng, 1997, pp. 72, 194).
- The most part of the scene (in term of time in the fiction) is dedicated, for both, to reading the play (Cao, 1973, p. 463-464), even if in the narration the majority of the space is occupied by the characters' dialogues.
- Overall, while the facade (the novel and chapter titles) is kept out of worldly desire, the network of references and the consubstantiality of love intertextuality in this scene cannot leave the reader without an expectation of a growing romance, not least by the fact that the quintessential love play the West Chamber animates the scene and Bao-Yu and Dai-Yu's interactions.

II. b) ... where literary intimacy prevails on romance in the narration

- A The narration of the scene, of the concrete actions of the characters, might offer a less romantic picture. At the beginning of the scene, Dai-Yu hails Bao-Yu about the fallen flowers, considering that

"It isn't a good idea to tip them into the water ... The water you see here is clean, but farther on beyond the weir, where it flows on beyond people's houses, there are all sorts of muck and impurity, and in the end they get spoiled just the same. In that corner over there I've got a grave for the flowers, and what I am doing now is sweeping them up and putting them in this silk bag to bury them there, so that they can gradually turn back into earth." (Cao, 1973, p. 463)

And "Bao-Yu was full of admiration for this idea" (Cao, 1973, p. 463).

- The narration starts and end with the flower-burial, and surround the reading and the quarrel on the West Chamber. The consensus between the two characters is complete and natural on the action of protecting the purity of fallen flowers and on burying these.

The quinary scheme (Larivaille, 1974) of the scene is as follows (consisting of the initial state of a narrative, the complication or problem, then the dynamic, and finally the resolution). In the initial state, Bao-Yu enjoys a life of pleasure and culture. The problem is initially a boredom that seems to be the result of an awakening of love. In the resolution dynamic, his servant has given him books of love. However, instead of constituting a resolution, of soothing Bao-Yu's feelings, one of these books, the West Chamber, is the basis for a shared moment between Bao-Yu and Dai-Yu. Moreover, if the problem is love, and the quarrel between Bao-Yu and Dai-Yu in a sense maintains this ambiguity, the resolution of the scene is the burial of the flowers, their final action. In other words, the resolution does not as such correspond to the problem of love, affection or boredom raised. The complication, throughout the scene, has been transfigured: Bao-Yu's boredom and feelings have remained unfulfilled. The complication, throughout the scene, has become the preservation of the purity of the fallen peach blossoms and the only resolution of the scene is the burial of the blossoms.

As a consequence, this flower burial seems hardly to be a romantic scene as described by Haiyan Lee (1997) or, in a sense, by Anthony Yu (2018). For four reasons essentially. First, as aforementioned, it does not make sense in term of narratology. Second, a burial, that is, the anthropomorphic action or practice of burying a dead body, or a ceremony at which someone's body is buried, is in these two senses a tragic event following death (ideas supported by Yee, 1995, Borelli, 2021). Third, applying a human practice to flower leaves anthropomorphizes these, and as flowers are often associated with girls of Bao-Yu's entourage throughout the novel, a symbolical or prophetic reading of the scene would rather induce to foresee a tragic end for Dai-Yu. Fourth, no other elements, even the quotation of the love play, seems to start a seduction process different from their previous interactions as such. A Buddhist interpretation of the scene is also raised: *"Contained in this image [of the flower-burial] is, depending on how you see it, a poignant image of grief, an allegory of love or its inadequacy, or a Buddhist exhortation to accept impermanence."* (Stenberg, 2018)

One aspect can be then added, namely that this flower burial distinguishes the intimate correspondence between Dai-Yu and Bao-Yu. The flower burial is a tiny moment in the novel in terms of space in the narrative – both in fictional time and in terms of lines. The burial of the flower is also very significant in terms of figurative interpretations, but this is a point that applies to many passages in the novel. The action is casual, not particularly difficult. The importance of this moment, one might say, beyond the poetic imagery that anthropomorphises the flowers by giving them the tragic prestige of a funeral, is that this burial strictly distinguishes Dai-Yu and Bao-Yu. They are the only ones who see the burial of the flowers, perform it, and believe in the meaning of that burial (which is not even the case for writing poetry or for physical intimacy). The meaning is to preserve fragile beauty for its own sake, with no other personal purpose. And it is based on an uncoordinated common need to protect the purity of the flower. The type of bond created is not really romantic, but rather spiritual, in the sense of the quality of being concerned with the human spirit or soul as opposed to material or physical things. The contradiction is that the spiritual bond is created by a concrete gesture in contrast to their constant discursive quarrels and simultaneously more concrete, objective and solid.

III. The second scene of flower-burial (chapter 27 and 28): a scene of spiritual confirmation

- A traditional flower farewell party took place between the first and second flower burial scenes (Cao, 2006, p. 24), which seems to generalise the attention paid to the loss of flowers. I will argue that the initial hypothesis (that the flower burials serve as a scene of spiritual connection rather than love connection) is confirmed by the second scene.
- Indeed, Dai-Yu has been ignoring Bao-Yu since she thought he was responsible for a servant's refusal to open a gate. During a walk in the Prospect Garden, Bao-Yu notices that *"'You can see she's upset,' he thought ruefully. 'She's neglecting her flowers. I'll bury this lot for her and remind her about it next time I see her' "*. (Cao, 2006, p. 37). This specificity of the flower burial, or even the absurdity of it for others, is well understood by Bao-Yu, who waits for his entourage to leave (including Bao-Chai) to go and quietly attend to the flowers (Cao, 2006, p. 38). On his way to the flower tomb, he hears verses being sung.
- The scene is largely a repeat with variations from the first scene. Exactly like Dai-Yu in chapter 23, Bao-Yu is startled by verses being sung without directly seeing the singer, and suffers a paralysing emotion, falls to the ground and cries. And the parallelism is twofold, for the singer who will turn out to be Dai-Yu, at the same time as Bao-Yu seems to be subjected to a growing "grief" while reciting the verses. Moreover, Bao-Yu writes poems just before the first flower burial scene, Dai-Yu recites poems before this second flower burial scene. The fact that, without previous concertation, both thought about burying flowers, in spite of their dispute, bring again their specific common practice to light. Both are evoking personal tragedy: Bao-Yu the thought of not only a departed Dai-Yu but also the other young girls of the mansion; and Dai-Yu evokes the loss of her parents.
- It is only as the Chapter 27 ends that Bao-Yu recognises Dai-Yu (without her seeing him yet), again emphasising the spiritual connection between these two, more than simple attraction.

Conclusion

This piece aims to make two contributions: firstly, to analyse the popular but not yet fully studied blossom-burials scenes (in English, French and Italian literature to my knowledge). Secondly, to challenge a common romantic reading of the scene for another kind of reading. It is argued that the flower grave and the act of gathering the fallen flowers in this final resting place, serves as a literary, poetic, bucolic and above all spiritual connection-creation between Dai-Yu and Bao-Yu. These flower graves seal, discreetly, ideally, and thus fragilely, their fate at the dawn of their relationship which, ultimately, also seals their tragic sunset to come.



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