

Daiyu's flower burial poem (Chapter 27) **Paul Rouzer, 2016**

While characters exchanging poems has been an element in traditional Chinese narrative since at least the third century, most Chinese vernacular novels tended to use poetry as part of the narrative, especially when the narrator (who usually imitates the voice of an oral storyteller) wishes to add some description. Cao Xueqin on the other hand almost always uses poetry composed by the characters themselves. As a result, most poems in the novel have a twofold purpose: they represent the role of poetry in the social lives of the characters, and they reflect the personalities of the characters who compose them.

Most of the poems – the long cycle of poems in Chapter Five notwithstanding – occur during social occasions, where characters are competing at writing poetry on set themes. This includes the poems on crabapple blossoms in Chapter 37, the poems on chrysanthemums in Chapter 39, the linked verses on snow in Chapter 50, and the linked verses on the autumn moon in Chapter 78. However, we have a substantial number of additional poems composed by Daiyu, and her verses are generally recognized by the other girls as the best of their circle. This accentuates Daiyu's role as an eccentric aesthete who also is overly sensitive – a sensitivity that contributes to her illness and her unsuitability as Baoyu's wife in the eyes of the Jia family elders.

Far and away the most famous poem in the novel is Daiyu's "flower burial" poem, which appears in Chapter Twenty-Seven. Baoyu overhears Daiyu reciting it as she prepares to bury blossoms of fallen flowers she has swept up, because she feels that such beautiful things should not be allowed to be publicly soiled by the mud and dust of the world.

Daiyu's poem is written in a flexible ballad meter, generally seven syllables per line (though with the occasional insertion of extra-metrical phrases). In traditional Chinese books, the lines of a poem were run together like prose; there was no spatial indication of separate lines, and readers depended on the rhythm and rhyme of the verse itself to indicate line breaks. The basic poetic unit was the couplet; lines are usually end-stopped, and even-numbered lines are *always* end-stopped. There tend to be stanza breaks in longer poems, usually indicated by rhyme-changes. The standard form is a series of four-line stanzas, with the rhyme scheme AABA CCDC EEFE etc. Occasionally poets may write shorter or longer stanzas, as Daiyu does here.

I have provided a character-by-character gloss of the poem below, combined with an English language translation. Hawkes' version is truly a tour de force and actually stays remarkably close to the original, but he's still forced to make some changes in order to re-create the feel of rhyme. My translation attempts to keep some sense of the original rhythm while keeping closer to the meaning (and with no attempt to rhyme). Because a seven-syllable line is rather too long in English translation, I have translated each line as two hemistiches to reflect the poetic caesura that tends to come in Chinese verse after the fourth syllabus of a seven-syllable line. Hawkes also keeps to a four-line stanza throughout, though the rhymes of the original suggest a number of striking irregularities.

After each stanza I have included a commentary to help the reader with some of the typical responses an educated Chinese reader would have to the poem.

花 謝 花 飛 花 滿 天 ，

huā xiè huā fēi huā mǎn tiān
flowers fade flowers fly flowers fill sky

紅 消 香 斷 有 誰 憐。

hóng xiāo xiāng duàn yǒu shéi lián
crimson fades scent cut-off there-is who pity/cherish

游 絲 軟 繫 飄 春 榭 ，

yóu sī ruǎn xì piāo chūn xiè
drifting threads gently twist float by spring kiosk

落 絮 輕 沾 撲 繡 簾。

luò xù qīng zhān pū xiù lián
falling floss lightly moisten strike ornate curtain

1.

The blossoms fade, the blossoms fly,
the blossoms fill the sky.
Their crimson fades, their scent dies out,
and who is there to pity?
Drifting threads gently twist together
and float past the springtime lodge;
Falling willow floss lightly sticks
and strikes the lady's window drapes.

In Chinese poetry, spring is generally the season of love-sickness; mildly erotic poems that describe lonely women viewing flowers are quite common, and are often written from the perspective of a male poet voyeuristically enjoying the view of a woman looking out from her boudoir onto a perspective of falling flowers (there is thus a double view suggested in some of these poems – a man watches a woman watching the flowers).

In poetry, a woman who sees falling flowers inevitably connects it with her own life. If she is lovesick (either because she has no lover or because her lover is away), then she associates the departure of the flowers with her own sense of aging and her frustration at remaining unfulfilled. One of the erotic assumptions of such verse is the fact that (generally speaking) “good” girls of proper families do not have lovers and are not supposed to experience emotions such as lovesickness, or even expose themselves to public view; often women who are described thus are assumed to be courtesans. Daiyu's position throughout the novel stresses the tension between her role as a proper young woman on the one hand and her attraction to romantic themes on the other.

Many of the other characters are likely to view many of her poems as not quite proper, and she herself is uneasy with letting others see her verse, especially men.

The fact that Daiyu is writing this particular poem brings a new aspect to it and complicates it in interesting ways. For one thing, she begins the poem very much in the voyeuristic mode – an external presence spying on the habitation of a woman, wondering if she is within and waiting for her to look out the window (the ornate curtain of line four is by convention the curtain of a lady’s bedroom). The threads of the willow catkins (like the poem itself) intrude on this living space and stick to it, drawing the attention of the woman within. Beyond that, the sinuous yet fragile and helpless motion of the catkins is by convention said to resemble the swaying waists of dancing girls.

One technical note: Chinese poetry is fond of parallel structures, where the essential syntactic structure of the first line of a couplet is reproduced in the following line. The third and fourth lines provide a straightforward example: a verb of motion is used to modify a metaphorical term for a flower (drifting threads, falling floss); this is followed by an adverb-verb combination (gently twist, lightly moisten). A second verb follows (float by, strike), which takes as its object an adjective modifying an architectural item (spring kiosk, ornate curtain).

Internal parallelism is also common in seven-syllable ballad style, as well as repetition. Here, the poem begins with a repetitive explosion of motion: as the flowers blow about in a riot, their word is repeated three times. There is also a touch of internal repetition in line two with “crimson fades” and “scent cut off”.

閨 中 女 兒 惜 春 暮 ，

guī zhōng nǚ ér xí chūn mù
bedroom (2) girl (2) pities spring lateness

愁 緒 滿 懷 無 釋 處。

chóu xù mǎn huái wú shì chù
sad thread-ends fill bosom not-have relief place

手 把 花 鋤 出 繡 閨 ，

shǒu bǎ huā chú chū xiù guī
hand holds flower hoe comes ornate chamber out

忍 踏 落 花 來 復 去。

rěn tà luò huā lái fù qù
bears tread fallen flowers comes then goes to on

2.

Within her chamber, the maiden
 pities how spring grows late;
 Brooding thoughts fill her breast,
 no way to bring relief.
 She takes the flower hoe in hand,
 leaves her luxurious chamber,
 And bears to tread on fallen flowers
 as she paces back and forth.

The flower-burier appears in the second stanza. As with most poetic heroines, she is sensitive to the spring and to the falling flowers. In the second line, her sadness is described in a term used for thoughts, “thread ends.” This is one of a series of thread-images conventionally employed to evoke thoughts or thinking. This is tied ultimately to a pun, because the most basic word for “thread” is pronounced the same as the word for “to long for/think of.” Here it is also linked to the threadlike willow catkins that were striking against the curtain of her room in the first stanza: one kind of (external) thread evokes an (internal) thread of thought. This links the heroine to the falling flowers and the fear of growing old that I mentioned above.

The grief that she feels for the flowers is so great she is compelled to take action – and so she goes outside into the flowers themselves and prepares to bury them. There are two interesting poetic developments here: first, Daiyu describes her heroine as engaging in a physical response to the situation which brings her outside – she is not content to remain mooning in her room. Second (and perhaps most interestingly), Daiyu is of course describing herself – standing outside of herself and narrating her own actions.

柳 絲 榆 莢 自 芳 菲 ，

liǔ sī yú jiǎ zì fāng fēi
 willow floss elm seed- on their fragrant (2)
 pods own

不 管 桃 飄 與 李 飛。

bù guǎn táo piāo yǔ lǐ fēi
 not care- peach float and pear fly
 about

桃 李 明 年 能 再 發 ，

táo lǐ míng nián néng zài fā
 peach pear next year can again bloom

明 年 閨 中 知 有 誰。

míng nián guī zhōng zhī yǒu shéi
 next year bedroom (2) know there-is who

3.

Willow floss and elm-tree seeds
 are fragrant on their own;
 No need to fret that peach blossoms blow
 and pear blossoms fly away.
 For peach and pear the coming year
 are able to bloom again;
 But next year within her chamber –
 who will be there then?

The speaker of the poem now pulls back from the basic situation and engages in a bit of philosophical musing on the inherent sadness of spring – a sadness that is human and which is then imposed to a certain extent on the indifferent seasonal cycle. Flowers will return again the following year – that is inevitable. But the aging beauty who pities the flowers cannot be guaranteed to be there and the same the following year. She could die, or get married, or simply become a different person with the experiences of a year. There is a touch of irony and mockery here, as Daiyu questions the beauty's pity in wishing to bury the flowers when it is she herself that is to be pitied.

This stanza makes substantial use of parallel patterns and repetitions to create a sense of logical argument from line to line.

三 月 香 巢 已 壘 成 ，

sān yuè xiāng cháo yǐ lěi chéng
 Third Month fragrant nest already built completely
 up

梁 間 燕 子 太 無 情。

liáng jiān yàn zǐ tài wú qíng
 rafter midst swallows (2) too heartless (2)

明 年 花 發 雖 可 啄 ，

míng nián huā fā suī kě zhuó
 next year flowers bloom even can be pecked
 though

卻 不 道 人 去 梁 空 巢 也 傾。

què bú dào rén qù liáng kōng cháo yě qīng
 yet not know people leave rafters empty nest also overthrown

4.

In late spring, the fragrant nests
 are built up, row on row;
 And in the rafters the swallows
 are just too cruel to us!
 Next year when the flowers bloom,
 the birds can eat them up;
 Yet don't they know?
 People leave and the rafters empty
 and all the nests are upturned.

A new element of nature is now introduced – birds (birds and flowers tend to be the most common nature motifs in this type of verse, and are especially associated with feminine themes). Here the reference is to swallows, who were known to build nests in the rafters of houses. Just as falling flowers remind the lovesick woman of her aging, so the appearance of paired swallows building nests and raising their young reminds her of her single status (this is why they are described as cruel). Yet the philosophical speaker points out that the impermanence of everything will affect birds and people equally, and the house will eventually be emptied of all inhabitants.

There is an example of an extra-metrical phrase here, which is fairly common in ballad style: “Yet not know.” Such phrases are usually an appeal to the audience, asking them to take note of something surprising or asking their judgment (the most common of these, for example, is “Don't you see?”)

一 年 三 百 六 十 日 ，

yī nián sān bǎi liù shí rì
 one year three hundred six tens days

風 刀 霜 劍 嚴 相 逼。

fēng dāo shuāng jiàn yán xiāng bī
 wind knife frost sword severe them oppress

明 媚 鮮 妍 能 幾 時 ，

míng mèi xiān yán néng jǐ shí
 bright en-bright-lovely (2) can how-time
 chanting much

一 朝 飄 泊 難 尋 覓。

yī zhāo piāo bó nán xún mì
 one morn-ing drift-away (2) hard/ seek out (2)
 impossible

5.

In one year, all of
 three hundred sixty days,
 Knives of wind and swords of frost
 press all urgently.
 Such bright enchanting loveliness –
 how long can it last?
 One morning it will drift away,
 impossible to find.

Because the flowers are described in terms that would also apply to a woman's beauty, it is unclear whether this stanza applies to humans or to flowers (both would work, though Hawkes opts for flowers in his translation). Regardless, it is our fate to face the ravages of time the entire year, year after year. It is inevitable that such beauty will fade quickly.

花 開 易 見 落 難 尋 ，

huā kāi yì jiàn luò nán xún
 flowers open easy to see fall hard-to seek

階 前 悶 殺 葬 花 人 。

jiē qián mèn shā zàng huā rén
 stairs in-front depress badly (2) bury flower person

獨 倚 花 鋤 淚 暗 灑 ，

dú yǐ huā chú lèi àn sǎ
 alone lean-on flower hoe tears secretly sprinkle

灑 上 空 枝 見 血 痕 。

sǎ shàng kōng zhī jiàn xuè hén
 sprinkle onto empty branch see blood traces

6.

When blossoms open, they're easy to see –
 when they fall, so hard to find.
 So melancholy, before the stairs
 the flower-burial girl.
 Alone she leans on her flower hoe
 as her tears secretly fall,
 And fall upon the empty branch
 where traces of blood are seen.

After the general philosophical musings of stanzas 3-5, the narrator returns to our heroine. After that earlier discussion of human mortality, the link between human and flower is made even stronger by the opening line here – when things are in their youth and height of beauty, everyone

notices them; but once they fade, they vanish from our consciousness. The girl pities the flowers but her own identity is connected even more strongly to them.

Now she weeps (as women tend to do in such poems); and when a woman is particularly moved, she might weep tears of blood. This may be a sign of strong emotion; of poetic exaggeration (“I have wept so many tears I have run out of them and only have blood left to weep”); or a deliberate misinterpretation of an actual phenomenon (tears run through the rouge on cheeks, turning red in the process). The use of blood-tears here is more compelling than the standard cliché however; we are not told that the tears are blood until they have already fallen on an “empty branch,” thus replacing the red blossoms that have already left it with a new kind of flower. Moreover, we can associate the shedding of blood here with Daiyu’s consumption and the discharge of blood she experiences at other points in the novel.

杜 鵑 無 語 正 黃 昏 ，

dù juān wú yǔ zhèng huáng hūn
Cuckoo (2) have-no speech just-now dusk (2)

荷 鋤 歸 去 掩 重 門。

hé chú guī qù yǎn chóng mén
shoulder hoe return leave shut double gate/door

青 燈 照 壁 人 初 睡 ，

qīng dēng zhào bì rén chū shuì
blue/dark lamp shines wall person just now sleeps

冷 雨 敲 窗 被 未 溫。

lěng yǔ qiāo chuāng bèi wèi wēn
cold rain knocks window blanket not-yet warm

7.

The cuckoos all fall silent now,
just as twilight comes;
She shoulders her hoe and turns to home,
shutting the doors behind her.
A dying lamp lights up the wall
where she tries to go to sleep;
But a chilly rain knocks on the window
and her blanket has yet to warm her.

We now have our second bird – after the swallows, the cuckoo (*dujuan*) is introduced. Its appearance here (or rather, its striking silence) ties this stanza to the previous one through a

literary allusion that readers would have known. The cuckoo was said to be a transformation of the soul of a king of Shu (now Sichuan), Du Yu, who killed himself out of regret after he seduced the wife of one of his ministers. It is noted for its poignant singing at night during the late spring and early summer; it is also said to weep blood. Its silence here may be ominous – it should normally start to sing at dusk.

This silence perhaps is what drives the heroine to surrender her task and go in to sleep. Daiyu of course gets very little sleep in the novel, as we are told repeatedly (though in erotic verse, sleeping alone under cold coverlets is a sign of loneliness).

怪 奴 底 事 倍 傷 神 ，

guài nú dǐ shì bèi shāng shén
find-I why (2) doubly harm spirit
strange

半 為 憐 春 半 惱 春。

bàn wéi lián chūn bàn nǎo chūn
half make cherish spring half annoyed spring
by

憐 春 忽 至 惱 忽 去 ，

lián chūn hū zhì nǎo hū qù
cherish spring at-once comes annoy at-once departs

至 又 無 言 去 不 聞。

zhì yòu wú yán qù bù wén
comes again have-no words depart not hear

昨 宵 庭 外 悲 歌 發 ，

zuó xiāo tíng wài bēi gē fā
last night garden beyond sad song issues

知 是 花 魂 與 鳥 魂。

zhī shì huā hún yǔ niǎo hún
know it's flower soul and bird soul

8.

“I find it strange – why is it that
I keep wounding my spirit thus?
I seem to be half in love with spring
and half of it vexes me.
When my love for it suddenly comes,

then vexation at once departs;
 But when it comes, it comes silently;
 and when it leaves, no one hears.
 But last night, beyond the garden
 a grieving song came forth;
 I know that it's the flower spirits
 and the bird spirits too.

Classical Chinese does not use explicit markers of direct speech, but a female first-person humble pronoun is introduced in the first line, marking a shift from distanced narrator to emotionally involved protagonist. From here until the end of the poem, the girl herself speaks of her feelings – and we can imagine that these are her own musings as she lies sleepless in bed.

The silence of the cuckoo in the previous stanza now becomes a focus of the girl's thoughts, as she contemplates the silence of spring's arrival and departure – which she almost seems to describe as a mysterious lover who comes and goes and cannot be relied on. Yet she *has* heard something – a mysterious song (not the cuckoo's), which she attributes to the mourning laments of the flower and bird spirits.

花 魂 鳥 魂 總 難 留 ，

huā hún niǎo hún zǒng nán liú
 flower soul bird soul always hard-to detain

鳥 自 無 言 花 自 羞。

niǎo zì wú yán huā zì xiū
 bird self has-no words flower self ashamed

願 奴 脅 下 生 雙 翼 ，

yuàn nú xié xià shēng shuāng yì
 wish I ribs below grow pair wings

隨 花 飛 到 天 盡 頭。

suí huā fēi dào tiān jìn tóu
 follow flower fly to sky edge (2)

天 盡 頭 ，

tiān jìn tóu
 sky edge (2)

何 處 有 香 丘。

hé chù yǒu xiāng qiū
 somewhere (2) there-is fragrant hill

未 若 錦 囊 收 艷 骨 ，

wèi ruò jǐn náng shōu yàn gǔ
not as brocade bag gather lovely bones
good as

一 抔 淨 土 掩 風 流。

yì póu jìng tǔ yǎn fēng liú
one handful pure earth cover refined grace (2)

質 本 潔 來 還 潔 去 ，

zhì běn jié lái huán jié qù
sub- origin- purity comes returns purity goes
stance ally

強 於 污 淖 陷 渠 溝。

qiáng yú wū nào xiàn qú gōu
better-than (2) mud mire fall trench (2)

9.

“Flower spirits and bird spirits –
always hard to keep them here;
The birds fall silent on their own,
and flowers grow ashamed.
I wish that below my arms
I could grow a pair of wings,
And following flowers fly away
to the very edge of the sky
To the very edge of the sky
Where somewhere there’s a fragrant mound.
Better it is in a brocade bag
to gather their gorgeous bones
And with a handful of purest earth
bury their refined grace.
In substance they came from purity,
and to purity shall return.
Better far than in mud and miry
trenches fall for good.

A long, rambling stanza conveys the reason for why the girl decided to bury flowers in the first place. The mourning song of the spirits she heard soon ceased, because both bird-spirit and flower-spirit were too shy and reticent to communicate for long, and also because they have departed when their physical manifestations perished. She wishes she could follow their souls to whatever world they go to after they leave ours, wishing to become a bird herself. Here it might be useful to see her identification with both flower and bird – she wants to be a bird to follow after them, but she already is an incarnation of a flower (the Crimson Pearl Flower), and the place

where she could fly to no doubt is the land of disenchantment, her original home. Once she arrives there, she can visit the “proper” grave of the flowers.

However, since she cannot fly there, she must remain contented with the next-best thing – to bury the leftover “bones” of the flowers (the petals), rather than their essence, to show her respect for them – her sisters, as it were.

爾 今 死 去 儂 收 葬 ，

ěr jīn sǐ qù nóng shōu zàng
you now die depart I collect bury

未 卜 儂 身 何 日 喪。

wèi bǔ nóng shēn hé rì sāng
not-yet predict my self what day mourn

10.

“Now you are dead and gone,
I gather you for the grave,
And I’m not yet able to foretell
when my own death will be mourned.

One thing Hawkes’ version does not convey is the baldness of these two lines, whose rhyme is different from the lines that come after and before them. They thus stand out as a stanza on their own (the shortest in the poem). This makes them essentially the emotional climax of the poem. The rest of it is denouement.

儂 今 葬 花 人 笑 痴 ，

nóng jīn zàng huā rén xiào chī
I now bury flowers people laugh foolishness

他 年 葬 儂 知 是 誰。

tā nián zàng nóng zhī shì shéi
other year bury me know is who

試 看 春 殘 花 漸 落 ，

shì kàn chūn cán huā jiàn luò
try-to see spring wanes flowers slowly fall

便 是 紅 顏 老 死 時。

biàn shì hóng yán lǎo sǐ shí

just is ruddy face ages dies time

一 朝 春 盡 紅 顏 老 ,

yī zhāo chūn jìn hóng yán lǎo
one morning spring ends ruddy face ages

花 落 人 亡 兩 不 知。

huā luò rén wáng liǎng bù zhī
flower fall people die/ both not know
vanish

11.

“Now as I bury the flowers,
others laugh at my folly;
But in that future year, who knows
who will bury me?
Just look as the springtime wanes
and flowers gradually fall;
Just the time when the rosy face of youth
grows old and dies.
One day spring will run out; and old grows
the rosy face of youth;
Flowers fall and people perish
and neither of them know.”

The speaker once more rhetorically links aging with the departure of the flowers, engaging in a number of striking repetition in the vocabulary to emphasize the two things compared, which could be schematized in the following way:

1. me, people, flowers
2. me
3. spring, flowers
4. rosy face
5. spring, rosy face
6. flowers, people

Daiyu's flower-burial song

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the blossoms fill the sky.
Their crimson fades, their scent dies out,
and who is there to pity?
Drifting threads gently twist together
and float past the springtime lodge;

Falling willow floss lightly sticks
and strikes the lady's window drapes.

Within her chamber, the maiden
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are built up, row on row;
And in the rafters the swallows
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Next year when the flowers bloom,
the birds can eat them up;
Yet don't they know?
People leave and the rafters empty
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In one year, all of
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impossible to find.

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So melancholy, before the stairs
the flower-burial girl.
Alone she leans on her flower hoe
as her tears secretly fall,
And fall upon the empty branch
where traces of blood are seen.

The cuckoos all fall silent now,
 just as twilight comes;
She shoulders her hoe and turns to home,
 shutting the doors behind her.
A dying lamp lights up the wall
 where she tries to go to sleep;
But a chilly rain knocks on the window
 and her blanket has yet to warm her.

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