

**TRANSLATION OF A CHINESE POEM INLAID IN SILVER ON AN  
ARCHAISTIC RED-SANDALWOOD BOX, WITH LAQUERED  
INTERIOR, AND GILDED MARK OF THE QIANLONG EMPEROR.**

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ELY FINCH, MELBOURNE, MAY 2020.

TRANSLATION,  
WITH A TRANSCRIPTION AND PHOTOGRAPH OF THE ORIGINAL  
POEM BELOW, EXPLANATORY NOTES ON THE FOLLOWING PAGES,  
AND RELEVANT IMAGES APPENDED THEREAFTER.

*The Pine-snow noble's studio has long in ruin lain;  
And from its remnants spreads no fragrance fine of ink and plume.  
His quenching consort, now alone, but as of old, survives;  
She meets still with the Thirteen Liner in her rue-filled room.*

王孫松雪齋顏久 遺跡空傳翰墨香  
祇有淬妃猶好在 芸帷時晤十三行



## NOTES:

### Preliminary remarks:

- The poem's wording will appear somewhat cryptic in translation. This is no less the case in Chinese for the insufficiently erudite reader unfamiliar with the range of traditional literary and cultural references on which it draws, which are addressed below.

### The first line:

- The first line—王孫松雪齋頹久 “*The Pine-snow noble's studio has long in ruin lain*”—opens in Chinese with the word 王孫 *wángsūn*, which is translated here simply as “noble”, but might be more fully explicated by the phrase “noble scion of a ruling house”. The next word in the Chinese provides the name of the individual who is ascribed this status: 松雪 “Pine-snow”. This is an alias of that titan of Chinese art history 趙孟頫 *Zhào Mèngfǔ*.<sup>1</sup>
- For readers who are unaware, *Zhào Mèngfǔ* was a scion of the 宋 *Sòng* imperial line—the nine-times-great-grandson of the founding emperor of the *Sòng* dynasty, and the descendant of a succession of nobles who followed thereafter—who was born not long before the Mongol conquest of the Southern Song state and the establishment of the 元 *Yuán* empire. After many years of penury, he controversially entered into the service of the new regime, having been recognised and fêted for his significant artistic and scholarly accomplishments by the Mongol emperor Kublai Khan. He is celebrated both as a painter and calligrapher, and is most noted for his achievement in regular-script calligraphy, being considered one of the four greatest regular-script calligraphers in all of Chinese history.
- The overall sense of the first line is thus “The studio of *Zhào Mèngfǔ*, that noble scion of the *Sòng* imperial line, fell to ruin long ago”.

### The second line:

- The second line—遺跡空傳翰墨香 “*And from the remnants spreads no fragrance fine of ink and plume*”—concerns the 遺跡 “remnants” or “surviving traces” of *Zhào Mèngfǔ*'s ruined studio. In this context, the remnants referred to are presumably synonymous with the ruins of the first line to which the studio has been reduced; but they could potentially refer to any of the materials from which the studio was constructed and any of the articles that once inhabited it.
- The translation represents a slight simplification of the original line, the sense of which is rather that “the remnants spread in vain, futilely, or to no avail, the fragrance fine of ink and plume”.
- The last word of the original line, 香 *xīang* “fine scent”, has a deeper sense in Chinese, namely “a refining influence”. This sense is central to many well-known lines from Chinese literature and idioms.
- The expression translated as “ink and plume” (翰墨) has the secondary sense of “writings and/or paintings”. The word is composed of the character for a long and rigid feather, “a plume”, which is a literary appellation for a brush, and the character for “ink” (the conjunction “and” is grammatically implicit).

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<sup>1</sup> *Zhào Mèngfǔ* had several aliases, of which 松雪 “Pine-snow” was one, though it is not always listed in modern biographies along with such longer aliases as 松雪道人 “Man of the Way of Pine and Snow”, of which it is a contraction. The following excerpt from the 同治 *Tóngzhì*-era 湖州府志 “Gazetteer of the Prefecture of *Húzhōu*” will provide, for the Chinese reader, a clear example of its use: “趙孟頫宅在甘棠橋南宅有大銀杏樹相傳為松雪手植” (see <https://ctext.org/library.pl?if=en&file=107577&page=1706&remap=gb>).

- The word translated as “spreads” (傳) has the double sense of “to pass through air” and “to pass on”, the latter sense being applicable to such things as knowledge, refinement and heritage.
- The overall sense of the second line is thus “Zhào Mèngfǔ’s studio having been laid to waste, the fine fragrances of brush and ink or brush-and-ink work that once emanated from it no longer emanate from its remnants, or rather, if they still do, they are no longer able to exert their former refining influence”.

The third line:

- The central expression in the third line—祇有淬妃猶好在 “*His quenching consort, now alone, but as of old, survives*”—is 淬妃 “quenching consort”. This is a context-dependent translation of a general appellation for the spirit of an ink-stone. The appellation in question consists of the character for “to quench” or “quenching” (淬) followed by the character for “female spirit” (妃),<sup>2</sup> and seemingly analogises the dunking of a brush into an ink-stone’s pool of ink to the act of quenching a heated sword.

In addition to its sense of “female spirit”, the second character has a separate sense of “consort”. This double sense is played on in the poem, and is the reason why the appellation is translated here as “quenching consort”—as opposed to “quenching genie”, “quenching sprite” or some other rendering that would reflect the second character’s sense of “female spirit”.

The play on the sense of “consort” hinges on Zhào Mèngfǔ’s being a noble scion of an imperial line, who might therefore be expected to have a consort. His nobility having been emphasised with the opening word of the original poem—王孫 wángsūn “noble” or “noble scion of a ruling house”—the word play is unambiguous and effective.

- The last two characters of the original line (好在) are a single word, which means “to survive or continue as it or one once was, or as they once were”. It can be used with respect to places, objects or people.
- The overall sense of the third line is thus “On account of the secondary sense of ‘female spirit’ that the word for ‘imperial consort’ has, and that word’s use in an appellation for the spirit of an ink-stone, Zhào Mèngfǔ’s ink-stone may be likened to his consort of former days, one that is a lone survivor and is still now more or less as she once was.”

The fourth line:

- The fourth line—芸帷時晤十三行 “*She meets still with the Thirteen Liner in her rue-filled room*”—concerns the “quenching consort” introduced in the previous line, i.e. the personification of Zhào Mèngfǔ’s ink-stone.
- 十三行 “the Thirteen Liner” is an epithet for a celebrated calligraphic model, consisting of a fragmentary thirteen lines of regular-script text written by the fourth-century 晉 Jin-dynasty calligrapher 王獻之 Wáng Xiànzhī. There are or were two versions of the Thirteen Liner, one of which belonged for a time to Zhào Mèngfǔ. He appears to have considered his version to be original, unlike the other, which he thought to be a 唐 Táng-dynasty copy.<sup>3</sup> Zhào Mèngfǔ was an assiduous copyist of the calligraphic models left to posterity by former masters, and is said to have copied this and other works of Wáng Xiànzhī’s hundreds of times over his lifetime.
- The expression translated as “rue-filled room” (芸帷) requires explanation on a number of levels:

The 芸 “rue” within it is the plant also known as “common rue” or *Ruta graveolens* (see Image 1). Picked after autumn when its leaves were glaucous or powdery,

<sup>2</sup> For readers of Chinese, examples of this character’s use in the sense of female spirit include 湘妃 Xiāngfēi, 天妃 Tiānfēi and 宓妃 Fúfēi.

<sup>3</sup> See 卷十 “section ten” of Zhào Mèngfǔ’s 松雪齋集 “Pine-snow Studio Compilation”.

this fragrant plant was used in Chinese antiquity to protect books from silverfish, and under mats to repel fleas and lice. Its strong connection with books resulted in the use of the word in an extensive array of elegant literary appellations for studio, library or book.<sup>4</sup> (See Images 2–6 for the monograph on this plant within Qing-dynasty botanist 吳其濬 *Wú Qìjùn*'s 植物名實圖考 “*Illustrated Nominal and Substantive Study of Plants*”, which quotes a number of historical sources on this subject.)

The primary sense of the second character in the expression (帷) is “curtain”. Curtains were hung in doorways in traditional Chinese settings, and for this reason the character is often used metonymically in the sense of room, or rather “curtained chamber”, most commonly with respect to the curtained chambers occupied by women.

芸帷 “rue-filled room”, or rather “rue-filled curtained chamber”, is one of the numerous expressions for library or studio that begin with the character for rue. The second character in this expression has, however, a unique connection with rooms occupied by women, and it would seem that both senses are being played on in its usage in the poem, i.e. the expression refers to the studio of the ink-stone's female spirit.

- The overall sense of the fourth line is thus “From time to time, *Zhào Mèngfǔ*'s ink-stone, personified by its female spirit, convenes within her chamber with the calligraphic model known as the Thirteen Liner, just as she used to do centuries ago in *Zhào Mèngfǔ*'s time.

The characters and stamp that accompany the poem:

- The poem, which is written in a graceful and recognisable running script, is followed by four characters in the same hand: “乾隆御題” “Inscribed by the Emperor in the Qianlong Era”. This was a standard phrase used in connection with inscriptions by the Qianlong Emperor, who is otherwise known as 清高宗 *Qīng Gāozōng*.
- Immediately below these four characters is a work of gold inlay, which takes the form of a seal-script stamp that reads: “乾隆御賞” “Appreciated by the Emperor in the Qianlong Era”. This was also a stock phrase, one used in connection with paintings, curios and objets d'art that were personally appreciated by *Qīng Gāozōng*.

The history of the poem:

- The poem is a recorded work that was composed by the Qianlong emperor, at Chinese new year in the year 1750, as an ode to one or more ink-stones that had belonged to *Zhào Mèngfǔ*.<sup>5</sup> An extensive illustrated catalogue of ink-stones belonging to the imperial collection was completed in the year 1778 (the 43<sup>rd</sup> year of the Qianlong Era), and the poem appears within it inscribed on a *Zhào Mèngfǔ* ink-stone and on the lid of the case that housed it: see Images 7–9 for the entry within this catalogue on the ink-stone concerned and associated illustrations, which depict the inscription of the poem, and another inscription that indicates that the ink-stone was housed in the emperor's well-known 三希堂 *Sānxītáng* studio.
- The poem is one of tens of thousands that the prolific Qianlong emperor wrote in his lifetime, and to the best of the translator's knowledge has not been translated before.

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<sup>4</sup> For readers of Chinese, examples include 芸帙 *yúnzhì* and 芸編 *yúnbīān* in the sense of book; 芸窗 *yúncuāng* and 芸館 *yúnguǎn* in the sense of studio; and 芸扃 *yúnjiōng* and 芸局 *yúnjú* in the sense of library.

<sup>5</sup> The poem is recorded in a number of collections of the Qianlong emperor's poetry, such as in his 御製詩二集 “Second Compilation of Imperial Poems”, in which it appears in 卷十四 “section fourteen”, along with others composed in the 庚午 *gēngwǔ* year—the 15<sup>th</sup> year of the Qianlong Era. Despite the absence of an explicit statement to the effect that the poems in the volume are ordered chronologically, their content and sometimes chronologically explicit titles seem to leave little room for doubt that this is the case. The placement of this poem a little before one that concerns the 15<sup>th</sup> or last day of the Chinese new-year period thus fixes the time of its composition to between the 7<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> of February 1750.

- The Qianlong emperor composed scores of short works dedicated to ink-stones, but this poem appears to be one of the earliest, having been written around two decades before work on his ink-stone catalogue was begun.

Translator's observations on the poem (these concern matters that are more subjective and thus more open to speculation):

- The poem's employment of an analogy to a noble and his consort seems to fit with the identity of its writer, as does the emphasis on *Zhào Mèngfǔ*'s imperial lineage.
- In his preface to his ink-stone catalogue, the Qianlong emperor writes about the durability of ink-stones and their suitability as collectables given the fact that they outlast all the other treasures of the studio. This preoccupation with permanence, which is evident in many of the emperor's literary works, and with ink-stones as a vestige of lost studios appears to fit with the wording of the poem.
- The name of *Zhào Mèngfǔ*'s studio (or rather the best known of his studios), “松雪齋” “Pine-snow Studio” or “The Studio of Pine and Snow”, is embedded in the first line. However, its first half, “Pine-snow”, belonging to the first part of the sentence, and its second half, “studio”, belonging to the second part, it is not an operative component of the line. It thus has a phantom-like visual presence rather than a semantic presence, and one wonders whether this was the intention of the poet, thereby heightening the idea begun in the first line and developed in the following of the studio's destruction but the survival of what may be viewed as its spectre. Intentional or not, this is the effect, and it adds greatly to the poem's resonance.

The poem's form:

- The poem can be classified as a structurally flawless 押七陽韻之平起七言近體絕句 “seven-character-per-line metrical *juéjù* quatrain that begins on the even tone and employs the seventh traditional rhyme”.
- This is a highly structured poetic form that, despite or rather on account of its short length, is particularly demanding to write well, its concision and strictness necessitating the judicious and economic employment of highly expressive and evocative language.

About the translation:

- The translation is written in iambic heptameter, which is to say that each of its lines is composed of seven iambic feet—an iambic foot consisting of one soft unstressed syllable followed by one loud stressed syllable. This metrical arrangement is intended to mirror the similarly strict metrical arrangement of the original, albeit that Chinese metre is concerned with tonal structure rather than syllabic volume.
- With seven iambic feet in each line of the translation to match the seven monosyllabic characters in each line of the original, there are twice the number of syllables in the translation. Literary Chinese is however known for its extreme concision and it is difficult if not impossible to match it in English.
- Like the original, the translation carries a rhyme at the end of its second and fourth lines. It should be noted, though, that with the increased number of syllables in the translation, the rhyme does not sound as resonant in English. (An alternative approach, perhaps better suited to English, would have been to rhyme each of the poem's couplets separately. This, however, while resulting in a more resonant verse, would not have directly reflected the original's structure, and would have undermined the cohesive effect central to the original that is produced by the repetition of a rhyme across the couplets.)
- The original is more subtle than the translation in that the personification of the ink-stone is not overt but ever implied. This suggestiveness could not be paralleled in English.
- Implicit in the translation is the assumption that the poem concerns one ink-stone or “quenching concubine”, but the grammar of the original is not specific to the singular or plural case. The poem's final couplet could thus also be read “*His quenching consorts,*

*now alone, but as of old, survive; They meet still with the Thirteen Liner in their rue-filled rooms.”*

About the transcription:

- The transcription is given left to right, with breaks between lines and couplets shown, unlike the original, which is presented in the traditional format, in which the text is unbroken and runs downwards in lines that start at the right and progress to the left.
- The character “祇” is a variant form of the character “祇” that was used in the inscription and is accordingly reflected in the transcription.

Mandarin Pinyin romanisation:

- *Wángsūn Sōngxuě zhāi tuí jiǔ, yíjī [or yíjì] kōng chuán hàn mò xiāng. Zhǐ yǒu Cuìfēi yóu hǎozài, yúnwéi shí wù Shísānháng.*

Cantonese Yale romanisation:

- *Wòhngsūn Chùhngsyut jāai tòiuh gáu, wàihjīk hūng chyùhn hohnmahk hēung. Jí yáuh Cheuifēi yàuh hóujoi, wàhnwàih sìh ngh Sahpsāamhòhng.*

Simplified characters:

- In standard (non-variant) simplified characters the poem is written as follows:  
王孙松雪斋颓久，遗迹空传输墨香。只有淬妃犹好在，芸帷时晤十三行。

About the box:

- The poem is strongly suggestive of the box it graces being what is termed an 砚匣 “ink-stone case” or 砚盒 “ink-stone box”, and its low lip and internal lacquering are clearly consistent with this possibility.
- The box does not seem to match the description given in the aforementioned ink-stone-catalogue entry of the case in which the *Zhào Mèngfǔ* ink-stone that is known to have borne this inscription was housed, nor does it seem to be the right shape for that ink-stone. Furthermore, while of a similar size, it is perhaps not quite wide enough to contain that ink-stone.

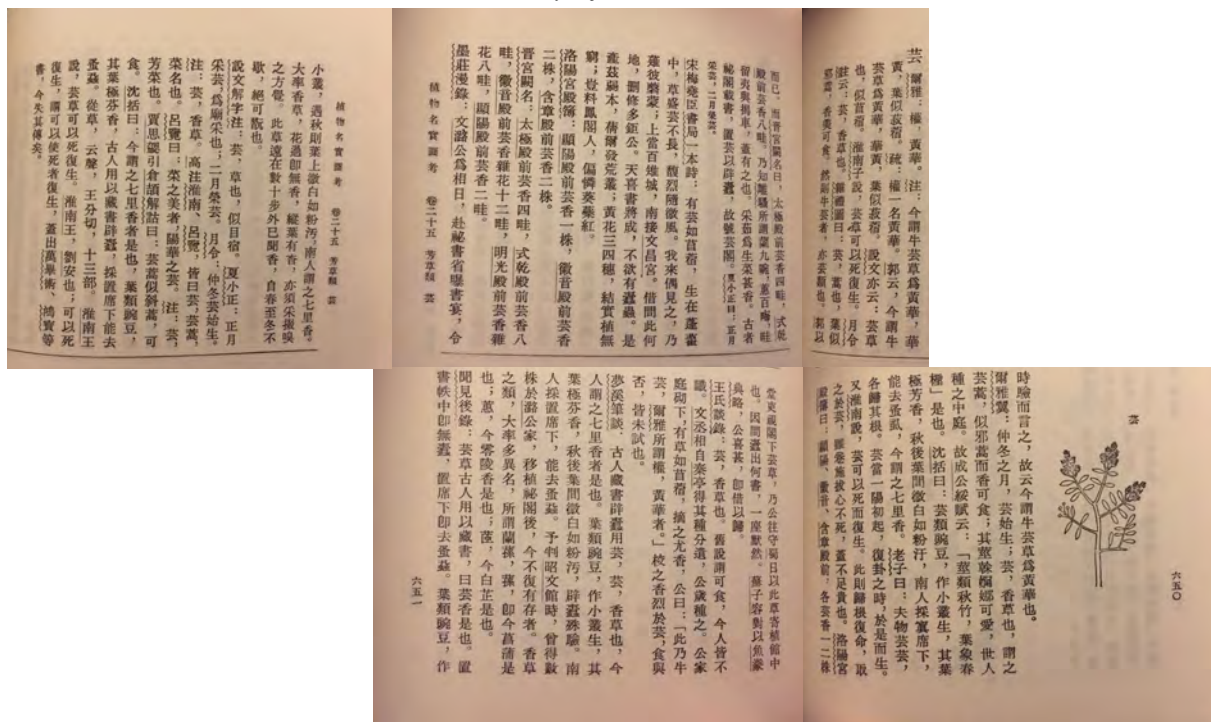


REFERENCE IMAGES:

Image 1: Common rue, *Ruta graveolens* (Copyright 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica: <https://www.britannica.com/plant/rue#/media/1/512305/23316>)



Images 2–6: Photographs of the monograph on rue on pages 650–652 of the China Publishing House’s two-volume 2018 reproduction of 吳其濬 *Wú Qìjùn*’s 1848 植物名實圖考 “*Illustrated Nominal and Substantive Study of Plants*” (ISBN-13: 9787101132144)





Images 7-9: The seventh entry in 卷五 “section five” of the Qianglong emperor’s 1778 西清硯譜 *Xīqīng yànpǔ* ink-stone catalogue, which concerns 趙孟頫澄泥斧硯 “an axlike ink-stone made from clarified clay that belonged to *Zhào Mèngfū*”. (Images courtesy of the Internet Archive website: see <https://archive.org/stream/06070930.cn#page/n106/mode/2up>)

