

# Japanese Focus



This issue, **we're tackling the hard stuff**. I'm going to do my best to explain one of the most common - and most difficult to translate - terms found in the *Sailor Moon* meta-series: "**Maboroshi no Ginzuishou**"; "**the Phantom Silver Crystal**".

## 幻の銀水晶

For decades, the proper English translation of this phrase has been under intense debate and scrutiny. Let's discuss why.

Anyone who has followed the North American versions of the *Sailor Moon* manga and anime will find that professional translators have come to no consensus of how "maboroshii" should be translated.

In some versions you'll find "illusory". In others you'll find "mystical". In still others you'll see Usagi's crystal described as "legendary" - which is way off base. Needless to say, there has been little to no consistency for any of the professional translations used, and in some cases, the "translations" of the word are in fact completely inaccurate.

This inconsistency has sparked a number of debates, especially among fan translators of the series. When so many official sources can't get this term right, how can anyone else be expected to? "Maboroshii" has had Japanese to English translators scratching their heads for decades, and it's almost never handled well.

Luckily, the rest of the phrase describing Usagi's crystal isn't as difficult to translate.

## 銀

The first character, "gin" just means "silver".

## 水晶

The last characters, "suishou", mean "crystal". Together, "ginzuishou" means "silver crystal". That's easy.

Fortunately for the rest, there is some background information that points to the correct meaning of the word "maboroshii".

It is not common knowledge, but the creator of *Sailor Moon*, Naoko Takeuchi, was first and foremost a professional chemist. During her studies as an undergraduate at the Kyoritsu Chemical College in Tokyo, Naoko made her manga debut with the one-shot series "Love Call" in 1985. Because Naoko Takeuchi is a trained chemist, tons scientific terminology, mineralogical references, and chemical names have wound up in her works - especially in *Sailor Moon*. Ever noticed that the majority of *Sailor Moon*'s villains are named after minerals or gemstones? That's just another facet of Naoko's influences and background.



Image source: <http://healingcrystals.net/>

The picture above is of a "phantom crystal". When a crystal forms around another pre-existing crystalline structure, like quartz, it is known as a phantom crystal; so called because you can see the "ghost" of the previous crystal inside the newer one. Phantom crystals are a very beautiful and a rare treasure - it is likely that during Naoko Takeuchi's studies she came across the phenomenon, especially since she had a keen interest in mineralogy.

That being said, the term for "phantom crystal" in Japanese when referring to this phenomenon is not "Maboroshi no Ginzuishou", but this:

## ファントム 水晶

"FANTOMU suishou". The highlighted characters say "phantom" – written with Japanese characters known as katakana, used mostly for writing foreign words. So it's hard to argue that Naoko Takeuchi absolutely named Usagi's "Maboroshi no Ginzuishou" after the phenomenon of phantom crystals, since she didn't use the standard term for the scientific phenomenon. But it's extremely likely that she intended to make a reference to it.

## 幻

The problem with translating "maboroshii", and the reason English speakers can't just default to a literal translation, is that it has all kinds of meanings in English depending on the context in which it is used. It can mean phantom, illusion, dream, vision, or fantasy. And in the case of Usagi's crystal, the context that would help a translator determine which definition to use is left ambiguous.

Most translators find themselves at an impasse; should they go ahead and translate the word as "phantom" because of the existing mineralogical reference? Should you drop the word "maboroshii" altogether due to the difficulty translating it to English? Or should you use an already established official "translation" for the word, even if the meaning is not the same?

There are no linguistic clues in *Sailor Moon* itself to point you in the right direction. Nobody speaks about the crystal in any way that adds clarification to the meaning. If you didn't know that the series creator was a chemist who loved to study minerals, you'd be thrown for a loop.

While I was doing my own independent translation of the *Sailor Moon* manga, I really struggled with how to deal with "maboroshii". In fact, in the end, I decided to drop it from my English translation of the phrase altogether, because I couldn't find a good way to deal with it. No matter how much I liked the romantic aspects of "Phantom Silver Crystal", I just didn't have the evidence to support why that translation was better or more accurate than, say, "Visionary Silver Crystal". That's because at the time, I was unaware of the "phantom crystal" phenomenon.

I would guess that most of the professional translators involved with *Sailor Moon* are similarly ignorant of rare crystal formations. Now that I am revisiting this term a few years later, with more data about Naoko Takeuchi's background, I really believe that the proper translation for *Maboroshi no Ginzuishou* ought to be "Phantom Silver Crystal". Sure, it's circumstantial evidence at best, but the words "phantom" and "maboroshi" are roughly equivalent in this sense. I believe that Naoko Takeuchi intentionally used 幻 (*maboroshi*), a kanji meaning "phantom", as a pun and reference to the mineralogical phenomenon of phantom crystals.



"I am a riddle wrapped in a mystery."

So there you have it! I hope you found this segment enjoyable and at least a bit informative. Until next time!

Questions? Comments? Maybe - heaven forbid - corrections? Feel free to contact us at [LunacyMagazine.tumblr](https://www.lunacymagazine.com) or [@LunacyMagazine](https://twitter.com/LunacyMagazine) on Twitter.