



TresOrient

MEN AND GODS

PART II

GUAN YU (关羽): FROM GENERAL OF FLESH TO GOD OF JADE





HOW THE WARRIOR WITH THE LEGENDARY
BEARD BECAME GUANDI (关帝), THE DIVINE
EMPEROR AND PROTECTOR OF THE RIGHTEOUS

THE MAN WHO DEFIED THE HEAVENS... AND JOINED THEM

Within the richly populated pantheon of China, few figures possess a destiny so powerful that the boundary between man and god dissolves. Guan Yu (关羽, AD 160–219) is one such figure. A general famed for his magnificent beard, an invincible warrior betrayed and executed, he rose—through the sheer force of his moral exemplariness—to become Guandi (关帝), the “Holy Emperor Guan”

Today, whether in temples or in shops, he embodies martial virtue, absolute loyalty—yi (义)—and the protection of the righteous. This second volume of our catalogue, Men and Gods, invites you to contemplate how matter—mammoth ivory, hardstone, bronze—can capture the very essence of a hero transformed into a deity.



Pride I

Agate (hardness 7)

Northern China, 20th century

Height: 22 cm \approx 8.66 in

Width: 21 cm \approx 8.27 in



HISTORY: THE LOYAL WARRIOR

Born around AD 160 in Xie County (解县, present-day Shanxi), Guan Yu—also known by his courtesy name Yunchang (云长)—fled his native region after killing a local tyrant. It was amid the turmoil marking the end of the Eastern Han dynasty (东汉, AD 25–220), a period shaken by the Yellow Turban Rebellion (黄巾起义), that he encountered Liu Bei (刘备) and Zhang Fei (张飞).

According to the Sanguo zhi (三国志, Records of the Three Kingdoms), compiled in the third century by Chen Shou (陈寿), the three men shared more than a military alliance: they lived as brothers, laying the foundations of a bond later immortalised as the “Oath of the Peach Garden” (桃园结义).



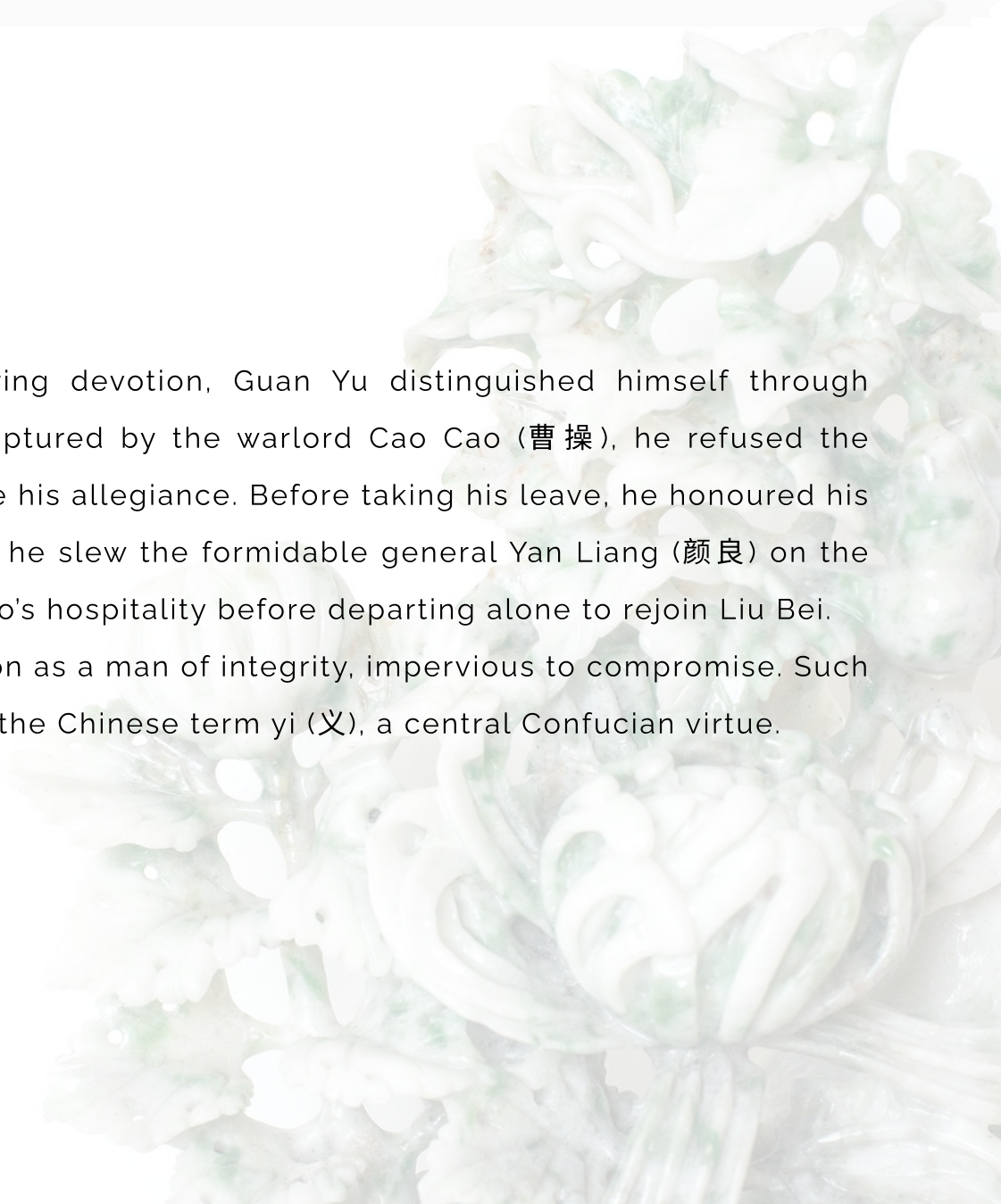
Pride II

Green quartz (hardness 7)

Northern China, 20th century

Height: 26.5 cm \approx 10.43 in

Width: 21 cm \approx 8.27 in



Serving Liu Bei with unwavering devotion, Guan Yu distinguished himself through exceptional bravery. Temporarily captured by the warlord Cao Cao (曹操), he refused the honours and riches offered to secure his allegiance. Before taking his leave, he honoured his word by performing a decisive feat: he slew the formidable general Yan Liang (颜良) on the battlefield, thereby repaying Cao Cao's hospitality before departing alone to rejoin Liu Bei. This episode cemented his reputation as a man of integrity, impervious to compromise. Such unyielding honour is precisely what the Chinese term yi (义), a central Confucian virtue.



Guan Di

Rose quartz (hardness 7)

Southern China, 20th century

Weight: approx. 100 kg

Height: 90 cm \approx 35.43 in

Width: 52 cm \approx 20.47 in

LEGEND: THE HERO OF THE NOVEL

If history provides the framework, it is the *Sanguo yanyi* (三国演义, Romance of the Three Kingdoms), written in the fourteenth century by Luo Guanzhong (罗贯中), that weaves the legend. Guan Yu is portrayed as a towering figure with a ruddy face and a luxuriant beard two feet long—hence his epithet “Lord of the Beautiful Beard” (美髯公).

He wields with superhuman strength his *guandao* (关刀), a halberd weighing over forty kilograms (青龙偃月刀).

The novel exalts his exploits: passing five gates and slaying six enemy generals to protect his sworn brother's wife, or enduring the treatment of a poisoned wound while calmly playing a game of go, his arm laid bare as the bone is scraped without a cry of pain. This image of the stoic warrior, loyal unto death, reaches its tragic culmination at the siege of Fan (樊城). Betrayed and outmanoeuvred, Guan Yu is captured and executed alongside his son Guan Ping (关平) by the forces of Sun Quan (孙权) around AD 219. Yet his death marks only the beginning of his ascent.



Respectfully, Guan Cong

Polychrome bronze

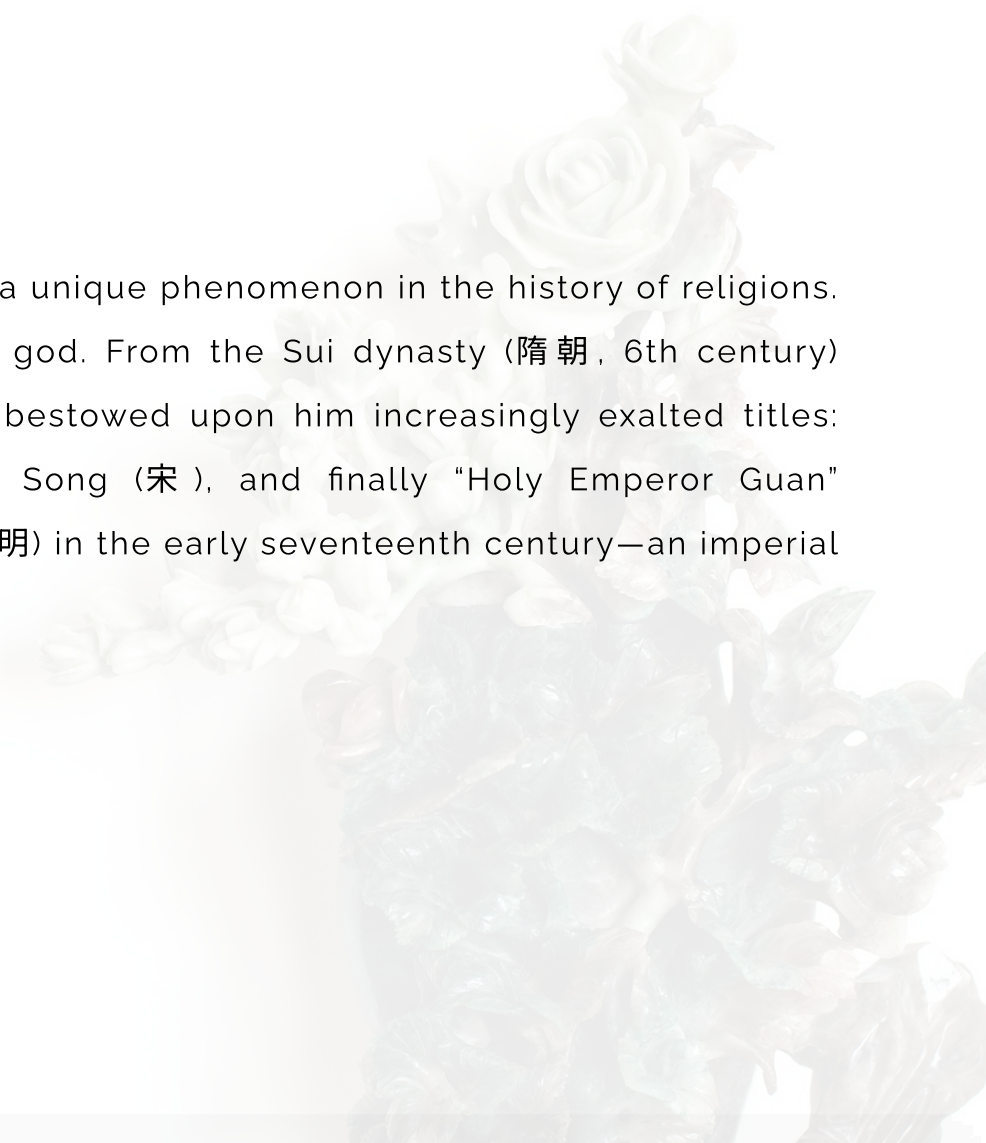
China, early 20th century

Height: 120 cm \approx 47.24 in

Width: 58 cm \approx 22.83 in

DEIFICATION: THE APOTHEOSIS OF AN IDEAL

His posthumous veneration constitutes a unique phenomenon in the history of religions. Guan Yu did not simply die—he became a god. From the Sui dynasty (隋朝, 6th century) onwards, his cult spread widely. Each era bestowed upon him increasingly exalted titles: marquis under Shu (蜀), king under the Song (宋), and finally “Holy Emperor Guan” (Guanshengdijun, 关圣帝君) under the Ming (明) in the early seventeenth century—an imperial title placing him among the highest deities.





Conquest

Bone, Southern China, 20th century

Height: 92 cm \approx 36.22 in

Width: 60 cm \approx 23.62 in

Why such a destiny?

- For Daoism (道教), he is the conqueror of demons, a purifier and protector—a celestial general (Tianjiang, 天将).
- For Buddhism (佛教), he becomes Qielan Pusa (伽蓝菩萨), a guardian bodhisattva protecting temples and the Dharma.
- For Confucianism (儒家), he is the Martial Sage (Wusheng, 武圣), the counterpart to Confucius (孔子), embodying loyalty and righteousness.

Even today, he presides in Hong Kong police stations as a protector of law enforcement, and in businesses as a god of wealth and probity, warding off deceit. His red face, constant in iconography, symbolises unwavering integrity and loyalty.



**Guan Yu and his halberd
With Liu Bei and Zhang Fei**

Heliotrope (hardness 6)
Southern China, 20th century
Height: 40 cm ≈ 15.75 in
Width: 27 cm ≈ 10.63 in

GUAN YU IN THE WEST: BETWEEN EXOTIC CURIOSITY AND PHILOSOPHICAL ARCHETYPE

A DISCREET YET REAL LITERARY PRESENCE

While Guan Yu has never occupied in the West a position comparable to that in East Asia, his name and legend are far from unknown. His principal gateway into Western imagination has been the translation of the "Romance of the Three Kingdoms". From the nineteenth century onwards, sinologists such as the Frenchman Théodore Pavié and the Englishman C.H. Brewitt-Taylor introduced European readers to the hero's exploits. In these works, Guan Yu first appears as a fascinating romantic figure—a swashbuckling hero both fearsome and chivalrous, evoking for Western audiences a blend of Roland and a knight of the Round Table.



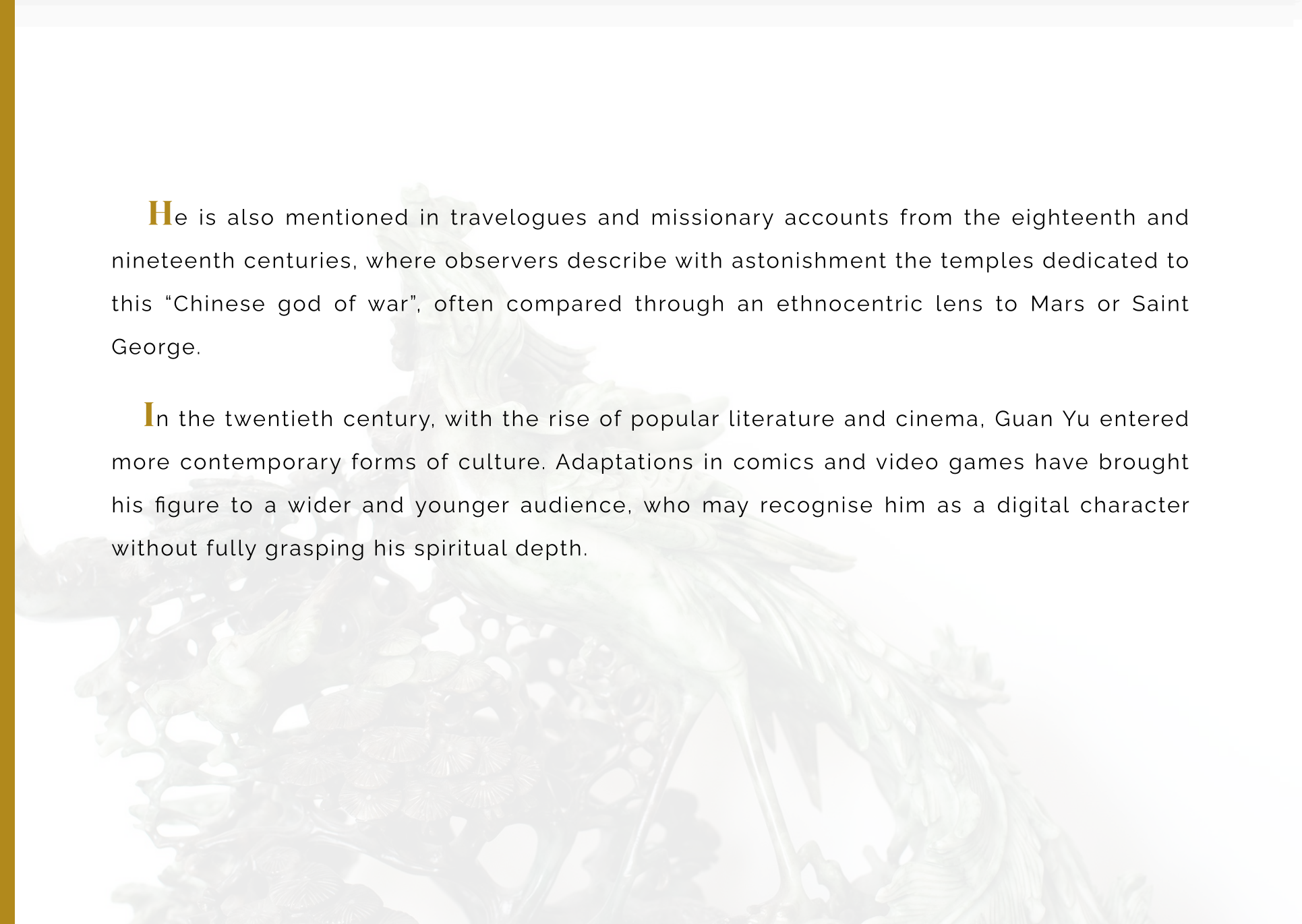
The Three Sworn Brothers

Lapis lazuli

Southern China, 20th century

Height: 28 cm \approx 11.02 in

Width: 25 cm \approx 9.84 in



He is also mentioned in travelogues and missionary accounts from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, where observers describe with astonishment the temples dedicated to this "Chinese god of war", often compared through an ethnocentric lens to Mars or Saint George.

In the twentieth century, with the rise of popular literature and cinema, Guan Yu entered more contemporary forms of culture. Adaptations in comics and video games have brought his figure to a wider and younger audience, who may recognise him as a digital character without fully grasping his spiritual depth.

*Guan Yu Reading the Spring and
Autumn Annals*

Bone, Southern China

20th century

Height: 43 cm \approx 16.93 in

Width: 41 cm \approx 16.14 in





**A CONCEPTUAL PLACE IN EUROPEAN
THOUGHT: THE PARADIGM OF WEN (文)
AND WU (武)**

Beyond literary references, Guan Yu occupies a more conceptual role in Western reflections on China, notably through scholars such as the Australian academic Kam Louie. In *Theorising Chinese Masculinity* (2002), Louie uses Guan Yu as a central figure to explain to Western audiences a distinctly Chinese conception of masculinity. He introduces the dual paradigm of wen (文) and wu (武), often translated as “the cultural” and “the martial”.

Where Western tradition frequently separates the intellectual from the warrior, Chinese thought values their harmony. Guan Yu embodies this equilibrium perfectly.

He is, unquestionably, the invincible warrior—the ultimate wu. Yet the tradition equally emphasises his mastery of wen: he is often depicted reading the Chunqiu (春秋, Spring and Autumn Annals), a Confucian classic attributed to Confucius himself. His strength is thus guided by wisdom and ethics. For European thought, Guan Yu becomes a key to understanding a civilisation in which intellect and the sword are not opposed but complementary.



War or Peace?

Serpentine (hardness 3–4)

Northern China, 20th century

Height: 78 cm \approx 30.71 in

Width: 43 cm \approx 16.93 in

Pride III

Henan soapstone
Zhengzhou, 20th century
Height: 112 cm \approx 44.09 in
Width: 47 cm \approx 18.50 in



A UNIVERSAL SYMBOL OF LOYALTY

In a Europe searching for universal values, Guan Yu is sometimes regarded as a philosophical archetype—almost a Platonic ideal of loyalty. His figure illustrates moral principles that transcend cultures: fidelity to one's word, self-sacrifice for a just cause, and resistance to corruption through honour or reward.

In this light, Guan Yu is no longer merely a Chinese general or a Daoist deity; he becomes an *exemplum virtutis* in the classical sense—a model of virtue as understood by Greco-Roman moralists—demonstrating that the exemplary life of a single individual may transcend not only centuries, but continents.



Majestic Guan Yu

Bone, Southern China, 20th century

Height: 55 cm \approx 21.65 in

Width: 29 cm \approx 11.42 in

The Works: A Dialogue of Materials

How does one honour a man whose loyalty is harder than stone and whose presence surpasses bronze? The works in this exhibition explore three approaches—three materials resonating with the many facets of Guan Yu.

Mammoth Ivory

A fossil material drawn from deep time, mammoth ivory evokes the timeless dimension of myth. The sculptor captures the austere gentleness of Guan Yu's face, the flowing grace of his legendary beard. Its warm patina humanises the deity, recalling the flesh-and-blood man who once lived.



象牙
文圖





The Three Battles of Guan Yu

Mammoth fossil ivory

Southern China

20th century

Width: 150 cm \approx 59.06 in





Hardstones and Gemstones

Jade (yu, 玉), lapis lazuli, quartz—precious minerals form the only fitting setting for a divine emperor. Jade, in particular, symbolises moral purity and perfection. The hardness of the stone reflects Guan Yu's unyielding character. Each piece is an offering, an attempt to fix in mineral eternity the radiance of superhuman virtue.

Path to Yi (义: absolute loyalty, protector of the righteous)

Rose quartz (hardness 6–7)

Soapstone base

Approx. 700 kg

Southern China, 20th century

Height: 156 cm \approx 61.42 in

Width: 83 cm \approx 32.68 in





*Beneath vast peaks where roaring cascades descend,
His righteousness outsoars the mountain's height.
Dead leaves conceal a treacherous, winding path,
Yet loyal heart strides on, unshaken in its might.
Amid the torrent's voice, his courage stands,
A steadfast summit, constant through all time.
Each step a virtue, every breath an oath
Till even rugged ways yield to the just and sublime.*

Chatgpt

Bronze

The material of war, armour and weapons yet also of art. Bronze magnifies the general's martial and cultural force. Sculptures depict him in armour, bearing his guandao or reading the Chunqiu, symbolising the perfect union of wen and wu.

Wen and Wu

*Culture in the left hand and strength
(missing spear) to the left*

Patinated bronze
China, early 20th century
Height: 166 cm ≈ 65.35 in
Width: 67 cm ≈ 26.38 in



THE ETERNAL PRESENT OF THE HERO

By bringing together fossil ivory, eternal gemstones and martial bronze, this section of the catalogue builds a bridge between the historical man, the literary hero and the venerated god. Guan Yu does not belong to the past: he remains a living presence in contemporary Chinese culture. Incense still burns before his statues; businesses make offerings in pursuit of prosperity; households display his image for protection.

To offer the collector more than a sculpture is to offer a fragment of the Chinese soul a soul which, for two millennia, has recognised in the red face of Guan Yu the very embodiment of loyalty.

Guan Yu's Halberd

Nephrite jade (hardness 7)

6.2 kg (the general's one weighed 40 kg!)

Southern China, 20th century

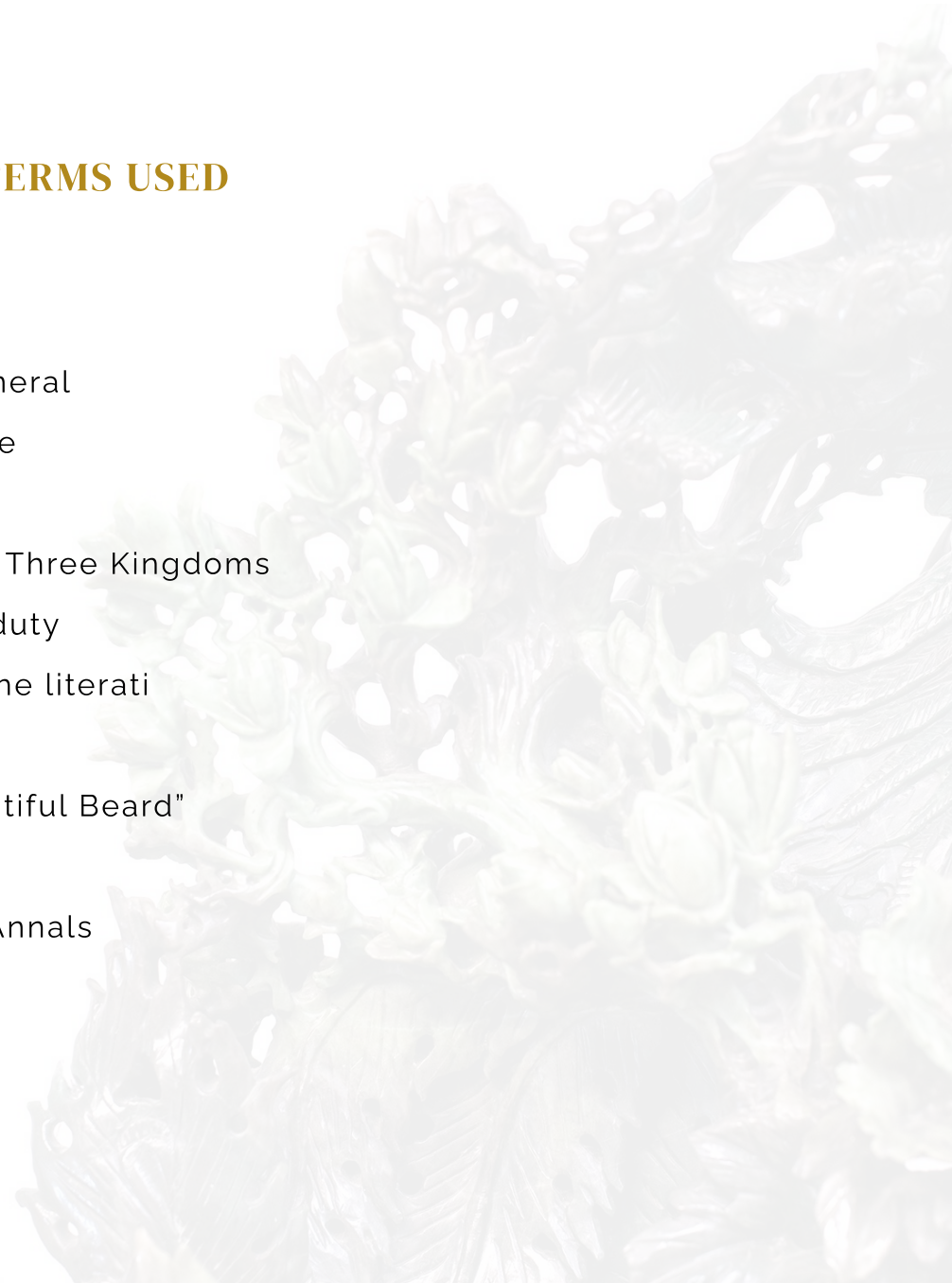
Height: 164 cm \approx 64.57 in





GLOSSARY OF THE MAIN CHINESE TERMS USED

- Guan Yu (关羽): Personal name of the general
- Guandi (关帝): "Emperor Guan", divine title
- Yunchang (云长): Style name of Guan Yu
- Sanguo yanyi (三国演义): Romance of the Three Kingdoms
- Yi (义): Loyalty, righteousness, sense of duty
- Wen (文): The cultural, the intellectual, the literati
- Wu (武): The martial, the warrior
- Meirangong (美髯公): "Lord with the Beautiful Beard"
- Guandao (关刀): Guan Yu's halberd
- Chunqiu (春秋): The Spring and Autumn Annals





This catalogue presents a selection of Asian sculptures from the gallery's collection.
For any enquiries or pricing information, please contact us:

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