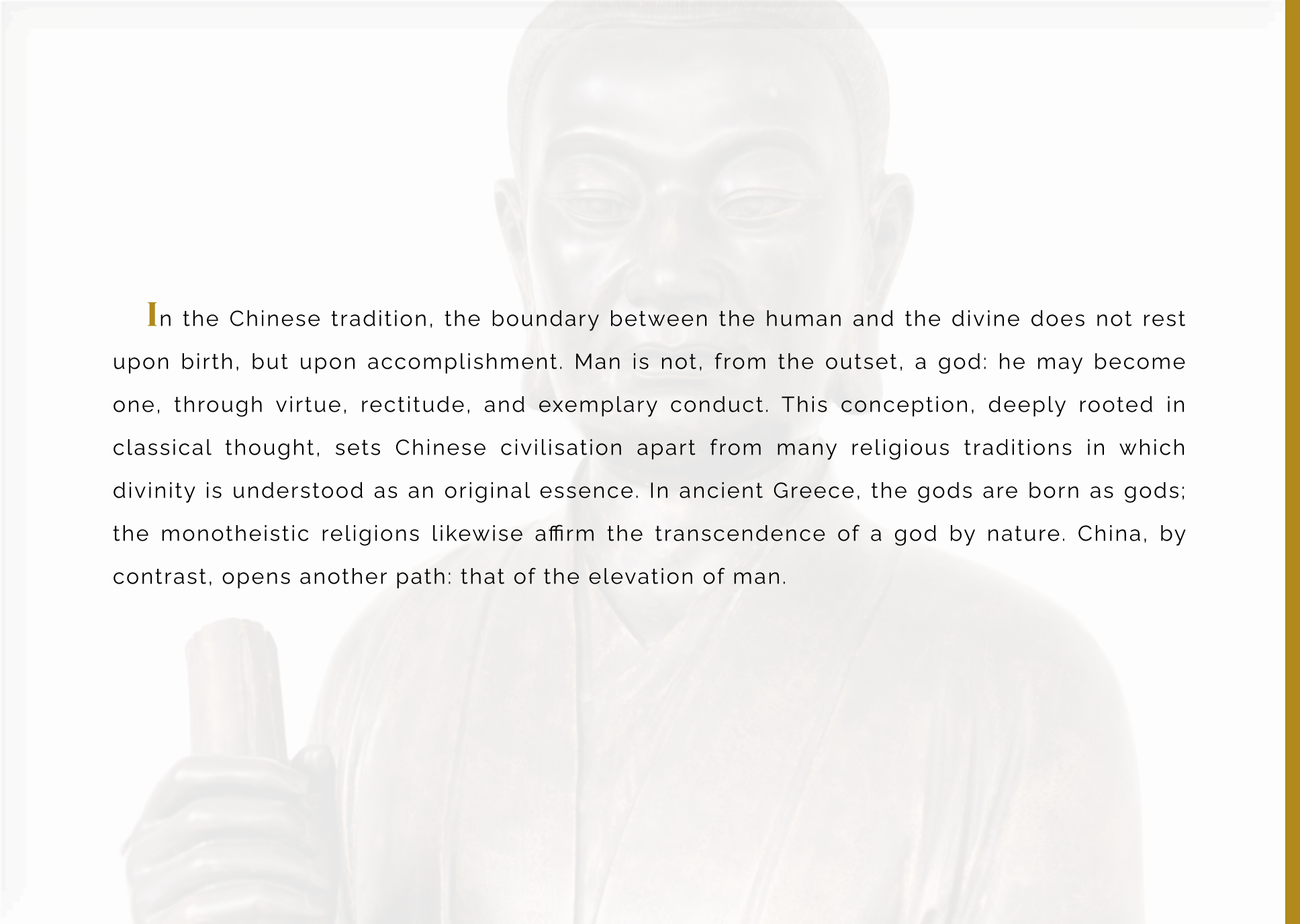




TresOrient

MEN AND GODS
PART III
CONFUCIUS AND THE ELEVATION OF MAN



In the Chinese tradition, the boundary between the human and the divine does not rest upon birth, but upon accomplishment. Man is not, from the outset, a god: he may become one, through virtue, rectitude, and exemplary conduct. This conception, deeply rooted in classical thought, sets Chinese civilisation apart from many religious traditions in which divinity is understood as an original essence. In ancient Greece, the gods are born as gods; the monotheistic religions likewise affirm the transcendence of a god by nature. China, by contrast, opens another path: that of the elevation of man.



At the heart of this vision stands the tutelary figure of Confucius (Kongzi, 551–479 BC). Born Kong Qiu in a troubled age—the Spring and Autumn period—he emerges in history as China's first great master. A philosopher and itinerant teacher, he travelled through the principalities of his time not to proclaim a divine revelation, but to impart a fundamental conviction: that harmony in the world depends upon the perfection of man. Rather than a religion, he proposed an ethic of responsibility and moderation, grounded in education, self-cultivation, and exemplary conduct.

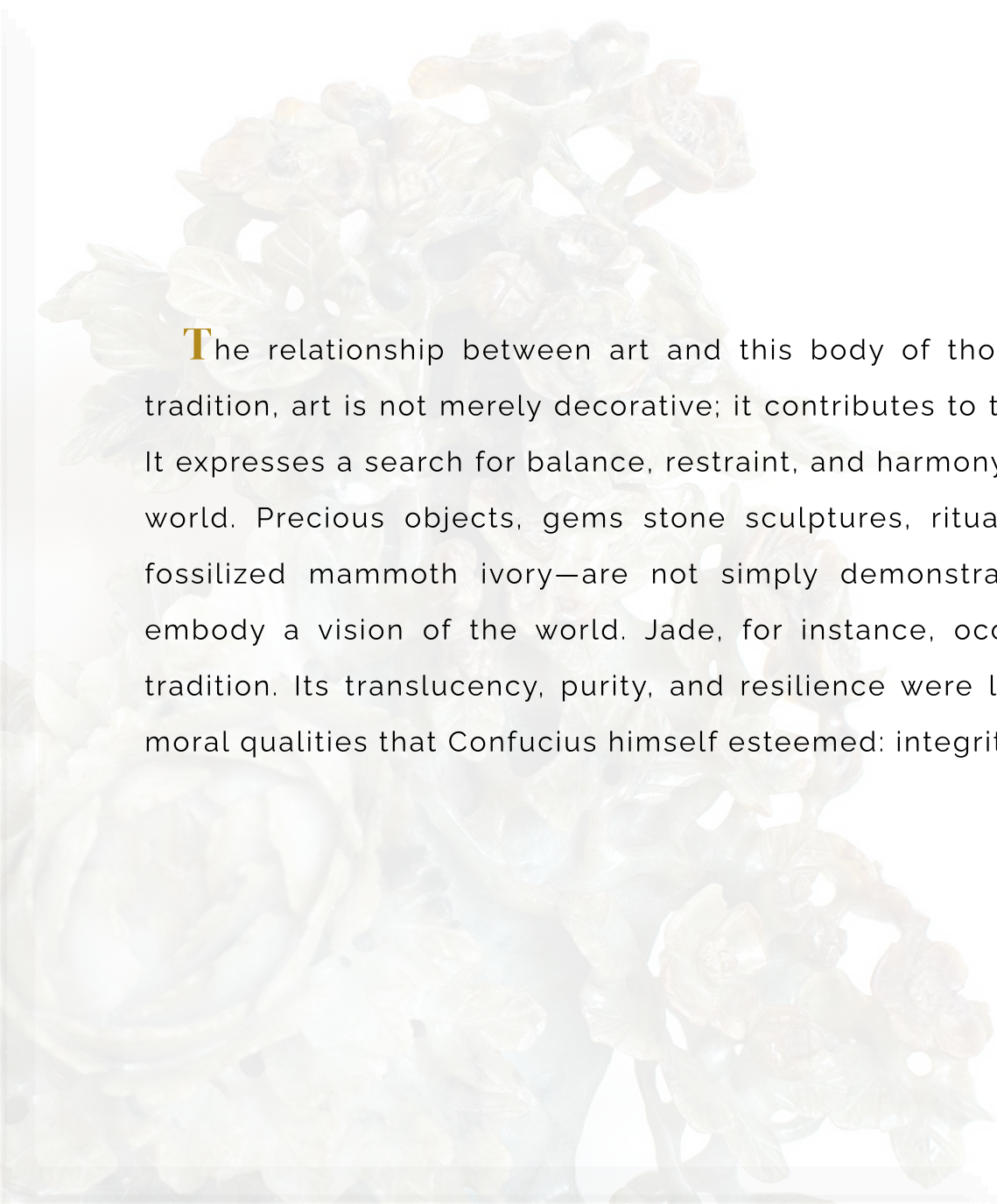
Monumental patinated bronze Confucius

Northern China, early 20th century

Height: 166 cm \approx 65.35 in

Width: 67 cm \approx 26.38 in





The relationship between art and this body of thought is profound. In the Confucian tradition, art is not merely decorative; it contributes to the education of both eye and mind. It expresses a search for balance, restraint, and harmony that reflects the moral order of the world. Precious objects, gems stone sculptures, ritual bronzes, and works carved from fossilized mammoth ivory—are not simply demonstrations of technical virtuosity. They embody a vision of the world. Jade, for instance, occupies a singular place in Chinese tradition. Its translucency, purity, and resilience were long perceived as the image of the moral qualities that Confucius himself esteemed: integrity, gentleness, and inner strength.

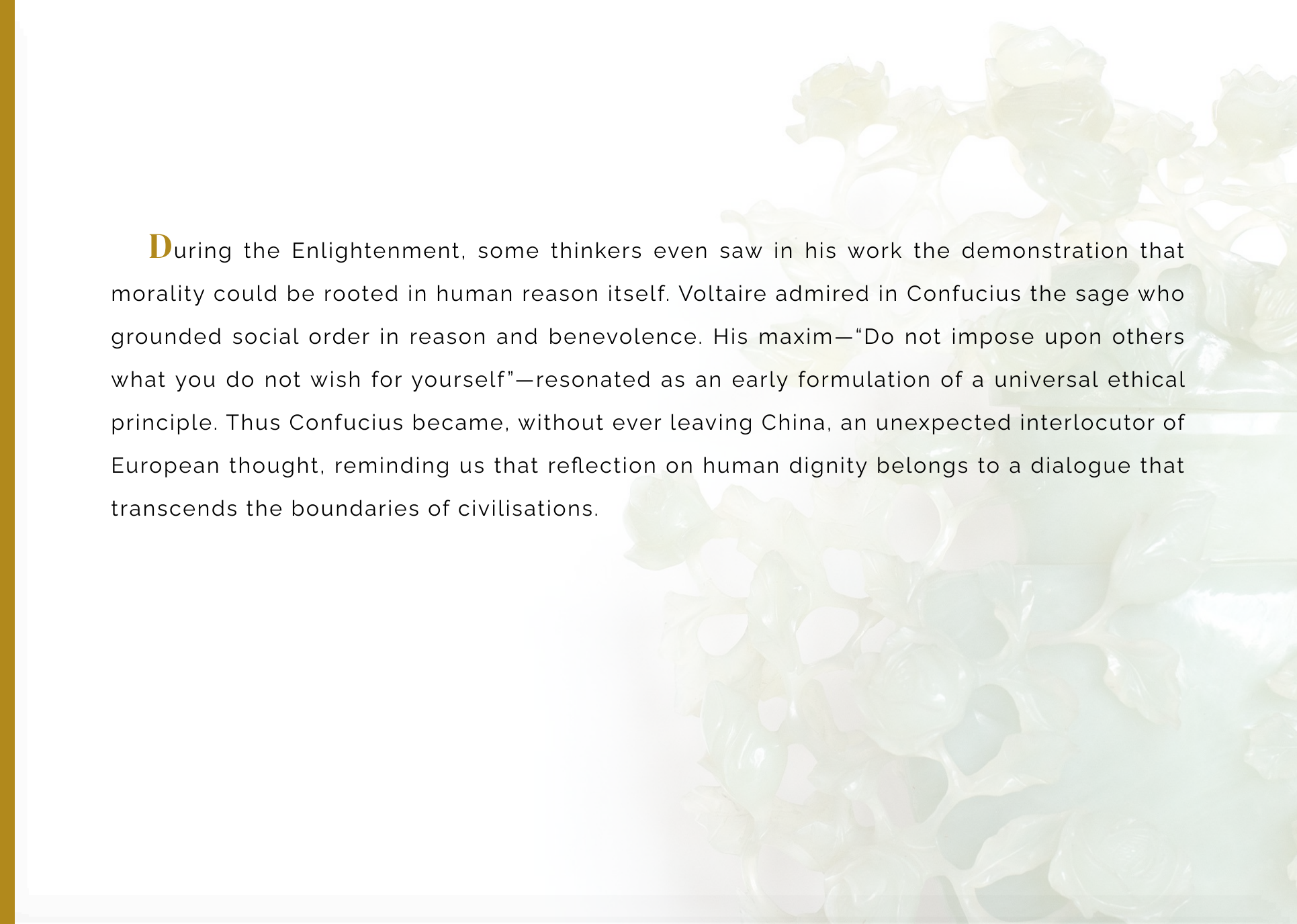
Confucius in cloisonné

Northern China, early 20th century

Height: 55 cm ≈ 21.65 in

Width: 21 cm ≈ 8.27 in

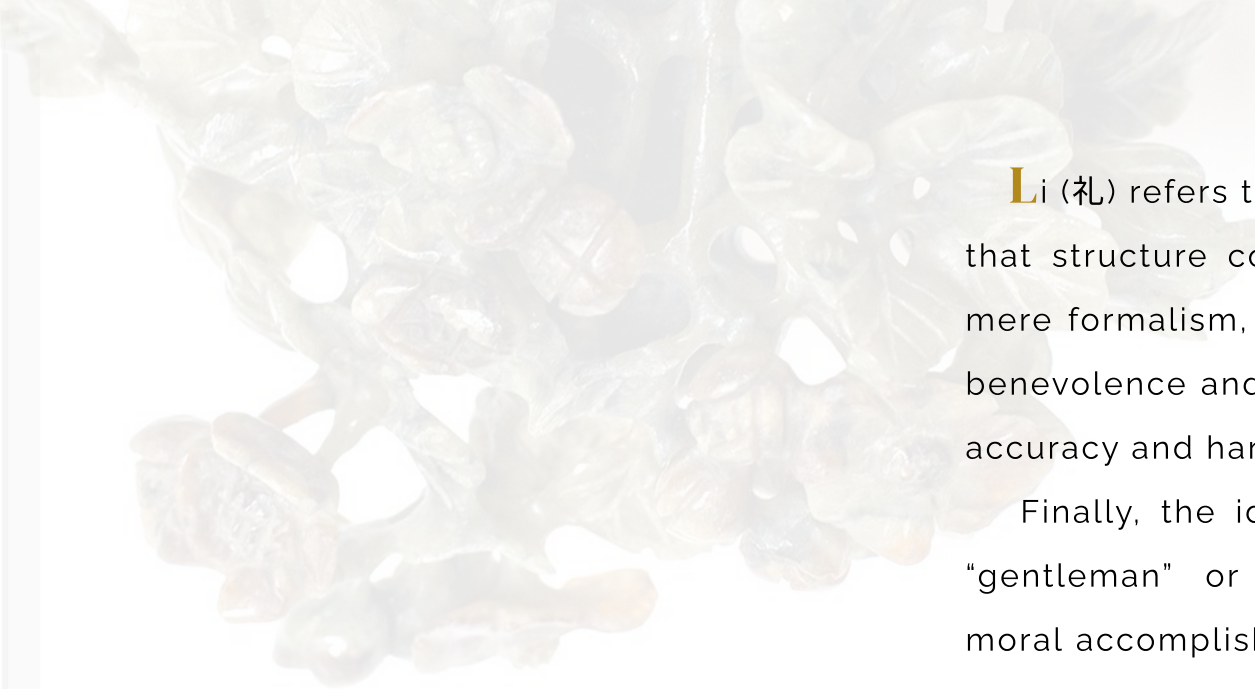




During the Enlightenment, some thinkers even saw in his work the demonstration that morality could be rooted in human reason itself. Voltaire admired in Confucius the sage who grounded social order in reason and benevolence. His maxim—“Do not impose upon others what you do not wish for yourself”—resonated as an early formulation of a universal ethical principle. Thus Confucius became, without ever leaving China, an unexpected interlocutor of European thought, reminding us that reflection on human dignity belongs to a dialogue that transcends the boundaries of civilisations.



The work of Confucius, recorded by his disciples in the Analects (Lunyu), is not a sacred book but a collection of dialogues, maxims, and teachings. Its project is profoundly political and social: to govern through virtue rather than constraint. To this end, he developed a practical philosophy whose pillars are both simple and profound. Ren (仁) denotes humanity, an active benevolence towards others. It expresses the capacity to recognise the other as one's equal, worthy of respect.



Li (礼) refers to rites, forms, and proprieties that structure collective life. Far from being mere formalism, it gives visible expression to benevolence and orders human relations with accuracy and harmony.

Finally, the ideal of the Junzi (君子)—the “gentleman” or “man of virtue”—embodies moral accomplishment. The Junzi is not noble by birth but by character: he becomes so through study, inner discipline, and constancy in virtue. He stands as living proof that greatness is cultivated.



Confucius in nephrite jade

Southern China, 20th century

Hardness: 5

Height: 80 cm \approx 31.50 in

Width: 35 cm \approx 13.78 in

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Confucius in rhodonite

Hardness: 6-7

Southern China, 20th century

Height: 65 cm \approx 25.59 in

Width: 20 cm \approx 7.87 in

This third section “Men and Gods” is rooted in this tradition. The sculptures gathered in this catalogue bear witness to an imaginative world in which human greatness may attain an almost sacred dimension. They remind us that, in classical Chinese thought, the divine is not always an origin: it may also be a horizon. And perhaps this is one of the most fertile lessons bequeathed by Confucius: that the highest elevation lies not in origin, but in accomplishment.



Kongzi

Les Entretiens de Confucius

Une étude fondamentale de la
philosophie et de l'éthique
confucéenne



Ce catalogue présente une sélection de sculptures asiatiques issues de la collection de la galerie.

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