



**Spider on thread – Good luck is descending from Heaven**

Vol III/2.38

## **Introduction**

### **The Symbolic Language of the Chinese**

A Chinese 'word' consists of one immutable phoneme. There are some 400 of these basic phonemes. Two or more phonemes may, however, be combined to form new 'words'. The North Chinese has four tones (i.e. each base phoneme can be pronounced in four different tones, with consequent change of meaning) thus giving a four-fold extension of the available phonemes. The number of homonyms remains very high.

A Chinese word cannot be 'spelled'. If a Chinese sees that a word he has used in conversation has not been understood he will write the character he means on one hand with the index finger of the other. All Chinese characters are essentially pictures, and therefore appeal to the eye.

Each sign is divisible into two components. This gives some indication as to how the character should be pronounced. Chinese characters are symbols, not ways of notating sounds, which is the usual function of writing.

Emil Pretorius said: All Oriental paintings are meant to be viewed as symbols, and their characteristic themes – rock, water, clouds, animals, trees, grass – betoken not only themselves, but also something beyond themselves: they mean something.

Writing conveys information which the reader is expected to understand or, at least, to try to understand. When the educated Chinese sends a picture or a piece of calligraphy to a friend, the 'message' contained therein will not be expressed in so many words. Often it will take the form of a quotation from classical literature – that is to say, the message is retrievable only if the recipient knows the source of the quotation and what it refers to. We may say that the picture contains a symbol, or that the symbol takes graphic form. In either case, the picture can be 'read' in two ways – as a work of art, which is intended to give aesthetic pleasure to the beholder, or as an expression of good wishes for the recipient. The picture as a whole, and the symbolical detail, are both designed to give the recipient pleasure and to transmit a message to him, albeit in cryptic form.



**Nomads with Tribute Horses – Northern Song**

## **1. History of Seed Carvings**

**"Ch'i Wu I Shu Ts'ung T'an" by "Tso Yang" Publishing Company Taipei 1991 (Pg. 35-44)**

During Ming and Qing dynasties China's carving art is adored for its careful and delicate lines. The materials used by the carvers were numerous, for example, jade, stone, bamboo, wood, tusk, horn, lacquer, coral and fruit kernels, etc; amongst which the fruit kernel carvings are refined and delicately chiseled wonders.

From literature and hearsay, the kernels used for carving are from olive, black olive, peach, cherry, plum, walnut, etc. Finished articles are either for display or as jewelry. Each article is a pleasure to enjoy, either simply carved or weighed down with details.

An article (5 volumes compiled by the association of burnt carving method) in the Ming Dynasty reported two seed carvings of the Song Dynasty. One used a seed with a size of 5 inch by 4.7 inch. On the surface are carved ten characters - Xi Wang Mu bestow peaches to Hero. This had survived and was seen displayed in the Palace at the beginning of the Ming Dynasty.

The second seed carving mentioned in the article is of the size of half a small peach seed. The whole seed was crammed full with writings. Finally the same article mentioned that a lot of ancient scholar's words were used in the carving.

The measurements of the first seed in today's term would have been 15.45 - 16.45cm at length and 14.49 - 15.45cm at width. The second seed is so small that it is only equivalent to 3 or 4 rice grains. It is merely impossible to realize that it is a small fruit kernel. In addition Li Zhi Yi from Song Dynasty had carved on it 10 lotus images, which made the completed article a wonder.

If one takes these two examples of the Song Dynasty period and the articles written about the themes - ancient people's sayings, famous poems and verses were frequently carved on fruit seeds. Therefore, although seed carvings exist in the Song Dynasty, the art is not comparable to Ming and Qing times.

### **1.1 Ming Carving Art (1368 – 1644)**

Early in the reign of Emperor Xuan De (1426-1435) there already exist a worker with the surname Xia, nicknamed Xia Bai Yen, proficient at carving art. He was able to carve 16 dolls on a small black olive and all these 16 dolls show expressions of vigorous joy.

In late Ming, there was another worker named Wang Yi, pen name Shu Yuan from Jiangsu Province, Changsu North West District. He could carve a kernel boat of 2.46 cm length. The central part of the carving is a vigorous dragon. Both sides of the boat have a 4-paneled window; each has its own pivot and can be opened and closed. When opening the windows one can see furniture inside. At the head of the boat, an old man is seated. On his left side a volume of book, on the right a stove, and a pamphlet in the center. At the back of the boat, a man is seated at the side. Other objects there include a teapot on the stove, so life like that fragrance seems to exude. All carved details - features and clothing - are

vividly alive. All window panels show an inscription. The Bottom of the boat is signed Wang Shu Yuan, also the seal Wang Yi is affixed. (Ming: Li Bai Hua, 6 Research Article, Volume 1).

In addition in the short article, 'Seed Boats', a worker is mentioned named Wang Shu Yuan. In the 2nd year reign of Tian Qi (1622) he carved a seed boat, which as a theme has the story of Su Tong Po crossing Ci Bi in a boat. On a length of not more than 32mm, 5 people are carved, the boat has 8 windows, stove, pot, rosary, and on the bottom 4 sets of 30 words. All characters on board are very life-like - having discussion, listening to the tea boiling and expressing deep concentration. On the left panel is inscribed 'Mountain High, Moon Small; The Rock Emerges as the Water Recedes' and 'Light Breeze Blowing Gently, Waves Calm'; words as they are in the Ci Bi poem. (Chinese Arts and Craft Manual vol. 3)

These 2 articles describe the seed boats of Wang Shu Yuan; the themes are out of Su Tong Po and friends crossing Ci Bi. However, both works show differences, e.g., the people on the boat, the arrangement / display and approach are different.

Together with Wang Shu Yuan, other skilled carvers of that period were Shen Jun Yu or Qiu Shan.

Shen Jun Yu, a native of Wu County was able to carve on an olive seed a scholar, a fan in his hand and on the fan an inscribed 4 characters poem. He is also able to carve on a walnut a pair of monkeys.

In the middle of Chong Shi's reign, a palace maid named Ah Chi was able to carve delicate flowers and birds on a plum seed. When the seed is opened, it is a small box but when put together, it becomes a plum seed again.

## **1.2 Qing Dynasty (1644-1911)**

The carving art of the Qing Dynasty follows the legacy / heritage of Ming Dynasty, also becoming more fine and minute – e.g. on the seeds there are many people carved. In Kang Xi's reign (1662-1722), an old man, surnamed Jing Lao, frequently carve fruit kernels. He also uses the story of Su Tong Po crossing Ci Bi to carve a boat. He was able to use a peach seed to fashion a touring boat, on both sides of the boat with 2 panels of small windows with delicate flowers carved on it. The windows can be opened and closed. Inside can be seen Su Tong Po looking out of the window, Buddhist's imprint facing him. There also is a youth with a flute in his hand, a servant with a fan, body half-turned, fanning the fire. At the stern is a bare foot old man steering.

During Qian Long's reign (1736-1795) Chinese carving art has developed to a big extent, thus there are quite a few skilled carvers. For example, early in the reign of Qian Long, Du Shu Yuan, nicknamed 'Smart Worker' used olive and walnut seeds to fashion boat. He also used the story of Su Tong Po crossing Ci Bi as a theme. However, his work is different from his predecessors. It was recorded that his carved boats are like fast boats; both sides with windows, mast, etc, all moveable, In the middle are seated 3 men. In the front is a servant fanning the tea, at the side a small plate, on the plate are 3 teacups. Three boatmen, two seated, one reclining, all meticulously and finely carved.

Du Shu Yuan's seed boats are lost to the world now. One can only admire but not behold. However, there is another craftsman whose legacy is still around. His name is Chen Zhu Zhang.

Chen Zhu Zhang, a native of Guangdong, entered the Qing Palace when he was 7 years, to be engaged in manufacture. At that time Guangdong was famous for its ivory carving. Chen Zhu Zhang entered the palace because of his fine workmanship in ivory carving and became one of the palace's famous ivory carvers. Ming Qing carvers' skills are frequently of exceptional standards and quality. Although Chen Zhu Zhang is an exceptional ivory carver, his kernel boats are equally fine and exquisite, comparable to his predecessors.

Amongst other carvers of the Qing period, there is Chen Zi Yun. He is not mentioned in articles but by the legacy of completed works. Techniques employed by him were shallow bas-relief, high (deep) bas-relief, see through carving and engraving. His themes are also numerous – e.g. 100 flower basket, pine and happy fisherman, etc. From the works left by him, it can be seen that his skills are superb / exquisite, his themes extensive and by the number of works left behind, it can be believed that he must be a dynamic, active and well respected (admired) craftsman. It's a pity that there is not even a drop of a word left behind.

As such these are the few carvers whose work are preserved or mentioned. There are many others who are not recorded anywhere and whose legacy are incomplete. It is thus impossible to examine or appreciate their work.

### **1.3 Themes of Carving**

According to records and inherited artifacts, the themes frequently used can be grouped into 5 headings: script writing, seed boats, flower / bird, people or animal and poems / stories.

#### **Script Writing**

This is the earliest type of seed carvings. It already exists in the Sung Dynasty. However, in the finely chiseled carvings of the Ming / Qing Dynasty periods, script writing alone seldom was used. Very often the script is only for the year, name or a poem suitable for the subject carved as e.g. on the boat a poem relating to the Ci Bi.

#### **Seed Boat**

In seed carving, boats are popular articles and one theme commonly used is the story of Su Tong Po crossing Ci Bi. As mentioned before, the Ming / Qing carvers, Wang Shu Yuan, Qiu Shan, Jing Lao, Du Shi Yuan and others carved such boats. They are admired both by the scholars of their time as well as on present day.

There are 2 seed boats on the 3rd floor of the Taipei Palace Museum where Ming / Qing carving artifacts are shown. One of them is Chen Zhu Zhang's work. Although a famous ivory carver, he too left his exceptional skills on the boat carving. On a 34.5mm long and 14mm wide olive seed, using its natural shape, he carved the bottom of the boat as well as cover. Middle portion are 2 flower windows with 4 panels. The 2 middle panels have pivots that allow them to be opened and closed. When windows are opened, Tong Po can be seen seated at the window, the table in front of him with tray, cups and saucers. A guest is seated at the table, a scholar holding forth discussion. In front of the boat is a boy and girl servant gazing out of the right side of the boat. At the back of the boat is an old helmsman with a hat and short jacket steering the boat, and a young scholar blowing a flute. A young servant squats in front of the stove brewing tea, another supporting his shoulders with his hand in a playful attitude. These 8 people's clothing's and expressions are different but spirited. At the base of the boat is a poem carved with a total of 300 Chinese characters after 'Su Tong Po crossing Ci Bi'. Although the characters are not very neat and orderly, the strokes are very clear. Finally there is a signature: Qian Long decree, 5th month, Chen Zhu Zhang respectfully manufacture; Qian Long 2nd year seal (= 1738)(1736-1795)

The other example is a peach boat, length 3.75cm, width 2.2cm. 1/3 of the surface is reserved as base of the boat using the natural grooves. With the flat top in shallow bas-relief, a cover for the boat is carved. The boat is divided into 3 sections. At the back is a helmsman wearing a big hat and in the middle part of the boat is a long table, on it a teapot, teacups, vase. In front of the boat is a 2 column corridor, a man is lying there playing flute. Opposite a man is seated drinking alone. In front of the boat is a coil of rope. On the door frame is a carving: 'Bright moon not wind enable one to be one's own master, Bright moon not must appointed time. From the inscriptions and the people on board, one can see that this boat refers to scenes from 'Ci Bi Poem'

#### **Flowers / Birds**

Delicately carved flower types and flying creatures is a big part of China's fine carvings. In the art of fruit seed carving flower and bird frequently appear on a category of delicate carving. Late Ming Palace maid Ah Chi carved a plum box filled with finely chiseled flowers and birds. Qiu Shan's 100 flowers basket is also spectacular.

An inherited flower basket from Chen Zhi Yun is 2.6cm long. He first removed the flesh from the shell by making a small hole at the base, then using the natural shape of the shell to carve a basket. Where the two halves of the shell join in a circle, a handle for the basket is carved. The lines of the basket look like they are finely weaved. On the top he carved in fine sharp lines peonies, chrysanthemum, mountain tea, lotus, orchid, embroidered flower ball, etc. in full bloom. Leaves are luxuriant, and though there are many flowers the total is not overcrowded. The flowers are so life like that they seem to exude fragrance.

## **People and / or animals**

There are two types of people or animal carving. The first is a single person or 2 animals on a seed. For example Ming Dynasty carver Shen Jun Yu was able to carve a monk (?) and monkeys. The other type is to carve 2 or more people and animal together on a single seed. These fine carvings sometimes appear as single article or put together as a rosary, morning pearl or a bracelet. Rosary or morning pearl is 108 seed beads string together. Bracelets are 18 or 12 carved seed pearls, e.g. one Luohan (total 18) on one seed or one Zodiac animal (total 12) on one seed. Sometimes on one side is the Luohan and on the back the zodiac animal. In the Beijing Palace Museum is a bracelet of 18 Luohan from the Qing Dynasty.

In early Qing Dynasty an expert judge and collector, Gao Shi Qi had a rosary carved from mountain peach. Each seed has 3/4 or 5/6 Luohans in different postures and with different expressions, totaling 500 people. Also carved were bamboo, lotus leaves, tea, sutras, dragon, tiger, lion, elephant, birds, and monkey. Gao Shi Qi remarked, "on initial inspection, extremely remarkable, clear view, clean lines, breathtaking detailed carved Luohans in different posture, unusually ancient and life-like, the carver's workmanship is incomparable".

## **Poem / Story**

In this group of carvings either poems or folk tales were used. Ming carver, Qiu Shan's carving themes were especially many and examples of tales varied like 'Fisherman Happy' or poem story like 'Midnight Lantern Shines on Sea', 'Spring colors first appear. He must be well known at that time for Intellectuals in their articles frequently mentioned him.

Chen Zi Yun of Qing Dynasty could also carve 'Fisherman Happy story' which is on exhibit in the Taipei Palace Museum. The olive seed, length 28mm, is carved as a display item. Using open carving technique, he chiseled an old pine tree, horizontally spread out to stretch across the total olive (see photo of Little Boss, not sold, nice patina) This pine tree grows by the side of the river, a boat is on the river, 2 men on the riverbank, one young and one old, happily chatting. A man can be seen sitting quietly by himself at the side of the boat.

## **1.4 Location, Remuneration, Basic Requirements**

According to the documents the carvers can be considered to be from 2 areas, one from Wu Zhong region and the other from the Guangzhou area. Wu Zhong refers to the Jiangsu Wu County (Suzhou) and neighboring area. For e.g. Ming Dynasty Wang Xu Yuan was from Lu Shan which is in Jiangsu Changsu border, namely north of Wu County. Shen Jun Yu is also from the Wu County. The palace maid Ah Chi, native of Yong Jia Gui although within Zhejiang Province, is not far from Wu Zhong. Qing dynasty's Jin Lao was a native of Gusu, which is also an administrative district of Wu County. Du Shi Yuan was a native of Wu Jun, which is also within the Wu County. Chen Zi Yun claims to be a native of Wu County in his handicrafts. Only Ming dynasty Qiu Shan was a native of Guan Chi, but some articles refer to him as a native of Qie (?) Xing, also not far from Wu Zhong, in the middle reaches of the Yangtze River. Ming Qing carvers were from Huizhou, Suzhou. The first two are south of Anhui County. Guan Chi is in Wan (?) Nan. However. Gao Shi Chi said 'The skills of people from Wu Zhong are incomparable'. Therefore, Wu Zhong's carving skills are better than those of Wan (?) Nan.

On the other hand, Chen Zhu Zhang was a Guangdong native. During Qing times Guangzhou is the center of ivory carving. The workers were also able to carve fruit kernels. At the end of Qing dynasty, Guangdong's fruit kernel carving art was in vogue for a short period.

Only famous carvers could command a good price for their work. As a example Du Shi Yuan can command 50 gm of silver for his exquisitely carved boats. As for Jin Lao, in the reign of Kang Hsi (1662-1723), he was asked by an official to repair the window of an heirloom boat. He had heard of Jin Lao's fame. Price was 10tael of silver. Jin Lao recognized the boat as his own work.

Although famous carvers were paid well, there were not many well known. These unknown ones are poorly paid for the amount of time spent. They had to perform other jobs so as to be able to feed themselves.

## 1.5 Well-known carvers up to Qing Dynasty (e.g.):

Artist	District / Area	Emperor	Dynasty	Time	Famous for ...
Li Zhi Yi			Sung		
Qiu Shan	Guan Chi (6)		Ming		100 flower basket, boat
Shen Jun Yu	Wu County		Ming		
Xia (Xia Bai Yen)		Xuan De	Ming	1426-1435	
Ah Chi	Yong Jia Gui	Chong Shi	Ming (late)		
Wang Shu Yuan (1)	Lu Shan, N Wu County	Tian Qi	Ming (late)	1622	Boat, window to open
Chen Zhu Zhang (2)	Guandong (5)	Qian Long?	Qing	1738	Boat
Chen Zhi Yun (4)	Wu County		Qing	(1644-1911)	Flower basket
Zhan Gusheng (8)		Qian Long	Qing	1736-1795	
Jing Lao (3)	Gusu, Wu County	Kang Xi	Qing	1662-1722	Boat
Du Shu Yuan (7)	Wu Jun, Wu County	Qian Long	Qing	1736-1795	Boat (lost)
Sun Qi Feng			Qing		

(1) = Seal was Wang Yi, Jiangsu-Changsu border, Jiangsu Province. Famous for boat.

(2) = See illustration in "Great National Treasures of China", Carver is written Ch'en Chu-chang. Entered palace

when he was 7 years old. On the bottom is a poem with 300 characters (at Taipei museum).

(3) = Got 10 Tael silver to repair window of a boat. Boat, where window to open.

(4) = Qing dynasty (no historical records)

(5) = At the end of the Qing Dynasty Guangdong was *en vogue* for fruit kernel carvings.

(6) = Not far from Wu Zhong / Jangtze river

(7) = (Du Shi Yuan ?) close to Wu Zong. Jiangsu Province. Nickname was "smart worker". His boats are lost. Can

ask 50 tael of silver for a boat.

(8) = Already with 9 years at court of Qian Long (1736-1795)

Even today the carvers from Suzhou area are from Wu Xian Zhou Shan Chun (=Zhou Shan village, **Wu county**, p.95) see above or p.156 .

## 2 The Way of Carving

Chinese carvings inevitably evoke pictures of ivory, wood, bamboo and stone wonders. However, few people realise that there is more to Chinese carvings than these. There exist an infinite number of seed carvings. It matters not to the Chinese how small the seeds are or how irregular the shapes can be. They can all be turned into works of art. As early as the Song Dynasty (10th - 13th century), there exist carvings of seeds from peaches, plums, cherry, olives, walnuts, apricots, pine and betel nuts. This form of art reached its peak in the Ming (14th - 17<sup>th</sup> century) and Ching (17th - 20th century) dynasties. During these two periods the skills of the craftsmen were more refined and the subjects covered, more varied.





**The way of carving**



**The chissels**

The Chinese olive is from the tree known as *Canarium pimela* KOEN. The height of the trees is normally between 10m to 20m though they can grow up to 30m. They are found south of 27° latitude particularly in Southern China, Hainan, Tonkin, Laos, Annam and Cambodia. The fruits are narrowly ovoid, faintly triangular at the tips, smooth or with a faint median rib on the lids. They can either be green, yellow or black in colour. The fruits are either eaten raw, used for medicine or preserved and eaten as snacks. The seeds are then cleaned and used for carvings. The average size of the seed is between **3.5 to 4.3cm**.

Apart from the short article, *He Zhou Pi*, very little mention is made of seed, specially olive carvings. Whatever information is available had been brief mentions by famous authors who had seen these carvings at the Palace during the Song Dynasty. These had been confined to the size of the seeds as well as the themes carved.

What is known and what is confirmed by present day carvers is that the work requires talent, good eyesight, and a lot of creativity, patience, concentration and spiritual commitment. The skills stay within the family – passed from father to son. It is a difficult craft as illustrated by comments of master carver, Jin Liao. Of his four sons who were taught this unique skill, only the third managed to pick up the method but not the skills. The essence of carving is extremely difficult to learn. It requires long period of learning and practice as setbacks are in abundance. Success and fame are not guaranteed, besides that carvers are not well paid and have to perform other work so as to have sufficient income for their livelihood. Since investment of time and money are not amply rewarded, there are only a few carvers of olive seeds in the present day. Most carvers prefer walnuts as they have a bigger surface to work with. This means less time is needed to finish a carving and the payment is the same as for carving an olive seed.

Only chisels (commonly known as whittler's knife) are used to whittle away the shell of the olive seed. The carvings are mainly of three types - statuettes, relief carvings on a basic surface, and engraving. Statuettes are miniature sculptures of figures or animals.

Chinese termed carvings in relief as one, two or three layers deep. In conventional terms, this means low, high and full relief. It is not unusual to find a combination of conventional and floral patterns on a background of pierced lattice pattern in high relief carving. Often many figures in every conceivable attitude – sitting, standing, playing, reading, talking or riding are included in high relief carvings. No two figures are the same in posture, costume or expression. Sometimes some figures stand nearly or entirely free. This is achieved by the great depth of carving from the basic surface. The themes are wonderfully conceived and frequently include mountains and clouds, trees and buildings.

Engraving is sometimes known as etching or incising. The pattern is first drawn on a polished surface, and then engraved with a sharp, fine pointed chisel. Ink is then rubbed into the design. When the surface is wiped clean, ink is retained in the engraved lines. The black ink outlines the design. Sometimes poems are inscribed on the olive seeds. An example - a 300-word poem carved on the bottom of an olive seed boat - can be seen in the National Palace Museum of Taipei.

Carvings are never just a piece of ornament to the Chinese. They are rich in symbolism and serve a number of purposes. Symbols are a very important feature of all communications. They are compressed expression of one's religious beliefs and ideas in visible form. Symbols are economies of statement, feeling and belief established in religions. They are commonly appropriated by individuals, hence they rarely portray what they purport to be. Symbols are like entrances to religious worlds and imaginations. They are possessed of power and may encompass a universe in a space no bigger than an olive seed.

Most of the carved designs usually represent wishes for happiness, prosperity and longevity as well as progeny; protection from evil influences and to correct the cosmic currents (yin / yang) that harmonises one's life. To understand such thinking, it is necessary to have a window into the Chinese mind. This is best explained by what religion means to the lay Chinese.

### 3. Chinese Beliefs

Long before thoughts are formalised into religion, the Chinese believed that spirits are present everywhere; in the mountains, in the rivers, in trees, in animals, on earth and in the sky. Even the early emperors had to appease these spirits if they desire their reign to be acknowledged and successful. So dominant are these beliefs that the formal religions of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism have to incorporate these into their doctrines.

Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism are commonly thought of as the three main religions in China. However, the term religion is a misnomer. The Chinese viewed the three as chiao, variously defined as teachings, body of doctrine or great tradition. The three are not mutually exclusive. In fact they are complementary. Confucianism defines life on earth, Taoism provides for life after death and Buddhism supplies the individual with a reason for living.



**"Charms" at house entrance doors - Singapore**

Confucianism taught that men are created and endowed with a good nature that invariably leads them right. The Supreme Being appointed kings and wise men to rule and instruct men. Instruction is necessary to promote men's virtue, and government to secure their happiness. These were provisions made by Heaven on behalf of mankind. It is said that Heaven gives birth to people with (such) desires, that without a ruler they must fall into all kinds of disorder; and Heaven again gives birth to the man of intelligence to regulate them. The teachings of Confucius placed emphasis on ritually correct behaviour that governs human relationships and introduced the concept of the morally perfect man or superior man.



**"Charms" at house entrances doors - Singapore**



The whole emphasis of Confucianism is on moral practice. This is best summed up by what the Master himself had to say: "If you lead people with political force and restrict them with law and punishment, they can just avoid law violation, but will have no sense of honour and shame. If you lead them with morality and guide them with li (social norms), they will develop a sense of honour and shame and will do good of their own accord." In other words, cultivation of these moral values is the only way to make individuals and society truly human and harmonious. Taoism is both a philosophy as well as a chiao. As a philosophy, Taoism teaches the virtue of simple life, communion with nature, the denial of selfishness and mystical Union with the Ultimate (Tao). Taoism recommends a retreat from civilization back to nature, in order to attain harmony with the Tao, the Supreme force behind the Universe. As chiao, Taoism has occupied several diverse positions in the Chinese life. In its early days, Taoism commanded the respect of the mighty till Confucianism displaced it as the guardian of official values. Then it appealed to those who wanted to deepen their spiritual life until Buddhism dislodged it from this position.

Now it functions as a system of magic, with incantations for healing diseases, avoiding death and warding off vengeful spirits from the other world. Taoism since the second century is now a mixture of magic and religion, giving rise to a host of gods, goddesses, deities and immortals.

Buddhism, on the other hand, taught that life is transitory and existence is suffering. It also maintains that there is an iron law of rewards and retribution and that all beings can achieve salvation. Therefore, one is responsible for one's life till the state of nirvana is attained. Followers believe that the deities of Buddhism are able to offer solace and comfort in times of sorrow; compassion and mercy during unfortunate periods, as well as hope and relief from the present burdens of mundane life. Buddhism thus gives its followers a sense of security and a feeling of hope.

Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism are so intertwined in the Chinese life that the deities of each chiao can be found in the same temple. Except for the specialists in each chiao, it is difficult for the layperson to know where one doctrine ends and the other begins. Nowadays what is practised and believed by most Chinese can at best be described as amalgamation of Buddhist and Taoist doctrines with elements from much older traditions.

Whether Heaven creates man in his image or man creates gods to explain their life, the Chinese have definitely created the spiritual world as a replica of their living one. Just as the officers of the emperor (or government in present day context) were distributed throughout the nation, so God must have His ministers in different places, carrying on His administration in the spiritual world. There is a whole plethora of deities with specific 'portfolios', covering all aspects of life from birth to death. Deities not only help with the daily efforts of mortal men, they also protect them from evil influences. Most Chinese households have an altar for a specific deity that they pray to everyday. They will visit the temples of the different deities, depending on their requests or petitions, with their offerings should the need arise.

It is not uncommon for the Chinese to worship at the temples of the three chiao in the same day. It is similar to visiting three doctors for the same ailment and then deciding which one's medicine is more efficacious.

Propitiation or expiation is alien to the Chinese chiao(s). Offerings are the tributes of duty and gratitude. Petitions and thanksgivings often accompany them.

Words, at least the ones that are phonetically identical with propitious words are important to most Chinese. They believe that such words will bring them happiness, wealth and good fortune. The Chinese word for fish is an example. Its pronunciation is identical to the word meaning abundance and wealth.

Paintings or carvings of fishes are thus very popular. Aural symbolism is very much a way of life with the Chinese. Hence, it is not uncommon to find seemingly unrelated objects in a Chinese household as a result of this belief.

#### **4. Themes**

Most olive carvings are either worn as pendants, use to form a rosary or simply to adorn the curio shelves. Very often, they are carved in the shape of a boat.

Not only do the Chinese revere old masters be they painters or carvers, they also highly respect anyone who can imitate these old masters to perfection. It is thus very common to see old masters copied even to these days. Carvings, embroideries and ceramics often replicate the works of these artists. Undoubtedly all these works of arts have a story to tell whether overtly or symbolically.

The carvers of olive seeds have taken their thematic inspiration from the old masters, history, religion, poems, folklore, myths and legends. As with most Chinese arts these carvings give aesthetic pleasure and express good wishes for well-being, success, longevity and progeny. The Chinese are known for their reticence and economy of words. What better way to express one's thoughts than through something that gives one visual joy!

We have grouped the different carvings as follows:

- |                        |                          |
|------------------------|--------------------------|
| - <b>Animals</b>       | - <b>Meaning unknown</b> |
| - <b>Boats</b>         | - <b>Other designs</b>   |
| - <b>Bottles</b>       | - <b>Rosaries</b>        |
| - <b>Deities</b>       | - <b>Village scene</b>   |
| - <b>Erotic scenes</b> | - <b>Zodiac animals</b>  |

At the same time we will try to explain the meaning of each carving.

In the following paragraphs are some detailed information of Deities. The meaning of all other symbols, known to us, are explained alphabetically in the subsequent chapters.



LSSL Temple, Singapore



Monkey God Temple, Singapore



LSSL Temple, Singapore

### Gods and Deities Lian Shan Shuang Lin Monastery (LSSL), Thian Hok Temple



Thian Hok Temple, Singapore  
Singapore



LSSL Temple / Singapore



Thian Hok Temple,



Two of four Heavenly Kings  
(Mo-li Ching and Mo-li Hung, the Kings  
of East and South)  
LSSL Temple, Singapore



LSSL Temple, Singapore



Two of four Heavenly Kings  
(Mo-li Shou and Mo-li Hai, the Kings  
of West and North)  
LSSL Temple, Singapore

## 4.1 Gods and Deities

In Chinese terminology, Heaven is best seen as a well-organised divine bureaucracy with clearly established portfolios. There are naturally many popular deities. Some are derived from Buddhist and Taoist canonical sources or later tales devised as glosses upon the canons. Others are simply the expression of the common people's eternal wish for a better future life. Yet others are drawn from the secular imperial order as well as from historical or semi-historical characters. The end result of this is that the pantheon abounds with Buddha's, Bodhisattvas, Arhats, Immortals, Emperors, Empresses, Kings, Gods and Goddesses as well as venerable Celestial Beings.

At the top of the pantheon is the Jade Emperor who presides over his ministers who in turn are responsible for the various departments concerned with human activities. There are also ministers who are charged with looking after the affairs of natural phenomena like sun, moon, stars, wind and rain. His wife is Wang Mu Niang-Niang. According to some sources, this lady is the same as Xi Wang Mu, the Empress of Western Air, famed for her Peach Festival party.

In the Imperial days, the Jade Emperor is thought to be solely responsible for the affairs of the Emperor, and his ministers for the affairs of the common people. Right up to 1911, the Emperor of China makes a twice-yearly sacrifice at the Temple of Heaven in Beijing in the Jade Emperor's honour. Nowadays all who visit the temple offers petitions and thanksgivings. Would-be mediums of any of his ministers have to seek his permission, something akin to asking for a licence to practice.

Today where technology rules the world, it is hard to imagine how these stories can be held as gospel truth. Yet there will always be some in this world who are fascinated by these tales especially the ones where good triumphs over evil and how life can be bettered.

Chinese termed carvings in relief as one, two or three layers deep. In conventional terms, this means low, high and full relief. It is not unusual to find a combination of conventional and floral patterns on a background of pierced lattice pattern in high relief carving. Often many figures in every conceivable attitude – sitting, standing, playing, reading, talking or riding are included in high relief carvings. No two figures are the same in posture, costume or expression. Sometimes some figures stand nearly or entirely free. This is achieved by the great depth of carving from the basic surface. The themes are wonderfully conceived and frequently include mountains and clouds, trees and buildings.

There are local variations and differences in the deities that will take a separate book to match the figures. What is definite is that human beings need a roof over their head and food for their stomach. Once these have been satisfied, they start to look for harmony, wealth, advancement or status, longevity and continuation of the family line. Hence the deities that are responsible for these needs have a special place in everyone's heart. These deities are commonly depicted with certain characteristics, which local variations adhere to too.

### Door Gods

It is said that Emperor T'ai Tsung of the T'an dynasty once was disturbed at night by demons



CHN875.01



Thian Hok Temple,  
Singapore

throwing bricks and tiles outside his bedroom. Two generals offered to arm themselves and keep watch outside his room. It obviously helped. But as the two generals did not had any sleep the emperor



commanded a painter to draw two pictures of men in full armour. These pictures were suspended on the right and left doors of the palace and the evil spirits were said to be subdued.

### **He-He (pronounced Her-Her)**

These two deities are also known as the heavenly twins. They are commonly represented as two boys. One of them holds a lotus blossom in his hand. The other has a shell-like object in his hand. Sometimes this is opened and a cloud of steam ensues. Five bats are seen on this cloud. One school of thought is that they represent the poets Han Shan and Si De. Han Shan was a hermit who lived in the Tian Dai mountain range. The prior of Guo Qing monastery adopted Si De. In later years he was placed in charge of the kitchen. Both are well known for their peace and harmony.



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CHNS441

**Shou Shan stone**

At times they are shown with a three-legged toad at their feet. There are many stories connected to the three-legged toad. The toad is reputed to be Chang-e, the wife of Yi, the archer who shot the nine suns. She stole the elixir of immortality from Yi and fled to the moon where she was turned into a toad by the gods. Perhaps because of this legend or because toads live to a considerable age, they have become a symbol for longevity. Another famous story links the three-legged toad to Liu Hai, a Minister of State in the Jin Dynasty. The toad conveyed Liu Hai to any place he wished to go. However, it is apt to disappear down a drain. Liu Hai is said to induce it out of the drain with a string threaded with five coins. The toad is thus an auspicious symbol for good fortune and money making.

Both names are the same phonetically in Chinese. The names mean togetherness and concord. Phonetically lotus too sounds like concord or unison. Bat is phonetically similar to the Chinese word for happiness and wealth.

A peaceful world is the ultimate goal of Confucianism. It is still the sublime ideal of the Chinese cultural tradition. With such a wealth of symbolism, carvings or paintings of Her-Her are popular gifts. They are particularly appropriate gifts to a marrying couple. Such a present represents wishes for togetherness and concord as well as wealth, longevity and happiness in the union.

### **Happiness, Wealth and Longevity**

These deities are most well known and much adored. Some sources said all lived on earth as men and by merit were deified after death. This in part explains their popularity. They grace the entrance of all Chinese businesses as well as appear in some form or other in most households.

The three deities, Fu Lu, Shou are often shown together. They represent the three wishes for long life, a good income and for good luck and happiness. Together they are considered the most auspicious combination in any premises. It is generally held that these good wishes are within the gift of the individual's deities.

### **Fu Xing,**

the god of status or affluence, is often depicted as a benign and well-groomed gentleman, carrying a ruyi. He is responsible for success in commerce or profession and achievements in social position. The ruyi symbolises wishes come true. Thus Lu with a ruyi means fulfilment of wishes for professional and social success and advancement.



### **Lu Xing,**

the god of happiness often appears dressed in court robes and carries an ingot, an emblem of wealth. Gold and silver ingots were currencies of ancient China. It is believed that he is the magistrate, Yang Cheng. Life in sixth century A.D. is unbearable as the emperor Wudi imposes intolerable levy. Yang Cheng saved the people of Hunan from this untenable position, thus bringing happiness to the people again. At his death, he was deified as the god of wealth.



### **Shou Xing,**

the god of long life is also known as the Immortal of the Southern Pole, in whose garden the herb of immortality grows. In Chinese cosmology, south is the region of life and sacrifices are offered to the Southern Dipper on the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month. These are to ensure a long and healthy life filled with happiness. He is often shown as a bald, old man with an elongated skull. In one hand he holds a gnarled stick of hard wood. The other hand holds a peach, the symbol of longevity. Nowhere else is the use of symbols and belief in homonyms better expressed than when Fu, Lu and Shou are present. Phonetically deer in Chinese is the equivalent of good income hence, it symbolises riches. Chinese believe that the deer can live to a great age as well as being the only animal that is able to find the sacred fungus (*lin-chi*) of immortality. The deer is thus also an emblem for longevity. Bat is the phonetic equivalent of happiness and wealth. The bat is thus used to symbolise wealth and happiness. Peach too is a symbol of longevity. In Chinese mythology, the peach tree that blossoms once in 3'000 years yields the fruit of eternal life. Anyone eating such a fruit will attain immortality.

In carvings and pictures, Shou is sometimes portrayed with a boy attendant, peach in hand, riding a deer or leaning against it and with a bat in the background. Such a carving thus represents Fu, Lu and Shou. Fu is represented by the bat and Lu by the deer. The recipient of either a carving or painting of Shou with these emblems is wished happiness, prosperity and longevity many times over.

There is a story about Shou having a game of chess with the Northern Dipper. The result of the game determines the lifespan for everyone born. In Chinese cosmology, north is the region of death. Perhaps as a result of this story or perhaps because infant mortality rates were high in days gone by, it is, therefore, not unusual to have a carving of Shou together with individual zodiac animals. The Chinese zodiac represents the 12-year cycle used to reckon time. An animal represents each year. The 12 animals are rat, cow, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, hen, dog and pig. Parents wear such olive carvings round the child's neck to ensure that the child will have a long life.

Almost all human beings wish for longevity and what they perceived as the good things in life. Shou is often the central figure in carvings or paintings. Emblems that reflect all these longings for a good life usually surround him.

### **Chai Zhen,**

the god of wealth is popularly believed to be a hermit who possessed miraculous powers. His mode of transport is a black tiger. He supported Wu, the founder of Zhou dynasty, against the last of the Shang emperor, Chou Hsin. He was killed by sorcery but was later deified as the god of wealth. Another version



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of the story placed him as Pi Kan, a relative of Chou Hsin. When he remonstrated with Chou Hsin about his wicked ways, the emperor ordered that Pi Kan's heart be cut out. It is generally believed that there are seven orifices in the seat of the wise man's intelligence, namely his heart. Using this as an excuse, the emperor had Pi Kan silenced. Sometimes he is represented as a dual being, a military and a civil persona. The military persona is sometimes assumed to be Guan Di, who was deified god of war. The civil persona is Pi Kan or Yau Wang, (medicine king) who was probably the god Bhaisajyaguru. Often there seems to be some confusion as to when he is worshipped. Some believed it to be 2<sup>nd</sup> day of the Lunar New Year, others that it is the 20th day of the seventh Lunar month. Yet others believed that he reports to the Jade Emperor in Heaven on the 2nd and 16th of every month. Sacrifices are made to him on the 1st and 15th day of every month so that man's prospects will be auspicious. Emblems associated with him is a little boy with uplifted hands filled with cash or trees in which branches are strings of cash and the fruits ingots of gold. He is very popular with everyone, especially with the poor and gamblers. Certain texts mention the five gods of riches without naming them. They are usually depicted as men in red official robes with a bat fluttering round each of them. They grant long life, wealth, virtue, health and welfare to mankind. It is also common to use five bats to represent the gods and their gifts. Some provinces in China also consider the twin deities, Her-Her as subordinate gods of riches. Five bats appear when the bowl held by one of the twins is opened.

### **Guan Di,**

the god of war was a favourite in the Qing period. There were 1'600 official temples as well as countless minor shrines dedicated to him then. Guan Di is revered not as a god of war but as a preventer of strife and protector against evil.

He was born in Hsieh-chou, Shantung and was a general in the Later Han Dynasty. The exploits of his bravery and loyalty are told in the Romance of the Three Kingdoms. His enemies were jealous of his prowess and success in the war campaigns. Thus by treachery they succeeded in having him beheaded. In recognition of his meritorious deeds, he was posthumously awarded various titles, culminating in the title, god of war in 1594. Most carvings or pictures of him showed him dressed in military garb. His face is strong and determined looking, and he has a long flowing beard. One hand holds a long handled broadsword. What is particularly intriguing is that regardless of the quality of the work, the determination and strength of Kuan Ti is clearly evident in all images of him.



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Even after his death, he continued to exert a powerful influence over the good and protection of the country. Nowadays policemen worship him and an altar dedicated to him can be found in police

stations. It is said that policemen pray to him for help in solving cases as well as to maintain peace in their precincts. In ancient China, the sword of the executioner is kept in his temple. After the execution, the supervising judge will detour to his temple to make an offering. This is to prevent the ghost of the executed criminal from following him home. It is believed that the ghost will not dare to enter Guan Di's presence.

He is also considered a patron of various trades and professions. As a result of this, he is regarded as the tutelary deity of all money making enterprises and thus developing into a kind of god of wealth. He is also revered as a god of literature. Thus most Chinese households have an altar for him. Praying to him ensures peace, protection from evil, wealth and scholastic success.

### **Guan Yin**

According to legend, Guan Yin, the goddess of Mercy was the daughter (Miao Shan) of a sovereign of the Chou dynasty. Against the wishes of her father, she refused marriage and insisted on becoming a nun. Her infuriated father then set her all the humiliating tasks in a convent, in the belief that she will want to return to the secular world. When this failed, he ordered her to be put to death. When the soul of Miao Shan reached Hell, all the flames were quenched and all flowers burst into bloom. Yama, the king of Hell, realising her innate goodness and purity, sent her back to life. In the fragrant heart of a lotus, she was carried to Potala where she practised Buddhism and dispensed



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**Bright Hill Temple,  
SIN**

marvel-working power. When her father fell ill, she cut off flesh from her arms to be used for medicine. The Chinese believed that partaking of flesh from one's children would heal all illnesses. Her father recovered and in gratitude ordered a statute of her with completely formed arms and eyes to be made. However, the sculptor misunderstood the order and carved a statue with many heads and hands. Even today, this is how she appears in some temples or private shrines. In this role, she is the all-seeing, all-hearing and all-compassionate deity who with great mercy and pity grants salvation from all miseries and woes.

According to some sources Guan Yin and the male Indian saint, Avalokiteshvara is the same persona. In Indian arts, Avalokiteshvara is depicted with well-developed breasts and feminine softness of curves. Perhaps as a result of this, he became a female deity. The transition to a goddess began around AD 600 and was completed in 1100 AD. Nowadays it is still possible to find statutes or carvings of Guan Yin looking like a man.

The most popular and usual portrayal of Guan Yin is a beautiful, serene and gracious woman dressed in white flowing robes, with a white hood draped gracefully over the head, either standing or sitting on a lotus flower. Her usual accompaniment is a boy, a vase, rosary and a pearl. Sometimes she is represented as riding on the Hou, a mythical animal that looks like a lion. This symbolises Guan Yin's supremacy over the forces of nature.

Many tales about the compassion of Guan Yin as well as the miracles wrought by her have been written. One such tale relates how she saved mankind from hardship and starvation by filling the ears of the rice plant. Legend has it that though the rice plant existed, its ears were empty. In her compassion for the starved population, Kuan Yin secretly entered the rice fields and squeezes her breasts so that milk flows into the ears of the rice plant. In order to fill all the plants she had to squeeze so hard that a mixture of blood and milk flowed out. This explains why there are two types of rice, the white from the milk and the red, from the blood.

Guan Yin's name means 'she who always observes or pays attention to sounds' meaning she who hears prayers. She is loved beyond all other deities because of the compassion she has for mankind as well as other deities or spirits (see Monkey King). There are many temples strictly dedicated to her. She is very popular with the people of South China especially the women. She is believed to be a bringer of children. Thus she is worshipped in many Chinese households and is particularly popular with those who desire offspring's. Worshippers pray to her for sons, wealth and protection.

### Liu Hai

This deity is usually depicted as a young man, together with a three-legged toad and a string of coins. It is said he subdued by tricks the gold toad and the toad spilt out gold coins. Wherever Liu Hai went, he gave the gold coins he got to provide relief to numerous poverty-stricken people. People praised him as a „living God of wealth“, saying he is an immortal and has a big fortune for million upon million years.



CHN030



Ivory Figure  
CHNI081

### Luohans

or Arhats were people who had passed the different stages of the Noble Path. Instead of enjoying their nirvana-state, they chose to return to the world to help others to overcome all passions and to achieve nirvana. The 18 commonly referred to in literature or arts were the original disciples of Buddha. They are also the patrons and guardians of Gautama (Shakyamuni) Buddha's system of religion and its lay as well as clerical followers.

It is believed that the Luohans will enter Nirvana when the Maitreya Buddha (sometimes called the Messiah) returns. According to Indian text, there were 16 Luohans. However, the Chinese included 2 more into the group when Buddhism was brought over to China. Hence, the common name, 18 Luohans. Their images can be found on the sidewalls of the second hall in a Buddhist monastery.

No.	Name	Attributes
1	Pindola the Bhàradvāja	Open book on his knee and mendicant's staff at his side
2	Kanaka the Vatsa	A stick
3	Kanaka the Bhàradvāja	A rising bowl
4	Nandimitra or Subhinda	Alms bowl, incense vase beside him; sacred book on left hand
5	Vakula or Nakula or Pakula	Little boy by his side and holds a rosary with 108 beads
6	Tàmra Bhadra	Worship posture with prayer beads
7	Kàlika or Kàla	Extremely long eye brows, holds golden earrings
8	Vajraputra	Hairy, lean and ribbed
9	Gobaka the Protector	Fan in his hand
10	Panthaka or Pantha the Elder	Sitting on a rock and reading from a scroll
11	Ràhula	Has a domed head, bushy eyebrows and a hooked nose, holds an ornate crown
12	Nàgasena	Right hand holds vase / vessel with nectar of life, left hand a magic stick
13	Angida	A lean old monk with a wooden staff and a book containing Indian writing



14	Vanavàsa	Sits in a cave meditating with closed eyes and hands folded over his knees
15	Asita or Ajita	Old sage with long eyebrows, nursing his right knee and absorbed in meditation
16	Pantha the younger	Old man leaning against a dead tree, holding a fan in one hand and the other held up in the act of teaching
17	Ajita	Old man seated on a rock and grasping a bamboo staff
18	Polot'oshè	Rides a tiger

The Luohans are thought to possess certain supernatural powers including the ability to:

- Be free from bodily ailments
- Understand all systems good and bad
- Attain spiritual insight with great rapidity
- Pass through solids
- Reproduce water and fire at will
- Reduce oneself until one vanishes entirely
- Fly through the air
- Assume any form at will
- Have power over animal
- Have strength to overcome evil effect
- Cure all illness



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Snuff Bottle, antler horn

There are many stories related to these powers. Very often their exploits are featured in Chinese arts and crafts. Although there are different versions as to who the seventeenth and eighteenth Luohan were, most are agreed that each Luohan can be identified by his fixed pose and distinctive attributes. Attributes are article held in the hands or arms and the seat, vehicle or animal upon which the deity stands or sit. Each Luohan is also responsible for different regions of the world. They have other Luohans, sometimes as many as 1'600 to help them in their administration of these regions.

Olive carvings feature the 18 Luohans in two styles. The first is all 18 Luohans together with a tiger and dragon on a single olive seed (see p. 87, bottom). The carved seed is then threaded through a string to be worn as a pendant. According to Chinese mythology, the Green or Turquoise Dragon is the guardian of the eastern quadrant. The sun rises in the East and with sunrise, all living things become alive. Hence, dragons are traditionally considered to symbolise the beginning of spring or life. They are also the emblem for vigilance and safeguard. The ruler of the western quadrant is the White Tiger. Thus the tiger symbolises autumn or the beginning of the end. The Chinese also believe that the tiger is capable of warding off all evil influences. A carving combining the 18 Luohans, dragon and tiger is a reminder to the recipient that life has a beginning and an end, and one should live one's life like the Luohans so as to achieve nirvana. Additionally, the tiger can frighten away the demons that are all too keen to lead one astray. The Luohans with their supernatural power too can keep the wearer of the pendant safe from all harm.

The second style is a seed for each individual Luohan (see p. 99 or 100). These are then strung together to form a rosary of 18 beads. The rosary not only serves to remind one of one's duties in life but also to invite the protection of the Luohans.



## **Buddha – Shakyamuni, Amitaba, Mi Lo Fo**

Theoretically a Buddha is anyone who has achieved nirvana that is free from rebirth. To achieve this, a person has to realise the utter futility of being, that is, thrown off the bondage of self, perception, sense and knows the unreality of all phenomena.

However, to most people, Buddha refers to Shakyamuni, Amitaba and Maitreya or Mi Lo Fo.

### **Shakyamuni (Gautama) Buddha,**

the most famous of all Buddhas is the founder of Buddhism. Historical records placed him as Prince Siddhartha, the son of King Suddhodana and Queen Maya. It was said that after being childless for 20 years, Queen Maya one night dreamt of a white elephant entering her womb. After this, she found herself with child. At birth, wise men foretold that if Siddhartha remains in the palace, he would be a great king who will rule the four seas. However, if he renounces the throne he will become a Buddha and the world's saviour. Mindful of this, King Suddhodana kept his heir apparent in a golden cage where only niceties exist. Prince Siddhartha's first encounter with the miseries of life - old age, sickness, suffering and misery - at twelve made him question the meaning of life, its purpose and death. He was unable to find the answers in and around the palace so at age 30 he renounced his kingdom, wife and son and set off on a journey that led to the founding of Buddhism.

The fundamentals of Buddhism can be summarised as:

- Misery invariably accompanies existence
- Existence is the result of passion or desire
- Desire must be destroyed if one is to be freed from existence
- Following the eight paths will destroy all desire
- The eight paths are correctness in one's views, thoughts, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness and concentration

A Buddhist convert aims at complete purification of mind, hopes to become enlightened, free from rebirth and attain nirvana by following the eight paths.

Carvings or images of Shakyamuni Buddha often depict a man with serene face expressing abstraction and his head, 'snail-crowned' (the characteristic spiral curls). A swastika is often placed on his heart. Swastika if angled clockwise is the seal of Buddha's heart. Hence it is often seen on the breast of statues of Buddha.

All carvings of Buddha depict him with hands and legs forming a number of stylised or ritualised pose known as mudra or hasta and asana. Mudra or hasta are ritualised hand poses and asana, leg poses. All poses have very specific meanings. Sometimes, both hands have different poses and different objects are held within these poses. The five most commonly depicted asana are:

- Meditation where Buddha sits cross-legged. The legs are locked firmly and the soles directed upwards whilst the hands lie loosely in the lap.
- Bodhisat-pose or pose of first emergence from meditation. The legs are loosed and unlocked but the soles are scarcely seen.
- Subactive-pose or pose of further emergence from meditation. The legs are unlocked, the left is under the right and the soles are invisible.
- Enchanter's pose where the left leg hangs down with an inclination slightly inwards and the right is loosely bent
- Maitreya's pose where both legs are pendent, soles of feet flat on the ground

The most commonly depicted hand attitudes are:

- Witness mudra where the right arm is pendant over the right knee with the palm inward and the fingers extended toward the ground
- Meditative mudra where the hands lie on the lap, palms turned upwards, the fingers extended fully in both hands while the left hand rests on the right hand or the left hand only rests in the lap
- In Perfection mudra, all fingers are intertwined, the index finger extend straight up and are together
- Usually the hands are held in front of the chest in turning the Wheel of the Law mudra. In each hand, the thumb and the index finger touch, the palm of the right hand faces outward whilst the left faces inward and covers the right hand.

- The arm is fully extended and the hand is directed downwards with the outstretched palm to the front in Bestowing mudra
- In Protection mudra, the arm is bent, palm to front and pendent with fingers directed downwards
- In Fearlessness mudra, the arm is elevated and slightly bent whilst the hand is elevated with the palm to the front and the fingers directed upwards
- The difference between the Preaching mudra and Fearlessness mudra lies in the thumb. Here the thumb is bent and touches the ring finger

### **Amitaba Buddha**

is the name most commonly evoked by Buddhist. In temples or at home, the chanting of sutras ends with 'Namah Amitaba' (Hear us, O Amitaba Buddha). His popularity is possibly due to the belief that he presided over the Paradise of the West, where the souls of the pious are reborn to rest in eternal bliss.

His name means Endless Light and his image can be found beside Sakyamuni Buddha in the second hall of a Buddhist monastery.

### **Mi Lo Fo,**

commonly known as either Fat Belly Buddha or Laughing Buddha, is Maitreya, the Buddha To Come. He is the expected Messiah of the Buddhists, having been appointed by Sakyamuni as his successor. He is to appear as Buddha after a lapse of 5'000 years.

He is always depicted as very fat, with the upper portion of his body bare and his face wears a laughing expression. He has a rosary either around his neck or his hand or as a rule shown in a sitting position. Sometimes he has dancing children as companions and a sack over one shoulder. His name means kindness or gentleness. He reminds us that all the miseries and unhappiness in the world is nothing more than illusion. His image is in the first hall of a Buddhist monastery.

A wearer of a pendant of any of the three Buddhas is accorded the blessings, protection as well as tranquillity of Buddha.



CHN981



Ayatuya, Thailand

### **Xi Wang Mu**

The identity of Xi Wang Mu (literally translated as Western Emperor Mother) is rather fuzzy. Some said she is the wife of the Jade Emperor, the supreme sovereign of Heaven. Yet others maintain that she is the wife of Dong Wang Gong (Ruler of the East). In the Shanhaijing, she is described as the tiger-toothed and leopard-tailed mistress of plagues and epidemics. Under Taoism she became more benign in nature and responsible for the length of human life, granting the boon of longevity and sometimes immortality. In some text she is identified as golden mother of the tortoise, the animal that embodies the universe. The tortoise is also the dark warrior symbolising winter and death.

The people of the Shang Dynasty made offerings to a Xi Mu. However, it is not clear if this is the same deity. Later descriptions placed her as one of a number of creators and innovators who were a primal part of Chinese human history. In the second century A.D., she was mentioned as a source of the elixir of immortality. In mythical Taoist canons she was said to have mothered Lao Tse and that on his death, he journeyed West on a buffalo bound for her paradise. Her cult became popular in the later Han Dynasty where Taoism held sway.



CHN265



Bright Hill Temple, Singapore

On a more prosaic note, she is the Empress of the Western Air and lives on the summit of Kunlun Mountain. Beautiful gardens, sparkling brooks as well as marble and jasper buildings surround her nine-tiered palace. Her heavenly abode is on the Flowery Platform under the Pole Star. She is accompanied by five jade ladies who act as her messengers as do three azure birds. The five ladies correspond to the respective five points of the compass. In this context, she is viewed as the head of a troop of genii.

In popular prints and carvings she is depicted as a beautiful lady with two young girls as attendants. One of the girls carries a fan whilst the other, a basket of peaches. Her sacred animal is the crane, the symbol of longevity. Very often she is depicted riding on the back of a crane. She is also represented by the mythical phoenix.

In her gardens are peach trees that yield fairy peaches, which confer immortality to those who eat them. The trees only blossom once in three thousand years and it takes another three thousand years for the fruits to ripen. When this happens, Xi Wang Mu invites all the immortals to her Peach Festival Party in her magic mountain. Amongst the delicacies offered are paws of bear, lips of monkey, livers of dragon and the peaches of immortality. The Peach Festival is a very popular theme for artists and carvers. She is also the guardian for the elixir of immortality. This is pounded at her request for those she deemed fit recipients.

The western quadrant of the Uranosphere is represented by the White Tiger, a reference perhaps to the early origins of Xi Wang Mu, the tiger-toothed and leopard-tailed goddess of plagues and epidemics. Possibly what is interesting in all the tales of Xi Wang Mu is the theme of immortality and death. The West is associated with autumn, the season of old age. She is the supposed mother of the dark warrior, symbol of death. Death and life seems to be linked to her. She is the giver of life as well as death.

To this day, her sacred animal, the crane is incorporated in Chinese funeral rites. It is quite common to see a crane with outspread wings and lifted foot placed on the centre of a coffin during a funeral procession. A wish perhaps for the crane, Xi Wang Mu's sacred animal and mode of transport, to carry the soul of the departed to the West where souls can repose in eternal bliss.

### **Sun Wukong**

The impish protagonist of numerous tales is better known as the Monkey King. His stories are very popular with the entertainment world. He was born from an egg, which had been fertilised by the winds as it lay on the peak of the Ao-lai mountain. After cultivating himself for 500 years, he became an adept in all kinds of magical skills. Amongst these skills was the ability to change into 72 different forms and using hair from his body fashion an army of soldiers. Finding that he needs a weapon, he descended into the dragon king's palace where he caused a big row. He chosed one of the columns of the palace as his weapon. Without asking for permission, he just took the column with him. With his magic, he could change this column to a size that could fit into his ear. When he needs a weapon, out comes the column in the shape of a long pole. All pictures or carvings of Sun Wukong showed him with such a pole. (see pictures)



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**Monkey God Temple,  
Singapore**

He then moved onto to Mount Hua where the monkey inhabitants voted him as king. After consolidating his position there, he began to look further afield to have his power acknowledged. He set his sights on Heaven and after a series of trouble making was granted the post of Imperial Stable Boy by the Jade Emperor. Monkey was very happy until he found out that what he thought was a grand post was nothing but a mere stable boy. Then he created more trouble and nobody could subdue him until Buddha was called in.

The cocky Wukong challenged Buddha to a jumping contest in which he lost. As punishment, Buddha made him wear a gold headband (see picture above) and instructed him to accompany Xuan Cong, a Buddhist monk, to the West to bring back Buddhist sutras to China. Knowing that Mukong is wily and disobedient, Buddha taught Xuan Cong to chant sutras whenever Mukong misbehaved. The chanting will cause the headband to shrink, thus causing Wukong excruciating pain in the head. Xuan Cong was deemed to be so holy that to partake of his flesh will cause animal spirits to attain human life. Wukong's all seeing eyes can see through the disguise of these spirits, thus ensuring the safety of Xuan Cong throughout their journey. Wukong was awarded the title 'Buddha Victorious in Strife' when the sutras were successfully brought to China. The exploits of Xuan Cong and Sun Wukong are immortalised in the fable 'Journey to the West'. To this day, Sun Wukong is still worshipped by the Chinese (see page 53). They look to him for help out of trials as well as protection from evil spirits.



**Lian Shan Shuang Lin Monestry, Singapore**

## **Other Symbols**

The following examples show frequently used symbols on seed carving. Many times the same motifs are found on paintings, snuff bottles, bamboo, wood, ivory or stone carvings.

There do exist much more symbols in different combinations, from different artists or different shoos.

As quite frequently certain wishes of their customers are taken in consideration as well, there might be quite unusual combination of these symbols.



**Fu, Lu und Shou on a sailing boat,  
Open air Restaurant  
(Hawker Centre), Singapore**



**Lion as door guard  
China Town, Singapore**



**Boy riding on a fish and lotus  
Open air Restaurant  
(Hawker Centre), Singapore**





CHN885 39 mm



**Bamboo (Zhu)**

Represents resilience and integrity, vigor and beauty. Together with the pine tree and plum it belongs to the 'Three Friends in winter'. Bamboo and pine are green even in winter, the plum is flowering in winter (according to Chinese calendar)

**Bats (Pian-fu)**

Sound identical to the word 'fu' for good fortune. They are emblems of happiness, longevity and wealth. A carving of a fisherman with a caught fish and bats (CHN049A1, p.54, 64) is symbolic of the wish that the recipient will always succeed in his dealings with people, have a long life as well as an abundance of happiness and wealth.

Bats with coin(s): -> see money

5 bats shown together symbolize the 5 blessings: long life, riches, health, love of virtue and a natural death.



**Bats with coins overlay**

CHN304 33 mm



**Snuff Bottle, glass**

CHNB018B 68 mm



**Normal boat** CHN029 35 mm



**Dragon boat**  
CHN017A5 43 mm



**Ferryboat, Yellow Mountains**  
Anhui Province

**Boat (Chuan)**

In the Chinese language is phonetically similar to generation. The dragon is used to represent the Emperor of China. Such a carving represents a wish for distinguished children in each succeeding generation. Figures on a normal boat are "Su Dong Po crossing the Ci Bi", meaning 'from generation to generation'. A dragon boat is common gift for a young couple to wish good fortune. It means: the dragon has nine sons, each one is different'.

**Buddha with face**

Have Buddha at your heart

⇒ see also *Mi Lo Fo, Amitaba or Maitreya*



CHN062A1 29 mm



**Temple at Bangkok**



CHN620 31 mm



**Netsuke, ivory**  
CHNI078 43 mm

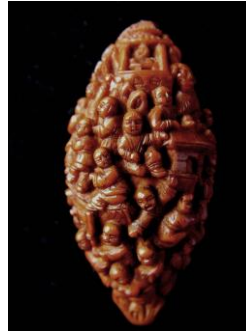
### Carp (Li)

Stands for communication with a distant friend / loved one. Carp leaping at Longmen Falls means success at examinations and achievement of civil appointment. If decoration was added to a gift for a scholar, it represents a wish for success in literary and official endeavor.

### Chai Zhen

### Children (Haiz)

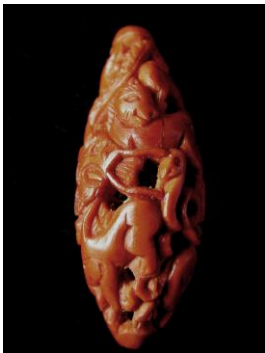
They are very popular as art motifs. In any Chinese conversation, children implicitly mean sons. This still holds true in many Chinese families even today. Sons are a source of pride, status and continuity in the Chinese household. A picture of two boys, one holding a lotus and the other riding on a unicorn, is a wish for heaven to grant the birth of sons year after year.



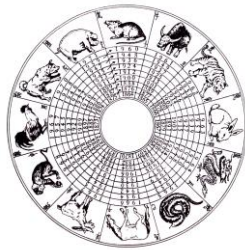
**100 children playing**  
CHN773 37 mm



**Snuff bottle, porcelain**  
CHNB003B 68 mm



**All 12 animals**  
CHN067A2 34 mm



### Chinese zodiac (Huan-dao)

Represents the 12-year cycle used to reckon time. In the zodiac each animal represents one year. The 12 animals are rat, cow, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, rooster, dog and pig. Each of these animals has certain attributes that will affect and dominate the year that each is in ascendant. A carving with all 12 animals represents a wish that the recipient will possess all the attributes of these animals.

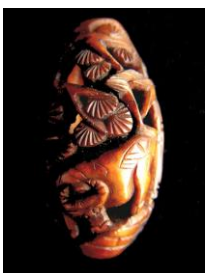
### Chinese zodiac / separate animals CHN075.01-12

#### Rat (Shu)

People born under the sign of the Rat are generally optimistic, intelligent, sociable and dependable. They are imaginative and very adaptable to new circumstances. Ambitious, practical, charming and quick-witted, the danger for the Rat is of getting carried away with its own cleverness and going too far.



1972, 1984, 1996, 2008



1973, 1985, 1997, 2009

#### Ox (Niu)

People born under this sign are dependable, patient and hard working, often achieving success late in life when others are abandoning ambition for thoughts of retirement. Their quiet perseverance often succeeds, where more volatile characters like the Dragon and the Tiger fail.

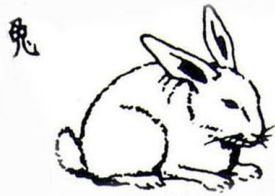
### Tiger (Hu)

People born under the sign of the Tiger are brave, strong and outgoing. They protect the weak against those who are stronger and are never happier than when righting real or imagined wrong.

The White Tiger represents the west and autumn and is the patron of the annual harvest.



1974, 1986, 1998, 2010



1963, 1975, 1987, 1999

### Rabbit/ Hare (Tu)

These people are mild, generous and peace loving. They are adaptable and sensitive, sociable and popular. They are also perfectionists in their work and often make good artists and craftsmen. The hare and the horse make good friends, the gentle modest Hare tempering the Horse's natural inclination to prance about and show off.

### Dragon (Long)

Full of vitality and enthusiasm, the Dragon is a popular individual even with the reputation of being foolhardy and a "big mouth" at times. They are intelligent, gifted, and a perfectionist but these qualities make them unduly demanding on others. People borne under this sign are well-suited to be an artist, priest, or politician.



1964, 1976, 1988, 2000



1965, 1977, 1989, 2001

### Snake (She)

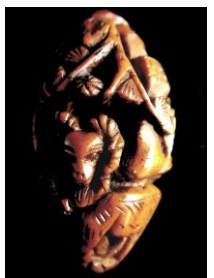
Rich in wisdom and charm, people of this sign are romantic and deep thinkers. Intuition guides them strongly. Suitable professions are teacher, philosopher, writer, psychiatrist, and fortune teller.

### Horse (Ma)

The natural Horse temperament is optimistic, generous, loyal, honest and sociable. The Horse also loves to travel, either physically or in the sense of constantly moving on from one project to another. They are gifted with great practical sense, having a talent for making their ideas work before moving on and a charm that makes them welcome wherever they go.



1966, 1978, 1990, 2002



1967, 1979, 1991, 2003

### Goat (Yang)

The Goat is renowned for its courage when forced to defend what it holds dear, its loyalty, especially towards parents. A kid down on its knees and seemingly praying in order to suckle from its mother is often employed as a symbol of filial piety. The Goat is associated with good fortune and prosperity, because it is in such times that it thrives.



### Monkey (Hou)

The Monkey personality is bright, witty, entertaining and popular. The Monkey has a nimble mind and can turn a hand to almost any occupation that comes along. He is also eager to help others with his many talents and will delight as much in praise as monetary reward. The downfall of the Monkey is often his irrepressible curiosity and sometimes misplaced sense of fun.



1968, 1980, 1992, 2004



1969, 1981, 1993, 2005

### Rooster/Cockerel (Ji)

He is credited with the five virtues of literacy, strength, courage, benevolence, and loyalty. In addition it is said to be a good administrator with a meticulous eye for detail. Occasionally he suffers from being arrogant, overbearing and pompous, but is soon forgiven because of his finer qualities.

### Dog (Gou)

The Dog is considered to be brave, loyal, intelligent, honest and open in all things. The Dog is not particular ambitious for money or fame, but needs to feel useful and appreciated. The Dog is a good judge of character and is generally not easy to fool, but loyalty can blind it to the imperfections of superiors or family members.



1970, 1982, 1994, 2006



1971, 1983, 1995, 2007

### Pig / Boar (Zhu)

People governed by this sign are considered honest, reliable, cheerful and sociable. They generally strive less for power than domestic bliss, but are capable of leadership when necessary. Their best qualities show in times of crisis when they bring their full intelligence to bear on the problems. Otherwise they have a tendency to do only as much as is necessary for a good life



Old House at Hohhot / Inner Mongolia

### Chrysanthemum

This flower stands for autumn and represents longevity as well as a life spent in quiet retirement

### Chupa tsea

Followed Tripitaka on the way to India together with Sun Mukong, the Monkey God, to obtain the Buddhist sutras from India.



CHN097 31 mm



CHN333 37 mm



Snuff bottle, amber  
CHNB008A 55 mm

**Cicada** (Guo-guo)

In ancient times the cicada symbolized regeneration of life, and therefore is a symbol of happiness and immortality.

**Clouds** (Yun)

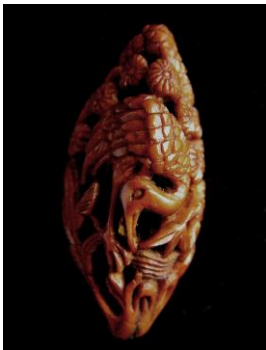
Are often used in conjunction with dragon. As ancient form they look just like simple spirals. They are harbingers of good fortune specially when combined with 5 bats.



CHN 752 35 mm



Old House at Tunxi /  
Anhui province



CHN279 33 mm



GCP\_Plate67

**Crane** (He)

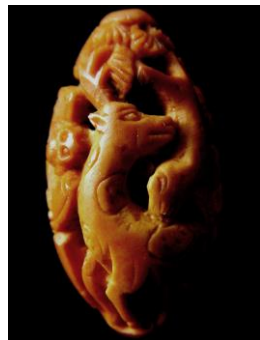
It is one of the many symbols of longevity and as such is often shown together with a pine-tree, the spotted hare, a tortoise, ling-zhi and a stone.

Variations on this theme couple a crane with a tortoise (CHN243) or a white deer.

**Deer** (Lu)

The word sounds phonetically like 'good income' (lu) and so symbolizes 'riches'. It means: 'May fame and riches come your way!'

It is as well a symbol for 'longevity', because the deer is said to be the only animal able to find the fungus of 'immortality'.



CHN117.01 32 mm

GCP\_Plate025





CHN106

38 mm



Temple roof, Singapore

### Dragon (Long)

They have a host of meanings to all Chinese and are symbolic in many respect. According to Chinese mythology, the Green (Turquoise) Dragon (Qing-long) is the guardian of the eastern quadrant. The sun rises in the East and with sunrise, all living things become alive. Hence, dragons traditionally symbolise the beginning of spring or life. They are also the emblem for vigilance and safeguard.

- 1-Long: Is the most powerful dragon and inhabits the sky
- 2-Li: the hornless dragon, lives in the ocean, is the most powerful dragon
- 3-Chiao: He dens in the mountains

### Dragon and tiger

Feng Shui or Chinese geomancy is the art of balancing one's life. An auspicious aura is necessary for the cosmic currents to generate favourable Feng Shui for the benefit of one's life. Inauspicious aura can be corrected by symbolic figures, talisman or charms. As guardians of the eastern and western quadrant of world directions respectively, both the dragon and the tiger, are important figures used to correct imbalances in the cosmic currents. The dragon represents Yang, the positive principles and the tiger, Yin, the negative principles of universal life.



CHN049A 39mm



At an old house at Kaifeng, Provinz Henan



CHN880 31 mm



Old House at Hohot / Inner Mongolia  
CHN566.03

### Dragon and the phoenix

They are important features in Chinese art. The dragon is probably the most complex and multi-tiered symbol in Chinese lore. When juxtapose next to the phoenix, it symbolises natural male vigour and fertility, commonly known as yang. The phoenix is the most incomparable in beauty amongst the feathered tribe. It is supposed to only appear when there is peace in the country. It is the guardian of the southern quadrant, representing the sun and warmth for

summer and harvest. Thus in analogy, the phoenix has great influence in the begetting of children. Its body reputedly symbolise the five human qualities - virtue, duty, ritually correct behaviour, as expected of all Chinese women. Together, the dragon and phoenix represent man and wife. To date, these emblems are still found in the trousseau of brides-to-be and in the wedding chamber.

### Elephant (Xiang)

A boy on an elephant, with a scepter symbolizes 'good omens'. It means 'what you want you will get'.



CHN316

27 mm



Forbidden City, Beijing



CHN128A 41 mm



**Erotic Art Collector,  
Internet**

### **Erotica**

As early as the 8th century BC, the only mention of sex is totally elliptical. This can be found in the "Book of Changes" where it is mentioned - 'male and female mix their essential forces and the ten thousand beings arise'. With the advent of the Confucianism, ancient China became an even more rigidly correct society. All behaviours are as laid down by Confucius. He even advocated that all bodily contact between a man and his wife should be avoided in daily encounter. Husbands should not hand things directly to their wives. They should instead lay things down

so that wives can pick them up.

Throughout Chinese history, sex has always been expressed obliquely. The rich imagery in Chinese language attests to this. It is a subject that is not vocalised. Yet it is essential to teach children what awaits them after wedding! The Chinese thus hit on the idea of presenting their offspring's of marriageable age, a book illustrating sexual relation.

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### **Fat Belly Buddha**

->see 'Mi Lo Fo' on page 19

Such a carving represents a wish to be accorded the blessing, protection as well as tranquillity of Buddha.

If he is surrounded by five playing children it means 'Good fortune that comes down from heaven'.



**Buddha with 5 kids**  
CHN536.01 33 mm



**Lian Shan Shuang Lin  
Monastery, Singapore**

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CHN096.01



**Old House at Kaifeng /  
Henan Province**

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### **Feng huang**

->see 'phoenix'

### **Fish (Yu)**

As it is spoken in Chinese it has the same sound as plenty and affluence; hence it is a symbol for wealth. Chinese believe that fishing is comparable to ruling. An unskilled fisherman will catch no fish; likewise, a tactless ruler will not win over his subjects.



CHN448 31 mm



**Snuffbottle (amber)**  
CHNB009 87 mm

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CHN278 31 mm Shou Shan Stone Carving

CHNS002 200mm

### Frog / Toad (Wa)

The three-legged toad is a moon symbol and because it lives to considerable age it is also a symbol of longevity. People said it could swallow the moon (in an eclipse); so it also stands for un-attainable wishes and desires. According to an ancient tradition, the toad is the transformed Chang-e, the wife who stole the elixir of immortality from her husband, and fled to the moon where she was turned into a toad. It is said if you scratch the earth with a toad's leg, a spring gushes from the spot. It was also believed that the toad could make you invulnerable.

### Fu

-> see 'God of Happiness' on page 13

### Goat / Sheep (Yang)

See Chinese Zodiac



CHN640 31 mm



CHN121 37 mm



Fook Yuen Rest./ Singapore

### God of Happiness

→ see also Fu at page 14

Together with Lu and Shou he is part of the 'Three Star Gods'. He often is dressed like an official from court and carries an ingot in his hand, the sign of wealth. Ingots out of gold or silver had been a currency in the old China.

### God of Longevity

→ see also 'Shou' on page 14

The 'God of Longevity' sometimes is shown together with a young servant, who has a peach in his hand, riding on a deer or leaning to it, and a bat in the background. Phonetically deer sounds like 'lu', and means good income. So it symbolizes wealth. Further Chinese believe that the deer can become very old and is the only living creature that can find the fungus of immortality (Ling-Zhi). The bat (in Mandarin) 'Fu', is phonetically the same like good luck and wealth. Therefore she is used as a symbol for it. The peach is a symbol for as a symbol for it. The peach is a symbol for long life. In Chinese mythology there is a peach tree flowering every 3000 years and giving fruits of eternity. Every one eating of them will become immortal. The recipient of such a carving or painting is wished to be happy, wealthy and a long life.



CHN144A1 35 mm



Shou Shan stone CHNS440 123 mm





CHN121 37 mm



Fook Yuen Rest./  
Singapore

**God of Status**

→ see also 'Lu' on page 14

He, the 'God of Status' or affluence, is often depicted as a benign and well-groomed gentleman, carrying a ruyi. He is responsible for success in commerce or profession and achievements in social position. The ruyi symbolises wishes come true. Thus Lu with a ruyi means fulfilment of wishes for professional and social success and advancement.

**God of Thunder (Lei Kung)**

He is depicted as a horribly ugly man with wings, claws, and a blue body. He carries a drum and in his hands, he holds a mallet and a chisel. Lei Kung attacks any human being guilty of an undetected crime or who remains beyond the reach of the earthly law.



CHN904 31 mm



CHN306 33 mm



Medium of Guan Yin,  
Temple Singapore

**Goddess of Mercy**

→ see 'Kuan Yin' on page 16

**Gourds (Gua)**

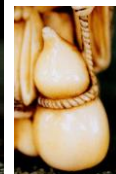
They symbolise heaven and earth united together. In Chinese mythology, when the gourd is opened, a cloud appears. This cloud can be used to trap demons. Gourds or pictures of gourds are supposed to ward off evil influences. The gourd is also a symbol of Li Tieh Kuai, one of the eight immortals. Hence, gourds represent longevity. When arabesques in paintings or carvings surround them, they signify the wish that the recipient family may last forever and be always being protected from evil.

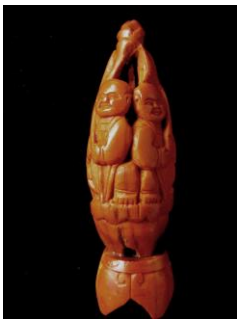


CHN024 28 mm



Shou with gourd, ivory  
CHNI051 51 mm





CHN320 47 mm  
carving



Shou Shan stone  
CHNS003b 92 mm

### He-He

see also page 13

They are also known as the 'Heavenly Twins'. Normally they are shown as two boys. One has a lotus blossom in his hand, the other one is keeping a mussel like container. If it is shown open, a white cloud is coming out of it. In this cloud one can see five bats.

Phonetically both names sound identical and mean togetherness and harmony. The lotus blossom phonetically sounds similar like as well. Bats phonetically sound like 'fu' meaning happiness and wealth. With such a

richness of meanings they are a popular gift specially for a bride and a bridegroom. It represents the wish for togetherness and harmony as well as for wealth and happiness in the unification

### Horse(s) (ma)

They symbolise persistence, swiftness and intelligence, vitality, speed, purity, loyalty and perseverance. Horses, particularly 8 together, are popular as art motifs.



CHN067A4 34 mm



Netsuke, ivory  
CHNI006A 50 mm



CHN386 37 mm



Bright Hill Temple  
Singapore

### Immortals (eight)

Chinese "Saints" are men and women who have in their lifetime achieved or developed supernatural powers, and who have been elevated, after death, to the status of gods. They are supposed to lead happy care free lives for ever and ever in the Kunlun Mountains or on the "Islands of the Blessed" in the Eastern Sea.

### Guan Ti

→ see details on page 15



CHN904 31 mm







**Guan Yin**

➔ see details on page 16

**Guan Yin on lotus leaf** Bright Hill Temple

/  
CHN314 40 mm Singapore

**Laughing Buddha**

➔ see 'Mi Lo Fo' on page 20

**Lei Kung**

➔ see 'God of Thunder'



CHN690 32 mm

**Leopard**

A leopard and a magpie symbolize the announcement of happy news, where leopard *bao* 豹 is a pun for announce *bao* 報 and magpie *xique* 喜鹊 for happiness *xi* 喜. Both are a good example for a pun or same pronunciation for different writings and with it different meaning.

**Lion (Shi-zi)**

The lion, what we see depicted in Chinese paintings or sculptures bears very little resemblance to the real animal.

Pairs of stone lions are popular as guardians of official buildings and temples. The right lion is male and left one, female. Under the left paw of the male lion is an ornamental ball whilst under the right paw of the female is a cub.

The number of bumps on the lion's head depends on the rank of the official whose building they are guarding.



CHN244 34 mm



Medicine Box - Baitong  
Chengdou / Sichuan  
CHNJ082



CHN297.01 39 mm



**Lotus (Lian-hua)**

This flower stands for summer and represents purity and harmony

**Lu**

→ see God of Status on page 14



**Luohan, tiger/dragon**  
CHN138A3 35 mm



**Snuff Bottle (Yellow Wood)**  
CHNB072 86 mm

**Luohans (18)**

→ see details on page 17

**Magpie (Xique)**

Its call heralds good news or the arrival of guests. The joy it brings is often depicts marital bliss. Two magpies symbolise the wish 'May you meet each other in joy'. Showing magpies, bamboos and plums 'May man and wife' (bamboo and plum) delight each other (two magpies),



CHN235 31 mm



**Old house at Hohot, Inner Mongolia**

**Mi Lo Fo**

→ see details on page 20



CHN879 32 mm



**Chinese coin**

**Money (Qian)**

The word qian (money) is phonetically identical to the word qian (before). A -> bat carrying money in her mouth can be interpreted as 'May happiness be before your eyes'. The word for 'eye' is the same as the word for the hole in the coin (yan)

**Monkey (Hou)**

Both the monkey and marquis have the same sound in Chinese. Thus a picture of monkeys upon each other is a wish for each generation to be elevated to marquisdom or in modern day context, a person of immense influence.



CHN228 32 mm





**Monkey God with peach** **Monkey God Temple,**  
CHN362 36 mm **Singapore**

**Monkey God** (Sun Wukong),  
see also page 21

He is a well-loved figure in Chinese folklore. His adventures in attaining immortality and the epic journey with Tripitaka to collect Buddhist sutras from India are well-tome volumes, avidly read even today. Stage plays, films, paintings and carvings of these adventures are still favourites amongst present day Chinese. Sun Wukong is famed for outwitting and destroying evil spirits. His worshippers pray to him for protection against all malevolence influences.

**Mountains** (Shan)

They are considered as sacred in China, and are a symbol of strength, durability and prominence. Mountains are considered as essence of Yang, water as essence of Ying. Thus water and mountain are considered to represent the 2 complementary forces which engendered the whole range of physical configuration



**Numerology**

This is a pseudo-science much believed and practised by the Chinese. Even numbers represent the yang (feminine) forces whilst odd numbers represent yin (male). Numbers determine the sex of the recipient in the case of two carvings.

**Orchid** (Lan)

This flower represents virtue, moral excellence and refinement of the superior man whose reputation precedes him like perfume



**CHN589 31 mm** **Pagoda at Xian, Shaanxi Province**

**Pagoda**

They are built to secure geomantic influence for the good of the surrounding district

**Pavilion (Ting)**

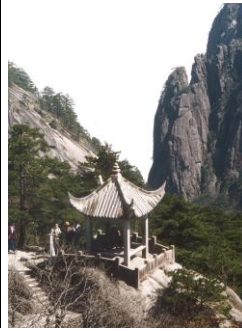
A pavilion in combination with cranes strongly suggests the place to be the "Island of the Immortals".

Both carvings are thronged with messages of immortality - Shou, the god of longevity, cranes, pavilion, peach and bat. The interesting difference is that one carving has two cranes whereas the other has three. However, the one with two cranes has another animal, a qiling besides them.

In some literature, the qiling, a mythical animal is sometimes described as having the body of a deer. It has always been associated with the birth of sons. We can thus conclude one of the carvings is presented to the wife and the other to the husband. The one for the wife has pine trees, two cranes, a qiling, Shou, two bats, pavilion and a young boy.



CHN499 40 mm



Yellow Mountains, Anhui Province

Besides a wish for longevity, the wish for begetting generations of sons is also expressed



**Peony (Fu gui hua)**

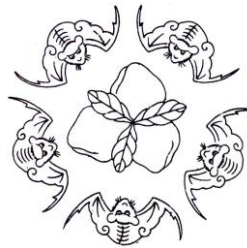
This flower stands for spring. It is also known as flower of wealth and honor. Represents good fortune and is also associated with affection and female beauty

**Peach (Tao)**

Symbol for longevity.



CHN228 32 mm



Bright Hill Temple, Singapore

**Peach Festival**

→ see 'Queen Mother of the West'

Shou on a crane on the way to the 'Peach Festival' of Xi-Wang Mu.



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**Phoenix** (Feng huang)

The phoenix is the chief of all birds and presides over the Southern Quadrant and symbolizes "summer", peace and order / harmony.



CHN096 36 mm  
overlay



**Snuff bottle.glas**

CHNB017B 66 mm

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CHN012 36 mm



**Yellow Mountains,  
Anhui Province**

**Pine tree** (Song)

This tree epitomises endurance, longevity and steadfastness as it retains its colour and needles in the cold winter. It is also a symbol for marital bliss since pine needles grow in pairs. The carving shown expresses a wish for marital bliss, harmony, longevity and the union to be blessed with sons. Marital bliss is symbolised by the pine tree; harmony is expressed by the lotus; longevity by pine tree and the boy holding a peach; birth of sons by the two boys, one holding a lotus and the other mounted on a unicorn.

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**Plum blossom** (Mei)

It stands for winter and beauty. Together with the pine-tree and the bamboo they are the friends of the cold season.



CHN235 31 mm



CHN265 32 mm **Bright Hill Temple,  
Singapore**



**Queen Mother of the West**

see Xi-Wang Mu on page 20

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**Queen of Heaven** (Ma T'su Po)  
 She has 2 attendants: - Thousand Miles Eyes and Fair Wind Ears. She is the patroness of all seafaring traders.



**Queen of Heaven with her two Attendants - Temple at Singapore**



CHN100 34 mm  
**Shou**



**Damo priest on Qilin / Shan stone carving**  
 CHNS001 200 mm

**Qilin**

This mythical animal is chief of all quadrupeds. It is sometimes called the dragon-horse. It represents order and harmony as well as longevity. The male is called Ch'I and the female lin. Its skin has five colors, red, yellow, blue, white, black. The male has a horn and the female is without it. It combines the body of a musk deer with the tail of an ox, the forehead of a wolf and the hoofs of a horse. Some writers state that it has the body of a horse, is covered with scales like a fish and has two horns bent backwards. Pictures

of the Goddess of Fecundity riding on a unicorn, and holding a child in her arms, may often be seen in the nuptial chamber.

**Ru-yi**

The pronunciation is phonetically similar to "as you wish" or "may your wish be granted". *Ruyi* scepters in the stylized form of a Lingzi fungus has traditionally been presented as birthday gifts. A *Ruyi* (lotus scepter) is also the emblem of *He Xiangtu*, one of the Eight Daoist Immortals. During the Qing dynasty, it was customary for the Emperor to present deserving generals, nobles and ministers of state with gifts of jade *Ruyi* scepter



see CHN121 - Lu



CHN524 26 mm

**Shakiyamuni**

He is the founder of Buddhism. The three faces of Buddha (the Buddha of the past, of to-day and to come) is to remind one, that one's past, present and future is interlinked. The carving is thus a reminder that one reaps what one sows.

**Shou**

→ see 'God of Longevity' or page 14



CHN230

40 mm

**Sons, 100 (Zi)**

Such a design expresses a wish for continuation of family live.

**Swastika (Wan-zi)**

If angled clockwise this is the seal of Buddha's heart. Hence, it is often seen on the breast of statues of Buddha.



CHN764 38 mm



**Temple at Penang, Malaysia**



CHN121 27 mm



**Entrance Restaurant, Singapore**

**Three Star Gods (Fu, Lu, Shou)**

They are the Gods of Happiness, Affluence, Longevity. More details see page 13

**Tiger (Hu)**

It is the chief of all land animals. The White Tiger (bo-hu) presides over the Western Quadrant and symbolizes "autumn". The Chinese also believe that the tiger is capable of warding off all evil influences. A carving combining the 18 Luohans, dragon and tiger is a reminder to the recipient that life has a beginning and an end, and one should live one's life like the Luohans so as to achieve nirvana. Additionally, the tiger can frighten away the demons that are all too keen to lead one astray.



CHN049A3 39 mm



**Bright Hill Temple, Singapore**



CHN243 36 mm



**Temple entrance at Hohot - Inner**

**Tortoise (Ao)**

Known as Wang pa or wang-po it symbolizes the universe. It is also the emblem of longevity, strength and endurance. Under the name 'Black Warrior' it presides over the 'Northern Quadrant' and symbolizes "winter". The divine tortoise has a snake's head and a dragon's neck.

**Mongolia**

**Tripitaka**

He is the monk who was sent by the Emperor to obtain the Buddhist scripts from India. He was accompanied by Sun Mukong (Monkey God) and Chupa tsea



CHN331 50 mm



Bright Hill Temple, Singapore



Child riding on Qilin  
CHN535 29 mm



Temple at Kaifeng, Henan Province

**Unicorn**

→ see also Qilin p.38

There seems to be quite some confusion, possibly just a misunderstanding when translating.

As it looks like (according to literature) there are two Qilin, a male and a female, called Qi and Lin. One has one horn, the other two. It is said he has the body of a deer or horse, the head of a dragon, the tail of an ox and a body with scales. Therefore it is sometimes called dragon horse.

Very similar to it is the mythical animal Xiezhi with one horn. It is said it is upright and honest by nature. In Ming and Qing dynasty officials wearing hats and robes embroidered with a pattern of Xiezhi must be those in charge of impeachment.



Xiezhi (?)  
CHN933 39 mm



Xiezhi in 'Auspicious Designs of China', p.127

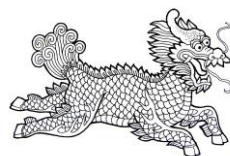
What we yet did not manage to find out is whether the claws are typical for 'Xiezhi' and the hoofs for Qilin.



'Dragon Horse', Bright Hill Temple roof, Singapore



Xiezhi (?) Forbidden City, Beijing



Kylin with one horn in 'Auspicious Designs of China', p.98



Kylin with two horns in 'Auspicious Designs of China', p.96

## Waves

They signify the edge of the human world and the border of the three islands of the Immortals.



**Waves/bottom of a boat**  
CHN017A2 40 mm

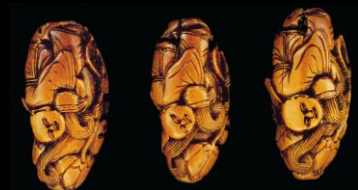
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**Overview**

**Comment on Pictures / Age,  
Use of Carvings,  
Different Seeds / Same Design,  
Same Design / Differently carved,  
Copying a Design,  
Similar Design elsewhere,  
Quality of Carving**



Squirrel with grapes – Bring many sons Vol. III/4.13





## Comments on pictures: Natural size versus enlargement



GCP\_Plate37c

The olives are in general very small (average 30 – 40 mm). A magnifying glass may be necessary to truly admire all the details the artist has carved on these small kernels. Enlargements up to two times or more is done in this book only as an exception to show examples of the incredible carved details.



CHN782

≈ x3.0



≈ x2.0



≈ x1.0

**Enlargements**

## Comments on Pictures: Age, Color / Coloring



CHN735b 30 mm



CHN060B 39 mm



CHN056a 39 mm



CHN375a 45 mm

**Some uncommon colors / shades** (not artificially colored)



Anhui Province

## Age or Coloring of the Carvings

Here obviously the same principles apply like with Netsuke.

The Canarium nut is originally of a light brown shade, which darkens very slowly after a long period. This means dark brown olives are either old or manipulated.

Almost all experts agree that patina enhances objects of carving.

In general age has an influence on price; the older the carving the more expensive it is. This is why some carvers are coloring their works. Sometimes they even describe their specific techniques. On ivory the shade fades when exposed to light, specially sun light (see photos on the left - netsuke front / back). Dealer for olive (Canarium pimela) or peach seed and walnut carvings have addicted to coloring. At least dyeing is done with bamboo or wood. As in the past there were no seals or signatures on these carvings, it is nearly impossible to determine the age of these art objects. One hint may be the design (see collection of Royal Botanical Garden Kew / Plate 71 or H.Pinto / Plate 72), which are no longer used to day (at least till now). However copying including signature is absolutely no problem for Chinese artists, therefore this is not necessarily an indication of age.



Netsuke / Ivory CHNI055 48 mm

## Patina (an indication of age ?)

According to "Encarta" (PC Software) patina means:

- **surface sheen:** a pleasing surface sheen that develops on an object with age **or** frequent handling

(so patina not necessarily means age)



**Use of Carvings: Rosaries, Beads, Pendants, Seals, Stands, Bottles**



**Bead** (see rosary)



**Rosary** CHN833 27 mm



**Snuff Bottle**

**Seals / Top-View**



**Seal** RBM001\_a



RBM002\_a

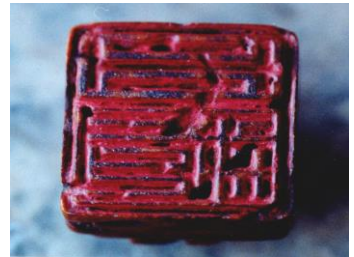


RBM003\_a



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**Seals / Bottom-View**



**Pendant**  
CHN068A1



**Stands - Zodiac Animals** CHN016B01 37 mm



**Perfume Bottle**



**Different Seeds / Same Design**



**Walnut** Maitreya Buddha with 5 Children



**Olive**



**Olive**  
CHN347



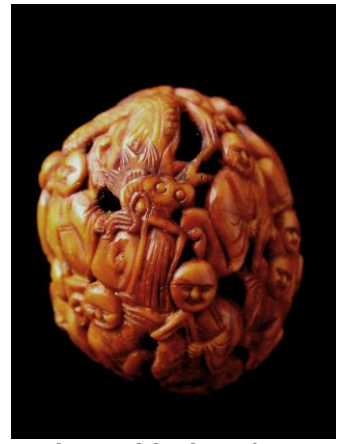
**Walnut** CHN675c



**Walnut** CHN056 39 mm



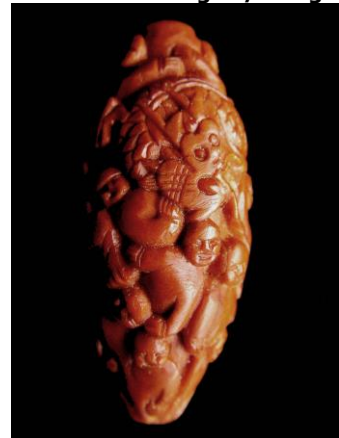
Vol III/3.18



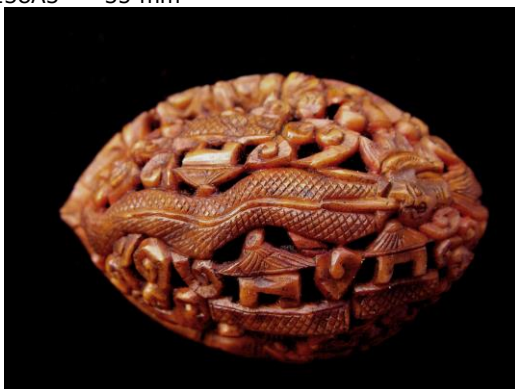
**Luohan with Tiger / Dragon**



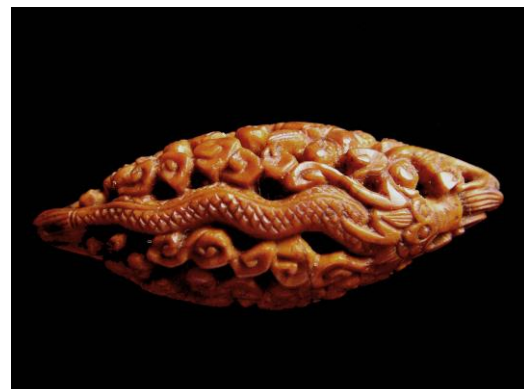
**Olive** CHN138A3 35 mm



**Olive**



**Walnut**



**Olive**

**Dragon Boat**

**Walnut**  
CHN053A1  
52 mm

**Olive**  
CHN017A5  
43 mm