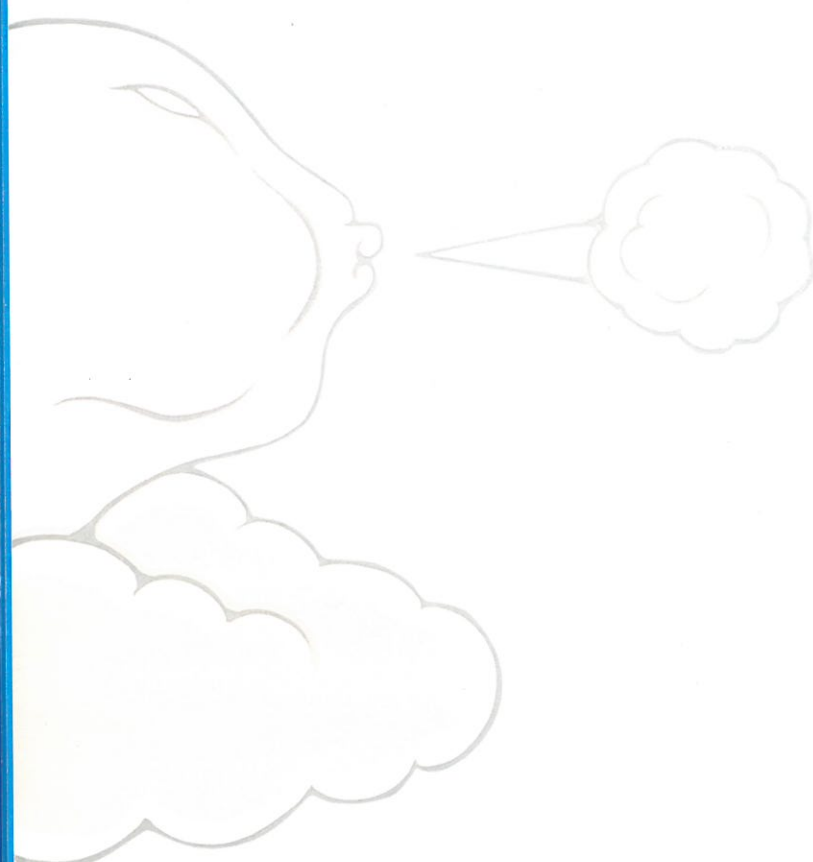




Other Histories

GUAN WEI'S FABLE FOR A CONTEMPORARY WORLD
DOCUMENTATION OF AN EXHIBITION

Edited by Claire Roberts

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Contents

Foreword	Jennifer Sanders	012
Introduction	Claire Roberts	014
'Other Histories': Origins and Creative Lessons	Guan Wei	022
Preparatory Drawings	Guan Wei	028
The Artists	Jean-François Lanzarone	036
Guan Wei: Artist as Storyteller	Claire Roberts	050
Exhibition Views	Jean-François Lanzarone and Marince Kojdanovski	058
Travels in Guan Wei's Curiosity Cabinet	Geremie R. Barmé	120
The Swift Might Speak of its Flight, if Stories Are No Longer There...	Alexis Wright	128
Chinese Translations		
另一种历史的呈现——起因与创作心得	关伟	136
关伟：艺术家和传奇的讲述者	罗清奇	139
行进在关伟的多宝阁	白杰明	143
雨燕可能谈到它的飞行，倘若故事不再……		
阿里克西斯·莱特		147
Artist Biography		152
Selected Bibliography		154
List of Works		156
Contributors		160
Acknowledgments		164

Foreword

'Other Histories: Guan Wei's Fable for a Contemporary World' is the result of a unique collaboration between Guan Wei and the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney. Over the course of one month in late 2006, together with a team of assisting artists and museum staff, Guan Wei created an installation of large-scale mural paintings and museum objects that transformed the Museum's Asian Gallery into a 'floating poetic corridor' in which history and memory, fact and fiction are blurred'. Crossing the threshold of the gallery, visitors entered into the fantasy world of Guan Wei, one inspired by the voyages of Ming dynasty admiral Zheng He (1371–1432) and the artist's own journey of migration to Australia. Guan Wei assigned new meanings to museum objects so that they substantiated the assumed history of the artistic realm he and his collaborators created. He also included in the display contemporary, imitation and found objects as well as paintings of ancient navigational maps and exotic plants and animals that Zheng He's men had encountered on their voyages that were 'on loan' from a fictitious Museum of Australian East Asian Art.

The Powerhouse Museum is Australia's leading museum of history, science, design and decorative

arts. Established in 1880 following the success of the 1879 Sydney International Exhibition it has developed a large and important collection that reflects human ingenuity and creative practice in Australia and other parts of the world. The Museum has a significant collection of Chinese objects acquired since the late-nineteenth century that reflects the history of Chinese migration to Australia. Working with Claire Roberts, the Senior Curator of Asian Decorative Arts and Design, Guan Wei had access to the Museum's collection, and together they selected objects that could be 'borrowed' to add authenticity to his narrative. Guan Wei's fable for a contemporary world began during the Ming Empire and took visitors on an ocean voyage to the Australian goldfields of the 1850s where large numbers of Chinese came to seek their fortune, many of whom then stayed.

Guan Wei was born in Beijing and first came to Australia in 1989. Since then he has participated in numerous solo and group exhibitions including the Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, Brisbane (1999), the Kwangju Biennial (2000) and the Adelaide Biennial (2008). Today, Guan Wei is one of Australia's leading contemporary artists with key works held in national

and state museums as well as in private and corporate collections in Australia and East Asia. It is the cartoon-like simplicity of Guan Wei's art together with his playful sense of humour and infectious idealism in dealing with serious matters such as the environment, the plight of refugees, race relations and the 'War on Terror' that has endeared him to viewers. As an artist who grew up during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) Guan Wei understands the power of art to communicate with people and create a lasting resonance. He approaches his practice with a social conscience, and a belief in the interconnectedness of humanity.

'Other Histories' was an unconventional museum exhibition because it was not based on factual research but on history and speculation, storytelling, personal experience and fantasy. Working within a museum environment and incorporating museum objects in showcases and in-house text panels and labels, Guan Wei's installation functioned as an inventive intervention, prompting visitors to question what was being presented as a record of the past, both in his installation and by other historical narratives. Guan Wei also hoped that those who experienced the exhibition would initially be

disoriented, and then relax and reflect on and rejoice in the common ground that we all share as human beings. In the exhibition brochure he explained: 'We, who come from different cultural backgrounds, need to better understand one another, connect with one another and seek friendship with one another. It is imperative that we find a shared set of values to ensure our survival.'

It was an honour for the Powerhouse Museum to have worked with Guan Wei in presenting 'Other Histories'. Published in the months leading up to the Beijing Olympic Games, this book documenting the exhibition seeks to acquaint more people with the abiding value of Guan Wei's work and with this bold, whimsical and thought-provoking installation.

Jennifer Sanders
Acting Director, Powerhouse Museum

Travels in Guan Wei's Curiosity Cabinet

Geremie R. Barmé

With the welcome incursion of international capital and the radical revivals of numerous eras of history, China has been experiencing an unprecedented concrete re-enactment of its numerous pasts. These are by and large imaginative reprisals in which conservationists have but a weak voice amidst the booming clamour of developers and opportunists. It is in this age of rediscovery, historical re-imagining and the reengineering of China, its times and places, that Guan Wei has created 'Other Histories', his fable for a contemporary world.

Apart from the environment of revivals and cultural tensions in both China and his adopted Antipodean homeland, Guan Wei conceived of 'Other Histories' by taking a page or two from *1421: The Year China Discovered the World*. This best-selling nautical confection by the fabulist Gavin Menzies has been much remarked upon, and lambasted, by scholars in various disciplines.¹ Nonetheless, Menzies' work has been featured in places like China and Singapore, among others, as part of a general move towards creating a more expansive history of how China is presumed to have engaged with the larger world on the cusp of the modern era. While, for the serious reader, *1421* may be little more than pulp

fiction, the book inspired Guan Wei to imagine a history in which the worlds of his life, Chinese and Australian, were brought together through an historical sleight of hand.

'Other Histories' created by Guan Wei and guided to realisation by a collective of curators and artists is something of a *Wunderkammer*, a 'wonder room'.² Cabinets of curiosity or wonder appeared in the days before a more formal delineation between the sciences, art and the codified appreciation of natural wonders developed. Renaissance Curiosity Cabinets ('cabinet' in the sense of room) were like mini-museums that evolved before the strict taxonomies of the Enlightenment would see objects sequestered from each other in new scientific systems of knowledge. They were individual, and frequently idiosyncratic, displays of rarities, oddities, fascinations, artifices and ephemera, collections of the real as well as the fictitious, assembled for the study and amusement of the avid collector. These crowded spaces inspired speculation in many areas of human knowledge, just as they accumulated the fruits of voyages of discovery, trade and conquest. One such collector was Gabriel Kaltemarckt who, when instructing Christian I of Saxony



'Chinese Ceramics' display of objects from the collection of the Powerhouse Museum.
Photograph: Marince Kojdanovski, Powerhouse Museum, Sydney.

in the late-sixteenth century on the creation of an 'art room' or *Kunstzimmer*, declared that there were a number of essential items in any such assembly: sculptures and paintings; 'curious items from home or abroad'; and, 'antlers, horns, claws, feathers and other things belonging to strange and curious animals'.³ With more art than artifice, Guan Wei's 'Other Histories' has reconstituted just such a *Wunderkammer*.

The collection of curiosities also has a venerable history in Chinese culture. Objects of unknown origin, or that would lead to speculation, delight and puzzlement were much favoured for being 'extraordinary'. Stones of mysterious form dredged from the depths of lakes where

tides and eddies had done the work of sculpting them, vegetal shapes that suggested otherworldly mystery, ancient inscriptions that hinted at unknown auguries, hoary bones that seemed to be those of mysterious dragons, all were collected assiduously, shared sparingly with friends and cognoscenti and marvelled over in private delight. Many early encounters with the post-Renaissance European world led Chinese collectors to delight at oddities of what was called the 'Far West'. For a culture that had been endlessly inventive, the intricate workings of clocks, the quaint use of chiaroscuro in painting human faces, the bizarre ability to make water betray its nature and flow upwards in fountains were all tricks of great ingenuity. One of the great emperors of the Qing dynasty, Qianlong (r. 1736–1795), would delight in these curiosities and he made them a feature of his palaces at the Garden of Perfect Brightness (Yuanming Yuan) to the northwest of Beijing.⁴

It has been observed that the Western 'discovery' of China and Columbus' voyage of expansion are linked through interpretations of Marco Polo's travel account of his time in the Mongol capital and the imagination of a distant Cathay.⁵ In his own way, Guan Wei perhaps saw



Detail of 'Zheng He and Columbus', mural painting.
Photograph: Jean-François Lanzarone, Powerhouse Museum, Sydney.

in his early encounters with Australia something of an El Dorado, as did many people who came to Australia from South China in the late-nineteenth century.⁶ It is here that he and other Chinese cultural figures active in the international arts scene have been encountering and creatively embracing the voyages of discovery of Europe. Guan Wei takes his own trip through history collecting and displaying the essentials for a modern Cabinet of Curiosities, one that he calls a 'Fable for a Contemporary World'. In 'Other Histories' Guan Wei celebrates Australia and the friable possibilities of an Antipodean land whose people, flora and fauna enthralled early visitors, and eventually its conquerors. It is a work that Guan Wei has spoken of as being a 'floating poetic corridor in which history and memory, fact and fiction are blurred'.⁷

Guan Wei has woven around the person of the Ming dynasty Yongle Emperor, the eunuch admiral Zheng He and the Southern Seas an imaginary tale of travel, encounter and enrichment to produce a monumental mural installation. As Claire Roberts notes in her essay

in this volume, 'Responding to queries about the conceptual veracity of his portrayal of the historical events and mythology surrounding the voyages of Zheng He—said to have involved an armada of "treasure ships" and some 27,000 men who travelled a distance of 70,000 nautical miles, over 28 years—and the idea that they might have reached Australia more than 350 years before Captain Cook, Guan Wei is reported to have said: "It doesn't matter, I am an artist."⁸

'Other Histories' also found inspiration in the mysterious origin of a small statue of the Chinese God of Longevity.⁹ That object, unearthed in the northern Australian city of Darwin in 1879, belongs to the collection of the Powerhouse Museum. No one knows how the little figure arrived in Darwin. Some have suggested that it may well prove that Zheng He's fleet reached Antipodean shores long before James Cook. In his book *1421*, Gavin Menzies provides an illustration of the object to bolster one of his many extravagant claims. In 'Other Histories', however, Guan Wei launched his own imaginative investigation, making the God of Longevity part of the constellation of the Southern Cross (emblematic of Australia) that Zheng He had used to guide his fleet, leading later immigrants from China south to this island continent.

Guan Wei's artistic trail is laid out through a series of relationships between the diminutive statue and other objects from the Museum's collection. Some are real, while others are masquerading in different roles, yet others are cheap commercial manufactures introduced into the museum space as part of the divergent narratives of Guan Wei's history of the Chinese encounter with the southern hemisphere. By travelling not only in time, but

also through space—by literally 'displacing' himself as a Chinese artist—Guan Wei gives himself room in which to think and imagine. By this means, he creates a narrative initially about China, then about Australia and then further on about China's place in Australia, as well as Australia's place in the world.

This new fable starts with the usurpation of the imperial throne in the Ming dynasty by Zhu Di, the Yongle Emperor. Taking as a departure point objects related to the Great Wall, imperial palaces and trade, Guan Wei creates the context for Yongle's most abiding creation, the expanded imperial city of Beijing. Yongle overthrew his nephew the Jianwen Emperor (r. 1399–1402), Zhu Yunwen, and sacked the capital of Nanjing. Jianwen would disappear and rumour held that he had fled the country.

Some would even claim that Zheng He's expeditions were launched, in part, out of the Yongle Emperor's desire to track down his dethroned nephew.

This northern city was Zhu Di's base, and after he took the throne he moved the dynastic centre there, naming it Beijing (the 'northern capital' in contradistinction to Nanjing, the 'southern capital'). It was not only a power base, but the place from which the emperor effectively staved off the invasions from the north-east and began work on strengthening the border defences known as the Great Wall. Guan Wei chooses the moment when Zhu Di usurped the throne to become the Yongle Emperor as the starting point in his own narrative. The Ming 'civil war' is represented in Guan Wei's account by a full-wall schematic painting of the territory of the Ming Empire



Detail of 'The Ming Dynasty: A Battle for Power', mural painting.
Photograph: Marinco Kojdanovski, Powerhouse Museum, Sydney.

featuring Nanjing in flames, a sinuous Great Wall, the mighty Yangtze River snaking with dragon scales through the landscape and the images of battles, confusion and flight. The move of the imperial centre to Beijing is the event that then gives the artist, and his Powerhouse collaborators, an opportunity to create a new story about what happened when Yongle took the throne. 'Other Histories' continues its narrative combining murals, vitrines and three dioramas. Guan Wei and his team of painters create a series of wall paintings that tell a story that is then reinforced and juxtaposed with displays of objects carefully selected from the Museum's collection. These items are imaginatively reassigned meanings that reflect the complex history that now unfolds.¹⁰

The design and construction of the imperial city Beijing also gives particular inspiration to Guan Wei. That city and its history are important for the artist not only in the re-imagining of the past in 'Other Histories', but also in the context of his own life, for he is from a lineage of lived history. His surname is a Han Chinese abbreviation of a Manchu clan surname Guwaligya; he is the scion of the Qing imperial clan. His great-great-aunt was the daughter of Ronglu, a military figure who famously conspired with the Empress Dowager Cixi in 1898 against the Guangxu Emperor. Guan Wei's great-great-aunt married into the imperial family, and her husband Prince Chun was the regent who oversaw the empire in the first years of the Xuantong reign (1909–1911), their son, Puyi, being the last Qing emperor.¹¹

In his work Guan Wei shows the Yongle Emperor and the eunuch general Zheng He against the backdrop of the newly created imperial palace in Beijing. The artist then



'Platypus', work on paper by Guan Wei.
Photograph: courtesy Powerhouse Museum, Sydney.

traces one particular journey of Zheng He's armada as they move along an imaginary timeline and through a partially fictional geography to travel to the south-sea islands and eventually to the shores of a massive southern continent. This pictorial travelogue leads to Australia, but it carries the viewer/traveller along a trajectory that is never far from Guan Wei's abiding concerns with the Chinese world, the issues of encounters with non-Chinese 'Others', and the question of how a non-confrontational engagement with the foreign might look, and even feel. Guan Wei's story of cultural adventure and sea-bound exploration comes at a particularly fraught period in the history of contemporary Australia, one during which politicised debates about border security, ethnicity and inclusivity have repeatedly threatened the very fabric of society.

During what has been the long decade of conservative rule in Australia, race politics has been used to narrow the national vision and incite public vigilance. While the country has become ever-more enmeshed with the economies of the Asian and Pacific region—profiting in particular from a resource boom fuelled by China's expanding economy—the previously more relaxed and expansive attitude to the cultures and peoples outside Australia has been paradoxically stymied.

At the outset of this era that has seen the narrowing of national vision and increased anxiety about the outside world, the historian and diplomat, Stephen FitzGerald—one of the pioneers of Australia's contemporary engagement with China—warned against Australia losing its way in dealing with the rising powers of Asia. He was also aware of how the blandishments of economic wealth could easily blind people to the rich possibilities of cultural growth that a booming Asia could offer. Over a decade ago Stephen FitzGerald expressed his concerns in a provocatively entitled book, *Is Australia an Asian Country?* In it he wrote of a transformation of the national ethos and spirit in response to the rise of China and other Asian economies. FitzGerald warned also that

The mythologizing of the history and culture and values of Asian societies is not... confined to Confucianists. It is more widespread. It is ahistorical. And it contains some dangers, because there are some signs that the emerging Asian 'Asia' could go the way the West did and make such myths about itself that it comes to believe it is the ultimate and only repository of virtue and good behaviour. In some quarters this

already had the flavour of political orthodoxy. But a united Asian region driven by such political orthodoxy is a united region to be feared, and for Australia it is critically important that we work for the maintenance of regional pluralism as the guarantee of heterodoxy and independence.¹²

It against the backdrop of the newly expansive economies and polities of Asia that Guan Wei has created for a contemporary Australian audience his own story of Chinese adventure and encounter with the 'Other'—that is, Australia. Although conceived by Guan Wei and created with a group of artist assistants, 'Other Histories' is, as you might have gathered, also the result of an extraordinary collaboration. It is a collaboration of the order and significance of which Stephen FitzGerald also wrote in his book, for he ended his discussion of Australia's new engagement with Asia on a positive note. He foresaw the possibility of the melding of people, ideas and cultures in Australia that would create a place where multiplicity would not be the source of racial tension and political exclusion. He hoped for an engagement with the world outside of Australia, and with the country's immediate neighbours, and that Australia would evolve into a country where difference allowed for possibility, one in which the 'Other' found a homeland. He was himself most at home when discussing and imagining how in the new millennium a deeply engaged, enriching and culturally resonant interaction with a nation like China could well work if it were a collaboration across nation-state divides that reached beyond received notions of exclusivity. In some ways, vital ways, Guan Wei's creation resonates with that home for this millennium.



Exhibition view.
Photograph: Marince Kojdanovski, Powerhouse Museum, Sydney.

The poetic tradition of imagination and otherworldliness makes 'Other Histories' a story of the spirit as well as being a confabulated narrative of movement and interaction. It is also a work that, through the engagement of both Guan Wei and the curatorial team of the Powerhouse Museum with China and Australia, and the powerful and rich distance between them, uplifts and expands the possibility of a more relaxed, fruitful and enjoyable cultural intertwinement. While China's continued economic rise and a heady Australian prosperity heightened by the mineral boom could lead to clientism, the grounded yet unfettered vistas featured in Guan Wei's curious cabinet of created history show that there are richer possibilities. For beyond the mutual pursuit of profit, the increased appetite for the consumption of material goods, the intermeshing of China with a wider world, something that has taken place as many people in Australia have reached out in unprecedented ways to their neighbours near and far, allows for a more mature appreciation of what individuals with shared human concerns can do across cultures, as well as across time. Re-enactment, historical fantasy and lived artistic reality work to make 'Other Histories' appeal as a history

to which we can aspire, rather than just being a nostalgic account of a history that wasn't. It is a history in which narrow nationalisms are recognised but which do not dominate the stories of people, the movement of ideas and the connection of lives. It is a history that finds future vistas in which common concerns are addressed and resolved through an appreciation of how individuals in the past have attempted to reach out beyond themselves.

Known for the airy humanoid figures that populate many of his works, and for a sardonic humour that eschews the irksome irony that still marks so much Beijing-generated art, Guan Wei has a more expansive sensibility. He works from a bold palette to create an engaging world that is neither confronting nor repulsive. Nonetheless, it is a realm that can, upon closer inspection, and introspection, prove to be haunting. It is a place in which whimsy often masks disquiet, one in which the artist favours a lightness of touch to deal with lurking menace.

Thus there is a sombre side to Guan Wei's lightness of touch. The first time I encountered his work was in Beijing in 1987, when I was introduced to him by the artist Ah Xian (now celebrated for his extraordinary porcelain sculptures). Guan Wei was creating a series of works inspired by acupuncture. They showed featureless grey and muted figures with acupoints (some real, others of Guan Wei's invention) highlighted with red circles and labels; many were fractured creatures, others carried chiding messages of warning. They were a ghostly evocation, slightly humorous, also haunting. In our anthology of non-official Chinese writings *Seeds of Fire: Chinese Voices of Conscience* (1988), in a section entitled

'Pressure Points', John Minford and I refer to what we called 'the Chinese Velvet Prison', stating that at the time the independent cultural creator, be he/she an artist, writer or intellectual was 'faced with a choice of suffering complete cultural ostracism or accepting the State's efforts to incorporate them in a new social contract, one in which consensus replaces coercion, and complicity subverts criticism.' In commenting on Guan Wei's work we said that, 'The paintings also evoke the nightmarish world of the artist as inmate.'¹³ It is in the artist's striking southern journey to the Antipodes, a new path leading out of this landlocked condition, that Guan Wei offers a different vision of how imaginative territory can be negotiated by a transnational cultural creator like himself. 'Other Histories' thus provides Guan Wei with a different territory, and therefore new perspectives, from which to consider his place of origin, as well as his adopted home.

'Other Histories' is thus an exemplary work in which a creative Chinese mind long nurtured in Antipodean reality embraces and enmeshes itself with local anxieties while speaking to wider, human concerns. Artists like Guan Wei who remain engaged with their place of origin while finding meaning in their domicile of choice enrich the scope of a world Chinese culture, contributing to it with an ambition that speaks to human reality, and possibility.

1. For an internet site devoted to debunking Menzies' book, see <http://www.1421exposed.com/>.
2. This point is also made by Michael Goldberg in his review 'Other Histories: Guan Wei's Fable for a Contemporary World', *Object Magazine*, 52 (April-July 2007): 48.
3. B. Gutfleish and J. Menzhausen, 'How a Kunstkammer Should be Formed', *Journal of the History of Collections*, 1 (1989):11, as cited at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cabinet_of_curiosities
4. See *China Heritage Quarterly*, 8 (December 2006) at www.chinaheritagequarterly.org
5. See Peter Hulme, *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean, 1492-1797* (London: Methuen, 1986), pp. 20-22.
6. In contradistinction to this, it is useful to follow the history of perceptions of China in Australia since WWII. See Timothy Kendall, *Ways of Seeing China: From Red Peril to Shangri-la* (Freemantle: Freemantle Arts Centre Press, 2005).
7. Guan Wei, quoted in Claire Roberts, 'The Artist as Storyteller', in the exhibition booklet *Other Histories: Guan Wei's Fable for a Contemporary World* (Sydney: Powerhouse Publishing, 2006), p. 3.
8. Claire Roberts, 'Guan Wei: Artist as Storyteller', in this book, p. 51.
9. See Claire Roberts, 'The Artist as Storyteller' and Guan Wei, 'Other Histories', in the exhibition booklet (Sydney: Powerhouse Museum, 2006).
10. The objects carry two labels, one indicating their location in the Museum's collection, the other written by Guan Wei and his collaborators to reflect the narrative that he has created and the part that the objects play in it.
11. See my 'Serious Manchu Whimsy: What Goes Around Comes Around', a catalogue essay written for Guan Wei's exhibition at the Sherman Galleries in Sydney, 30 October-22 November 1997.
12. Stephen FitzGerald, *Is Australia an Asian Country? Can Australia Survive in an East Asian Future?* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1997), p. 145.
13. Geremie Barné and John Minford, *Seeds of Fire: Chinese Voices of Conscience* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2nd ed., 1988), pp. 386, 387.