

Mythologies

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– Jennifer Wen Ma:

*Aeolian Garden*, exhibition catalogue, San Gimignano and Siena: Associazione Arte Continua and Gli Ora, 2006.

## Ma, Jennifer Wen (1973–)

Jennifer Wen Ma's work encompasses a range of media, including film projections, sculpture, participatory installations and performance. The Beijing-born artist's work often addresses complex contemporary social situations – such as the recent SARS epidemic – but also invokes classical myth and philosophy.

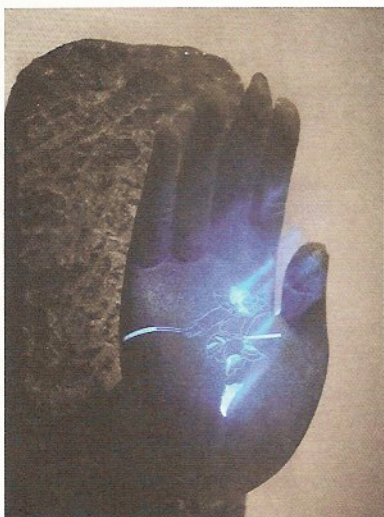
*New Adventures of Havoc in Heaven I* (2008) was originally conceived for and presented as part of the Beijing Cultural Olympiad in 2008. It is an animation depicting the Chinese sage Sun Wukong, usually known as the Monkey King, projected onto a cloud of smoke. Sun Wukong is the main character in the great Chinese epic novel *Journey to the West* (published anonymously in the 1590s and attributed to Wu Cheng'en) and remains one of the most popular figures in Chinese mythology. He is seen as an anti-authoritarian figure and a trouble-maker, mischievous and playful, and is the subject of numerous stories, films, TV series and even computer games.

The artist explains: "Sun Wukong's reckless antics at the celestial peach banquet and their consequences were the culmination of the Monkey King's series of rebellious acts against the orders of heaven. A beloved hero in China, Sun Wukong has long stood as a symbol of bravery against authority. In a party where supposedly all the celestial beings were invited, finding that someone with his background and status was considered unworthy, Sun Wukong dared to challenge the status quo."

In Beijing, Su Wukong appeared in the sky over the Legation Quarter, riding on a cloud of smoke, with his hand to his brow, looking toward Tiananmen Square and in the direction of the Olympic Green. His appearance at the state-sanctioned ceremonies for the Olympics, before the eyes of the world's media, constituted a powerful act of subversion. For the opening events of 'Mythologies', the Monkey King appears in the sky above Burlington Gardens, his presence evoking a different set of associations relating to globalism and cultural exchange. Ma enjoys the notion that this represents a continuation of his proverbial 'Journey to the West'.

*New Adventures of Havoc in Heaven II* (2008) is a related sculpture positioned inside the gallery, inspired by the story of Sun Wukong's bet with the Buddha. The gods, exasperated with Sun Wukong, asked the Buddha for help in dealing with him. The Buddha therefore made a bet with the

Jennifer Wen Ma  
**New Adventures of Havoc  
in Heaven II** (2008)  
Stone, smoke and video  
projector, 30 × 20 × 20 cm.  
Courtesy the artist



Monkey King that he could not escape from his palm. Sun Wukong, who could leap over 50,000 km in a single bound, smugly agreed. He sprang away and quickly arrived at the edge of the world. Nothing was visible except for five stone pillars and, to prove he had been there, he marked them. Afterwards, he leaped back and landed in Buddha's palm. There he was surprised to find that the five 'pillars' he had found were in fact the fingers of the Buddha's hand. When he tried to escape, Buddha turned his hand into a mountain and, before the Monkey King could escape, he sealed him there for five centuries. In Ma's work we see the Monkey King caught within the stone hand, somersaulting, doomed to repeat his actions for 500 years. [BT]

Jennifer Wen Ma lives and works in New York and Beijing. Ma's solo exhibitions include 'Aeolian Garden', UMoCA for Arte all'Arte 10, Colle di Val d'Elsa (2005). Recent group exhibitions include 'Everything is Museum', Guggenheim Museum, New York (2008), Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao (2009) and National Art Museum of China, Beijing (2008); 'The Politics of Fear', Albion, London (2007); '%...@Y!#', Tang Contemporary Art, Beijing (2007); 'Long March Project Yan'an', Long March Space, Beijing (2007); 'BELIEF', Singapore Biennial (2006); and 'Distance', Guangzhou Art Museum (2003). Ma was a core member of the creative team for the opening and closing ceremonies of the Beijing Olympics in 2008.

