

Poetic Heterotopia  
Jennifer Wen Ma's Practice

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In response to questions about her views on “conflict” in fiction, American science fiction author Ursula K. Le Guin once said that we need to seriously rethink the very question of ‘where is the conflict in your story?’ “If you say that story is about conflict, that plot must be based on conflict, you’re limiting your view of the world severely. And in a sense making a political statement: that life is conflict, so in stories conflict is all that really matters. This is simply untrue. To see life as a battle is a narrow, Social-Darwinist view, and a very masculine one... To limit all human behavior to conflict is to leave out vast, rich areas of human experience.”<sup>1</sup>

This dialectical thinking on the human experience of conflict corresponds to an undercurrent that flows through Jennifer Wen Ma's creative oeuvre.

Her latest work, *Cry Joy Park—Fold* (2018), is a large-scale mixed media installation composed of two very different spaces. The viewer first enters into a black garden in which the tree branches and vines are made from honeycomb paper sculptural constructs, hanging down from above, suspended from a structure akin to a grapevine trestle, the plants growing wantonly as if in a forgotten field abandoned by civilization. Walking among them, the viewer is struck by a powerful wave of inhibition, unease and even fear. An air of death permeates the space, but here and there one catches glimpses of strange fruits cast in red copper. Moving forward, the path through this black garden reaches a narrow end and leads the viewer into another space that suddenly opens before them. Constructed from the same paper material and technique, this is however a spacious and bright white garden. Everything is neatly ordered, with the copper fruits swaying freely within. This seemingly direct and simple spatial contrast (black and white, dark and light, constricted and expansive) between the two gardens gradually increases: though manmade, they “grow” within the set time and space of the exhibition; Ma has arranged for local workers to continue to cut, fold, sew, assemble and hang pieces in the gardens. This sustained action brings changes to the viewing experience throughout the exhibition, as the black garden grows increasingly narrow and cramped, while the white garden expands ever upward.

When she first began conceiving the artwork, Jennifer Wen Ma confronted the Beijing city government's response to calls from the Standing Committee of the People's Congress to forcibly remove members of the so called “low end population.” This “low end population” or “low end labor force” refers to the migrant population of Beijing

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<sup>1</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, *Conversations on Writing with David Naimon*, Tin House Books, 2018, p. 40.

who often have low incomes, little education, and engage in menial labor. This massive campaign to clear out Beijing's outsider population in the winter of 2017 left thousands of migrant laborers stranded in harsh cold air. It also hit Ma, who was in the midst of preparing a new artwork, quite hard. In the art industry, the production, shipping and installation of artworks is often carried out by this low cost labor force. Once the artwork is completed, this labor disappears in the process of the artwork's circulation. The art industry forms a juncture for the contradictions between the supposed "low end" and "high end." Beyond the labor that produces much of the art, artists who have yet to "succeed," and their studios, were also targeted by this campaign to clear the capital of migrants. This led Ma to wonder just what it is that separates "artists" from "craftpersons", "craftsmanship" and other "blue collar work" in contemporary society, and how she could make this labor visible in her works in a sincere manner.

Discussions of the contradictory relationship between labor and art production within the capitalist social structure, as well as artistic practices that engage immigration and class relations are hardly rare. Controversial Spanish artist Santiago Sierra is famous for the use of cheap hired workers to perform low level labor in his artistic practice. For instance, in the work *250cm Line Tattooed on 6 Paid People* (1999), Sierra paid six unemployed Cuban youths in Havana thirty US dollars each to have a line tattooed on their backs as they faced away from the audience and the cameras. The six lines together measured 250 centimeters. Sierra executed this concept again later in Spain. In *160cm Line Tattooed on 4 People* (2000), he sought out four prostitutes addicted to heroin, paying them the average price for a dose of the drug (roughly 67 USD). In the work *Persons Paid to Have Their Hair Dyed Blond* (2001), presented at the 2001 Venice Biennale, Sierra gathered illegal vendors of counterfeit bags and cheap consumer goods from the streets, paid each of them 60 US dollars, and dyed their hair blond. The only physical requirement he set for his participants was that their hair had to be black (black hair being associated locally with low class people such as migrants from the south of Italy, Asia and Africa). Meanwhile, Sierra gave his Venice Biennale exhibition site over to these vendors to legally set up their stalls. This artwork compared the value of artworks and cheap commodities in a highly satirical fashion, but more importantly, Sierra intended to foreground the identity of these often-invisible lower-class people (including the very symbolic act of bleaching their hair). In this forced exchange of contexts, not only the exhibition viewers were left disoriented in the arrangement, the street peddlers were also at a loss as to how to sell their wares in the gallery. Claire Bishop writes, "Foregrounding a moment of mutual nonidentification, Sierra's action disrupted the art audience's sense of identity, which is founded precisely on unspoken racial and class exclusions, as well as veiling blatant commerce. It is important that Sierra's work did not achieve a harmonious reconciliation between the two systems, but sustained the tension between them."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics", *October*, no.110, fall 2004, p.73.

This tension between art and labor emerges in a completely different way in Jennifer Wen Ma's work. Though on one hand, similar to Sierra, she hires workers to exchange their labor during the exhibition period for a wage wildly divergent from the value of the artworks, Ma's approach does not focus on provocation and conflict or directly exploit the body of the participants. On the one hand, the work carried out by the workers in the exhibition space is "performative" and thus immaterial; on the other hand, the outcome of their labor forms the physical properties of the artwork. During the time they worked together, Ma engaged the workers in conversations that aimed at getting them to think about issues such as labor values, wealth distribution, social collaboration and individual empowerment. Particularly in the Chinese context, these are topics that people have generally not been able to openly discuss in a critical fashion, or in other words, independent thinking or a deliberative mindset on these topics among the working class is not encouraged or supported under the call for the construction of a harmonious society. Contemplation of the individual and collective awareness, and of humanity and utopia are themes Jennifer Wen Ma has long explored in her works. Ma's earlier works are often expressions rooted in literary classics, aesthetic traditions and personal emotions, and engaged in discussions revolving around such reverent, sweeping subjects as "dream states", "the sublime", "myth" and "religion." As she creates *Cry Joy Park—Fold*, the experience of active interaction with the workers may mark a turning point: a quest for direct yet moderate means of intervening in the social reality during the process of artistic practice.

In Jennifer Wen Ma's eyes, the white and black gardens serve as poetic metaphors of utopia and dystopia. The Western philosophy claims "utopia" as a sixteenth century European invention, because it takes its name from Thomas More's 1516 book *Utopia*. This "political treatise novel" is written in the form of a travelogue, describing a fictional traveler's journey to a nonexistent island in the Atlantic (some scholars say it is connected to the discovery of the Americas) where he finds a society completely different from that of Europe at the time (utopia, or basically "no place"), thus catalyzing endless imaginings of the ideal society. British sociologist Krishan Kumar strictly defines utopia as an exclusively modern concept arising from specific historical conditions (the humanist thinking since European Renaissance, religious reformation and geographical discoveries of the European Renaissance) that is secular and anti-religious at its core. Though Kumar asserts that utopia is not universal, and that it could only arise in Western society with its classical and Christian traditions, Chinese scholar Zhang Longxi believes that long before such alleged Western-influenced movements of Chinese modern thinking as "datong" (great unity), "pingquan" (equal rights) and the Taiping Rebellion, traditional Chinese Confucian thought already contained aspirations toward ideal society. Such aspirations differed markedly from those of Buddhist and Daoist thought in that they were clearly worldly and secular in orientation. In other words, these aspirations firmly believed that humanity was capable of building a perfect world through its own actions, without the need to place one's hope and fantasy on

religion or illusory spirits.<sup>3</sup> This faith in “human nature” is also embodied in *Cry Joy Park—Fold*. Jennifer Wen Ma's choice of title is carefully considered. She deliberately avoided the use of the terms “heaven,” while choosing such words as “joy” and “park” to denote worldly intentions.

In the history of Chinese literature, the work that is most utopian is certainly Tao Yuanming's *Peach Blossom Spring*. Tao imagined an idyllic place at some remove from the world, a society of hard-working, kind farmers who rose with the sun and rested at dusk. In Zhang Longxi's eyes, this “Confucian utopia” mentality that arose long ago in the Eastern Jin period is not an expression of some individual fancies of spirits and fairies or a life of reclusion, but a description of an idealistic community and social life, which is the basic trait of utopian literature. That is to say, utopia is focused not on individual happiness, but on the collective stability and harmony of society as a whole.<sup>4</sup> The scene in *Cry Joy Park—Fold*, the progression from gloomy isolation to sudden openness, reminds one these lines from *Peach Blossom Spring*: “There was a small opening in the mountain, with a hint of light... After a few dozen paces, it suddenly opened up.”

Jennifer Wen Ma's literary referencing is also embodied in the concept of “fold.” “Fold” of course directly refers to the folded paper sculptural component of the installation. The basic technique of the paper sculpture is similar to those of the folded paper lanterns often made by children at Chinese festivals, but Ma multiplies this simple folding on a grand scale, while making subtle and complex variations from one layer to the next and assembling different layers together. Through the tension produced by pulling these layers apart, the paper, which normally would not be able to hold itself up, is given volume. This flexible, collapsible garden first appeared in Ma's multi-media installation opera *Paradise Interrupted* (2015–ongoing). A black garden expands and contracts on stage to accompany the plot of the opera. The shape and volume can be changed at any time as needed. Furthermore, the “folding” within the context of utopia and dystopia in *Cry Joy Park—Fold* also calls to mind the story *Folding Beijing* by science fiction writer Hao Jingfang. *Folding Beijing* posits a near future where the residents of the city are divided into three classes. The “advanced” technology of this time is used to fold and divide the living space and time of these classes: during each 48 hour folding cycle, the first space (which belongs to the ruling elite) enjoys the first 24 hours, from six o'clock the first morning to six o'clock the following morning; the second space (belonging to the middle class) enjoys 16 hours, from six o'clock on the second day to ten o'clock that night, while the third space (the lower, working class) only has 8 hours, from ten o'clock at night to six o'clock the following morning. When it comes time to switch, the residents of the previous space must lie down on their beds and be put to sleep as their space is folded up and the buildings of the next space unfold. Is this bizarre, heterotopian spectacle something Ma has been imagining? Is this black garden

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<sup>3</sup> Zhang Longxi, “The Utopian Vision, East and West,” *Utopian Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (2002), pp. 6-7.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p.14.

the “third space” in the story? It is as if the harder we work, and the more we pursue discipline, harmony, happiness and efficiency, the less we are able to cast off the fetters of reality, and the further that utopia of “diligent work and boundless happiness” fades off into the distance.

The history of modern political and social movements is scattered with examples of the contradictory progression of utopia and dystopia. Among them, the most complex are those of socialism and communism, as ideologies, as movements, and most importantly, as the closest possibilities to utopian society. In the 20th century, socialism had once stood as the temporary social reality in the Soviet Union, China and a few other countries in the world, but it soon corrupted and decayed into a totalitarian nightmare. The collapse of this closest attempt at the ideal society is doubtless an important factor behind the rise of dystopian thought. Jennifer Wen Ma’s black and white garden is an allegory for precisely this cycle of continued construction and deconstruction of utopian ideals in human society and the alternative space this process may have given birth to. Such reflection is particularly prescient now, as global politics goes into retrenchment with the rise of right-wing populism and nationalism, and the expansion of illogical neoliberalism, and society seems to truly have no more room for utopia. New thinking on utopia has become a rarity in art and literary discourse; utopia is no longer a fashionable topic of discussion or cultural imagination. But for this very reason, it is perhaps even more important for humanity to maintain and revive a utopian ideal, a new, unprecedented imagining of a harmonious society.

Jennifer Wen Ma remains optimistic. In *Cry Joy Park—Fold*, the viewer ultimately moves toward a bright, open space. Her earlier works that employ ink as a material also express an optimism of “becoming” through a subtle yet persistent strength. In works such as *Hanging Garden in Ink* (2012), *Germinating Thoughts* (2011), *Inked Bamboo* (2011), *Inked Cypress* (2011), *Inked Orchids* (2011) and *In Furious Bloom* (2010), Ma covers the plants entirely in black ink to create an apocalyptic scene. As time flows on, these seemingly desolate branches and leaves sprout tender new green shoots. This process needs no magnanimous manifestos, no exaggerated visual embellishments. It is a poetic becoming.

With such an optimistic outlook, the definitions of utopia and dystopia in the space of *Cry Joy Park—Fold* become less important while the tension really arises from the experience of passing between the two spaces. Perhaps the concept of “heterotopia” is a more apt description of this “transient space.” Michel Foucault defines heterotopia as an experimental, contradictory space, one not of simple right or wrong, optimism or pessimism, but instead a “space of the possible” that is marked by social practice, in the here and now, and of human interaction. Interestingly, Foucault sees the “garden” as the most ancient example of a contradictions field which embodies the heterotopia. Perhaps Foucault did not know much about Chinese gardens, and so when commenting the “garden of the Orient,” he specifically describes instead the gardens of ancient Persia. He writes, “We must not forget that in the Orient the garden, an astonishing

creation that is now a thousand years old, had very deep and seemingly superimposed meanings. The traditional garden of the Persians was a sacred space that was supposed to bring together inside its rectangle four parts representing the four parts of the world, with a space still more sacred than the others that were like an umbilicus, the navel of the world at its center (the basin and water fountain were there); and all the vegetation of the garden was supposed to come together in this space, in this sort of microcosm.... The garden is the smallest parcel of the world and then it is the totality of the world. The garden has been a sort of happy, universalizing heterotopia since the beginnings of antiquity..."<sup>5</sup> In Jennifer Wen Ma's garden, then, where there is hard work, where there is fluid interplay and juxtaposition of time and space, and lively encounters and interactions between people of different backgrounds and classes, what poetic possibilities may emerge?

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<sup>5</sup> Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias," ("Des Espace Autres," March 1967 Translated from the French by Jay Miskowiec), *Architecture Mouvement Continuité*, October, 1984.