

# Writing the Chinese Restaurateur into the Canadian Literary Landscape

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GABRIELLE ROY'S SHORT STORY "Où iras-tu Sam Lee Wong?" was first published in 1975. It appeared in a collection of four stories set in western Canada entitled *Un jardin au bout du monde*, translated into English by Alan Brown as *Garden in the Wind* in 1977. That it was translated so soon was a function of Roy's centrality to the canons of both French Canadian and English Canadian literature at the time. A novella more than a short story, it is a poignant tale of an immigrant from China who sets up a Chinese café in a small town in rural Saskatchewan sometime between the 1930s and the 1950s. Two biographers have described Roy's uncertainty about how to conclude her narrative of restaurateur Sam Lee Wong. And Roy's papers at Library and Archives Canada do contain various endings for the story, at least two of which are dramatically different from the one that Roy eventually chose to publish. These two biographical accounts of the story, together with François Ricard's "Notice" in the 2012 Boréal edition of *Un jardin au bout du monde* detailing the various typed and revised manuscript versions available, provide rich material to pique a reader's curiosity. Yet there has been no further discussion of the variant endings, what might have prompted Roy to select the one that she did, and more generally what might have prompted her indecision about how best to conclude the story.

Although the 1975 publication date might suggest that the story was part of the accelerated pace of publication of Asian Canadian literature toward the late 1970s, the story of Wong was actually conceived in the 1940s, and this extraordinarily long gestation, which involved lengthy deliberation about how best to conclude the narrative, attests to considerable hesitation and self-interrogation by its author.<sup>1</sup> In turn, this hesitation speaks to Roy's understanding of the delicate balance required in this novella between introducing readers to Wong and an alternative perspective on western Canada while avoiding the impression of speak-

ing *for* him. Roy's specific deliberations, I argue here, are evidence of her nuanced understanding of the delicacy required in dealing with and representing Wong's alterity and of an authorial process that involved an "ethics of care" in its depiction of human dignity and isolation.

### The Story's Long Gestation

Although the long gestation of this story has been noted (Gagné 260-61), it has not yet been the focus of extended critical attention. The length of time between the story's first inspiration in the 1940s and its final publication in 1975 speaks to the challenges of telling Wong's story. What was it about this lonely Chinese restaurateur that engaged Roy for so long and proved to be so challenging? As she herself writes, the story would likely have remained as an *ébauche* — an early "sketch" or "draft" — without "la curieuse insistance du Chinois à se rappeler à mon souvenir, à me rappeler surtout qu'il n'y avait peut-être que moi à avoir imaginé son existence et par conséquent à pouvoir lui donner vie" (*Un jardin* [1994] 8).<sup>2</sup>

Likely the first incarnation of this figure of the Chinese restaurateur appears in one of Roy's 1943 articles about immigrants in western Canada in which Roy describes people whom she saw on her evening walks in Canora, Saskatchewan: "[J]'apercevais sur le seuil de son café celui que l'on retrouve dans tous les hameaux, dans tous les bourgs de l'Ouest, celui qui paraît toujours s'ennuyer et jamais se décourager, celui qu'on nomme Charlie partout: le restaurateur chinois" ("Peuples du Canada" 44).<sup>3</sup> It would be more than thirty years before the same figure became the eponymous protagonist of a short novella about her imagining of his experience in Saskatchewan. And, even with that extended delay, he was still one of very few examples of an Asian protagonist in a work of Canadian literature, especially a work of literature written in French by someone outside the Asian Canadian community.<sup>4</sup>

Since the story remains little known, it is perhaps useful to give a short recounting of its plot. The narrative is fuelled by instances of miscommunication and painful ironies. It opens with Sam Lee Wong's emigration from China and his choice to settle in, and set up a restaurant in, small-town Horizon, Saskatchewan.<sup>5</sup> Wong chooses Horizon because of its proximity to some rolling hills, which remind him of the hills in a homeland that has become a mythic memory both for him

and for his readers. His little café enjoys limited success for a time as a gathering place for local men who find themselves, for various reasons, without someone to cook for them at home, but eventually most of his clients end up leaving Horizon in search of better prospects elsewhere. The final blow comes when there is an oil boom in the area. Sam struggles to meet the demands of the influx of new customers, and the Department of Health shuts the restaurant down. His landlord sells the building from under him, eager to take advantage of the rising demand for real estate. Sam tries to explain his predicament to his only friend in the small town, but his friend misunderstands him. In turn, the friend's message to the villagers to help Sam is also misconstrued. The result is a party thrown by the villagers to honour his retirement when Sam had no intention of retiring and indeed no money to support himself in his retirement. After the villagers discuss what might be the best gift for him, they decide on a gold watch to mark the occasion rather than the envelope of cash that might have launched the next phase of his life in a more practical way. The published story concludes with an older and more stooped Sam taking the train to another small town nearby (Sweet Clover), on the other side of his beloved hills, to set up another little café.

Commentary to date on "Où iras-tu Sam Lee Wong?" has focused on the story's symbolism, elements such as the bowl of rice that Wong remembers sharing in his childhood and the hills that draw his attention. One advantage of such lines of inquiry is that they draw attention to the links between this story and others in the same collection that contain symbolic echoes. Although all of the stories are set in western Canada, they are not explicitly linked by shared characters, unlike other short-story collections by Roy. Nevertheless, there are areas of overlap among the collection's four stories, all of which focus on individuals isolated to some extent or even exiled, living as they do in western Canada at great distances from their original homes and communities. One draft translation of the collection by Brown actually bears the title "The Exiles," signalling a shared kinship among the stories.

### The Question of Narrative Closure

What were the different endings that Roy considered for the story? In his biographical study published prior to the story itself, Marc Gagné

includes a description of his 1969 conversation with Roy. At that point, it seems, she had neither written the story's conclusion nor decided exactly which conclusion might be the most appropriate. She explained to Gagné that she had envisioned two possible endings, one in which Wong hangs himself and the other in which he journeys toward the mountains. I quote directly here, however, to stress the responsibility that Roy felt for her character, whom she imagined "sending" either to his death or toward obscurity: "D'abord, j'ai songé à envoyer le Chinois se pendre à une branche d'arbre dans les collines. Ainsi il mourrait incognito, dans le même silence où il a vécu. Comme seconde façon, j'ai pensé l'envoyer simplement vers les montagnes sans préciser davantage. Au loin, il disparaîtrait lentement et nous ne saurions jamais ce que l'avenir lui aurait ménagé" (Gagné 260).<sup>6</sup> Gagné's sense is that the choice for Roy in 1969 was between a closed ending and an open ending. Based upon conjecture drawn from her other writing, Gagné anticipated at the time that she would opt for the more open ending. He explains that Roy preferred a story in which the characters have many possible futures to one in which their fates have been sealed (261). In the end, he was both right and wrong. Roy opted for an open ending but not precisely the one that she described to him in 1969 in which Wong would journey toward an uncertain future and location in the mountains. That ending does not exist among the many drafts of the story held in Library and Archives Canada, but it is similar to one of two variant endings found in Box 55, which describes Wong walking away from the village: "Or, par ce matin de froid vif, on le vit dépasser les dernières maisons du village et continuer en direction des collines, emportant sous le bras ce qui avait tout l'air d'un gros livre épais" ("Sam Lee Wong" [1969b] 58).<sup>7</sup>

Roy's papers do reveal that the earliest draft version of the story lacked a conclusion. After the party to honour his presumed retirement, the first draft leaves Wong contemplating his future, understanding in part that it has been decided for him and without his asking. Indeed, a version of this open-ended denouement would appear in the published version. The original text from the manuscript including the modifications by the author reads as follows:

Quand il fut seul *enfin*, rentrant chez lui par la nuit froide si claire et scintillante qu'elle paraissait contenir tous les souvenirs de chaque

vie/plus de souvenirs sur chaque vie que n'en contient l'âme ? ?, alors seulement Sam Lee Wong crut comprendre ce qui s'était passé. C'était de lui que le maire avait parlé. C'était lui qui allait partir. Et son regard retomba, stupéfait, vers le sol.

Il avait été fêté, donc, il allait partir.

Quelquefois déjà, tout en dehors des choses du village qu'il eût été, il avait vu cette incompréhensible tournure des choses se produire; on fêtait quelqu'un, et ensuite il partait, toujours il partait. Il n'y avait pas autre chose à faire quand un village tout entier, s'était mis un bon jour à tant aimer quelqu'un.<sup>8</sup> ("Sam Lee Wong" [ca. 1950] 39-40)

Roy's papers in Library and Archives Canada reveal that, during the years subsequent to her discussion with Gagné in 1969, Roy contemplated two very different endings with a number of subtle variations. In the first alternative ending, as in the one already mentioned, Sam moves toward an uncertain future. In the other ending, he dies either by his own hand or inevitably by being alone and outdoors in a harsh Saskatchewan winter landscape. Either way draft texts include two significant narrative elements.

First, they include details of the discovery of Sam's body when the winter snows recede, as outlined in the two subsequent passages dating from the 1960s:

Quelques jours plus tard, des enfants montés faire du toboggan par là découvrirent le corps. Il pendait, les semelles à peine détachées du sol, à la branche d'un petit arbre comme lui court vêtu, seul de son espèce sur le versant nu d'un coteau, et qui lui ressemblait en quelque sorte. ("Sam Lee Wong" [ca. 1960-70b] 67)<sup>9</sup>

C'est à la faveur d'un faux printemps, survenu en plein hiver à la suite d'un vent chinook qui souffla sa chaude haleine deux jours durant et mis la terre à nu, que l'on découvrit, non pas tellement loin du village, au creux de d'un vallon, le corps de Sam Lee Wong. ("Sam Lee Wong" [1969b] 59)<sup>10</sup>

As well, and particularly interesting because it stands out among the variant draft endings, an earlier version appears only to be struck out in favour of a description of Wong hanging himself ("Sam Lee Wong" [ca. 1960a]).

Second, the draft texts feature the bitter irony that, after his death, and only after his death, is Sam finally invited into the community of

which he worked so hard to be a member. Either this invitation comes when the community realizes that he has no known relatives and the town's *curé* concludes that they should bury him among their own,<sup>11</sup> or it is written into the words engraved on Sam's headstone:

Et c'est ainsi qu'à la fin des fins  
 Sam Lee Wong  
 Chine ?  
 Horizon 1958  
 repose parmi les chrétiens comme auprès des/ avec les siens. ("Sam  
 Lee Wong" [1969b] 61)<sup>12</sup>

I am grateful to Jacquelyn Sundberg for pointing out that the words on Wong's gravestone are doubly ironic since Wong spoke repeatedly with his friend about his desire to return to China after his death in order to be buried with his ancestors. It is ironic that his ultimate acceptance in death by the villagers is yet another misunderstanding of his desires.

In the early 1970s, a new element entered variants of this alternative ending. Whereas in earlier drafts the gravestone bears French characters (possibly understood to be English ones that would be recognizable to the inhabitants of Horizon), variants from both 1973 and 1974 mention "des caractères étranges" etched into the stone ("Sam Lee Wong" [1973] 61; "Sam Lee Wong" [1974a] 61).<sup>13</sup> Although the *curé's* decision and words serve to welcome Wong into the community posthumously, in these variant endings the strange and unrecognizable characters on the headstone underline the distance between Wong and that community. Neither the narrator nor most of the community members can recognize the Chinese letters. Even in the earlier version, in which the gravestone is carved in recognizable characters, a question mark indicates the community's lack of intimacy with Wong, who lived among its members for twenty-five years: "Chine ?"

Four years after Gagné's meeting with Roy, François Ricard spoke with the author about two possible ways of ending the story. Although Roy was still wrestling between whether to have Sam live or die, the two choices no longer included death by hanging, and she had put both variants to paper. Further, the alternative to having Sam journey toward an uncertain future in the hills had been qualified by this time: the location of his destination near the hills was specified as the small town of Sweet Clover. Ricard recalls his first meeting with Roy in July

1973 when she read aloud two different endings and asked his opinion about which one was preferable:

Then she brought out the “Sam Lee Wong” manuscript and read it to me from beginning to end. She read very well, in a firm if slightly hoarse voice, miming the dialogue and varying the rhythm to suit the emotional colour of the words and sentences. She read me both conclusions she had written, adding that she could not decide which was the better. I told her I preferred the second, where the leading character goes to the other village and finds himself back with his hills. Then she told me she would keep that one, and she did; but I think she had already made her decision. (*Gabrielle Roy: A Life* 450)

If Roy had indeed made a decision in 1973, then it was the result of profound deliberation. Amid her papers are two handwritten versions of a note that presumably date from this period in which she articulates her uncertainty and considers the possibility of providing the reader with two alternative endings, essentially giving the choice and decision to the reader:

Je pourrais quitter ici Sam Lee Wong. Il m'en coûte. Le désir de l'accompagner un peu plus loin encore vers ce qui put être le dénouement de sa vie me tient. Or le curieux est que me sont apparues deux manières possibles d'en finir. Les ayant écrites ~~ces deux~~ toutes deux, je ne sais toujours pas sur quelle fin arrêter mon choix. Il me vient donc l'idée de m'en remettre au lecteur: à lui de choisir le dénouement qui lui paraîtra ~~la plus~~ en ligne la plus sûre avec le caractère de Sam Lee Wong. (Dans sa mystérieuse retenue habituelle, lui-même ne m'ayant pas éclairé.) Ou d'inventer une fin selon sa pente. (“Sam Lee Wong” [1973])

Ici pourrait s'arrêter la banale histoire désolante de mon ami Sam Lee Wong. Pourtant j'ai éprouvé du regret de l'y abandonner, et j'ai poursuivi ~~son~~ le chemin en sa compagnie quelques temps encore. J'apercevais deux manières d'en finir. Je les ai rédigées toutes deux. Maintenant je ne sais sur laquelle arrêter mon choix, laquelle en fait/me paraît en fait la plus vraie. Je les propose donc toutes deux au lecteur. À ~~lui de choisir~~ chacun le dénouement qui lui paraîtra semblera le plus ~~apte~~ juste. Ou d'en inventer un autre, selon sa pente. (“Sam Lee Wong” [1973])<sup>14</sup>

Reading through the various early draft endings, one recognizes two

primary impulses. The first brings Wong to a final and specific death — in the earliest versions through hanging, then later through exposure to the elements. These endings offer some closure both through their descriptions of the deaths and then either through the words of the *curé* when he decides to bury the restaurateur in the community or through the words carved on the gravestone. The second impulse allows Sam to live on. At first glance, these draft endings seem to become increasingly open ended with each new version. Sam is seen leaving the village, first by walking away from it toward the hills (“Sam Lee Wong” [1969b] 58) and then by travelling through the hills by train (“Sam Lee Wong” [1974a]). In that first departure, however, we learn that he dies of exposure, for his body is found (“Sam Lee Wong” [1969b]). In contrast, in the next version of this ending, Sam departs by train to the sound of the community saying “Happy landing, Charlie! . . .” (“Sam Lee Wong” [1974c] 59), and the outcome of his travels is left ambiguous. In the last draft ending, the closest to that of the published version of the story, the *curé* speaks at the party, the community wishes him “happy landing Charlie,” and the story closes with Sam lifting his eyes to the hills. The reference to Psalm 121 adds solemnity to the gesture.<sup>15</sup> Is Sam looking to the hills for salvation at a time when help seems to be unattainable? That question is answered in the published version, which ends with an additional phrase that links his beloved hills with the notion of his eventual death: “Il releva les yeux sur les collines. Là vers quoi il avait toujours marché ne devait plus être bien loin maintenant” (*Un jardin* [2012] 107).<sup>16</sup> In this way, the chosen ending is only partially open ended, as Gagné had predicted. Instead, with precision about the destination of Wong’s travels (to Sweet Clover), and with clear signposting of this eventual destination (the hills to which Sam has always been travelling and, as the symbolism suggests, his eventual death), Roy’s final choice of ending offers a solemn sense of closure while enabling Sam to live on, to continue to make his life choices.

### Narrative Voice

Another line of approach in the critical commentary interrogates the story’s narrative voice, asking whether Gabrielle Roy has successfully negotiated the complexities of speaking for Sam Lee Wong, of telling his story. Dominique Fortier, for example, focuses on the fine balance between Roy’s insistence on telling stories as personal testimonies and



her use of free indirect discourse (which filters a character's thoughts and feelings through a third-person narrator) and the interrogative mode to suggest the narrator's inability to be entirely omniscient ("L'écriture" 249-50). One explanation of Roy's privileging of this style of discourse and the interrogative mode<sup>17</sup> might be her reluctance to overstep her role in telling Wong's story. Estelle Dansereau finds that Roy successfully maintains this fine balance. She argues that to see Sam only as an object of the gaze would be to limit his potential as a character ("Convergence" 95). Free indirect discourse allows the narrator to outline Sam's thoughts without exercising authority over the narrative (97). In another article, Dansereau argues that a sense of her own marginality invited Roy to see this as a central predicament in her fiction, and her awareness of being "d'une espèce destinée à être traitée en inférieure"<sup>18</sup> led her to treat the other as simultaneously central to and marginal in her fiction ("Narrer l'autre" 459, 460). Carol Harvey would agree, arguing that, because Roy herself spoke from a minority position as a Franco-Manitoban, she felt solidarity with the marginalized Sam (137-39). As such, the figure of Sam exemplifies the paradox of Roy's oeuvre (Dansereau, "Narrer l'autre" 460). For Dansereau, as for Simon Harel, the narrative voice itself assumes responsibility while also speaking "au nom de l'autre" ("Narrer l'autre" 461; Harel 17).<sup>19</sup>

What might account, then, for her profound hesitation in bringing Wong's story to a close when Roy clearly had the authorial courage to take on the challenge of such a sensitive portrayal? It is Dansereau, relying on the theories of Homi K. Bhabha, who comes the closest to suggesting a link between Roy's uncertainty about the conclusion of the story and the delicate narrative balance that Roy struggled to maintain between depicting and speaking for her character, an argument that I will develop here at greater length and with detailed reference to the archival material. For Dansereau, Roy's thoughtful deliberation about how to conclude the story of Wong appropriately involved considerations of how Roy could best give voice to a character so different from her in terms of both gender and culture. Dansereau refers directly to Bhabha's description of the potential trap of voice appropriation:

Gabrielle Roy évite le piège identifié par Homi Bhabha que la représentation du déplacement et de l'aliénation du colonisé encourt de facto l'appropriation de son discours. De fait, Roy réussit, du moins en partie, une de stratégies dites méritoires par Bhabha, l'exigence

que l'imitation ou la représentation du sujet colonisé soit suffisamment ambiguë pour faire éclater le discours afin de pouvoir céder au sujet nouvellement formé une présence partielle. ("Narrer l'autre" 472)<sup>20</sup>

Rather than appropriating Wong's voice through representation, Roy ultimately succeeds — Dansereau concludes — in providing enough ambiguity in the representation to give Sam a partial presence in the story.

The extensive archival material demonstrating the level of sensitivity that surrounded the telling of Wong's story suggests Roy's lengthy and careful self-interrogation while trying to determine the best direction for a story of an isolated individual very different from her.<sup>21</sup> However, the particular concerns and considerations voiced explicitly by Roy to her biographers and between the lines of her many variant endings anticipated by about twenty years the trajectory of what would become a heated debate in the late 1980s and early 1990s in Canada about "appropriation of voice." This debate came to a head in 1989 when Women's Press of Canada refused to publish three stories written by authors who did not share the race and culture of their subjects (Bondy-Cusinato 1). Other decisions fanned the flames of the debate, for instance in 1992 when Concordia University refused to display two paintings of African North American women because of their representations, or in 1994 when singer Nancy Nash was a top contender for the Juno award category of "best music of Aboriginal Canadian recording," having appropriated the name Red Sky and offered a rendition of a sacred song of the George family (Bondy-Cusinato 2-3). These issues provoked discussion about the relative merits and pitfalls of an artist portraying another's story, especially if the artist was a member of the majority culture representing a member of a minority culture.

Is it respectful, or even ethical, to tell stories that are part of what defines an individual or a people of a particular cultural community? Lenore Keeshig-Tobias's response was an emphatic no: "Stories, you see, are not just entertainment. Stories are power. They reflect the deepest, the most intimate perceptions, relationships and attitudes of a people. Stories show how a people, a culture, thinks. . . . [T]he Canadian cultural industry is stealing native stories as surely as the missionaries stole our religion and the politicians stole our land and the residential schools stole our language" (71-72). Marlene Nourbese Philip was also a strong

voice of opposition. She explained that “The ‘right’ to use the voice of the Other has . . . been bought at great price — the silencing of the Other. . . . It is also a right that exists without an accompanying obligation, and as such, can only lead to abuse” (100-01). Perhaps more than any single example, a flashpoint for this position emerged in criticism published as of the late 1990s of Robert Bringham’s rendition of Haida stories.<sup>22</sup> Examples raised during the heated debates involved portrayals of Canada’s First Nations and Black communities. But the same arguments and issues would be directly relevant to representations of the Asian community in Canadian writing — except that the canon of Asian Canadian writing had emerged largely by the 1970s and before this very public debate. One voice in the Asian Canadian community did take up the challenge of advocacy: Roy Miki, together with William Deverell, was one of the organizers of the Writing thru Race conference of 1994, “a highly controversial and publicized event that significantly impacted contemporary anti-racist cultural production in Canada” and that participants joined by invitation (Sehdev [abstract]).

What was the outcome of this heated dialogue? Certainly, it engendered greater sensitivity toward issues of race, gender, and culture in artistic representation. Kelly Bondy-Cusinato argues convincingly that it also brought us to a more nuanced understanding of artistic responsibility. In particular, she finds that Linda Alcoff in her lucid 1991 article “advocates that speaking for others is both politically effective and a personal responsibility we all share” and “provides a philosophical, altruistic underpinning for many or most of the arguments in defense of voice appropriation” (137-38). Bondy-Cusinato further points to the notion of an “ethics of care” raised by feminist theorists such as Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings, and she argues that the relationship of care invites one to see from a different perspective (162-64). Explains Noddings, “What is offered is not a set of knowledge claims to be tested but an invitation to see things from an alternative perspective” (32). In terms of Wong’s story, Thuong Vuong-Riddick notes an appreciation of Roy’s approach consistent with such a perspective, saying that the work is one of compassion rather than denunciation (49). Roy highlights the limitations of the residents of *Horizon*, drawing the reader’s attention both to their limited understanding of Sam and his world and to how little readers can come to know him. In this way, Roy invites readers to reflect on their own relationships with this fictional “other” and be

aware that there remains an untold story here, *even within Roy's own narrative*. Roy both extends and takes up the invitation to “see things from an alternative perspective” (Noddings 32) by offering the narrative of Sam and wrestling with how to do so appropriately. Further, in the approach of this novella, in its attention to the experience of the solitary restaurateur, as well as in the extensive deliberations about how best to provide it with closure, Roy illustrates a deliberative “ethics of care” (Bondy-Cusinato 162).

Isabelle Daunais sees the novella's published conclusion as the key to how, in her view, Roy avoids the pitfall of imprisoning her character. More specifically, Daunais argues that engaged or “ethical literature” (“la littérature dite éthique”) — when a writer narrates the story of an unknown or humble individual — can be understood as a trap, for the object of the story has no independence and can only exist as he or she is depicted. Paradoxically, then, the author entraps her character even while trying to give that character value and attention. “C'est là,” Daunais explains, “le grand paradoxe — et la grande ironie — de la littérature dite éthique : en même temps qu'elle donne vie et existence aux personnages les plus humbles et les plus pauvres, en même temps qu'elle lutte contre l'oubli des exclus et des morts, en même temps qu'elle prend 'l'autre' en charge, elle fait de cet autre une sorte de prisonnier, ou une sorte d'instrument” (69).<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, when Daunais turns her attention to Roy's story, she argues that the ending, which provides for possibility rather than closure, allows Sam a certain independence and agency. For Daunais, Sam “est un personnage libre d'aller et venir, libre de ne pas être adéquat, libre, par exemple, d'accueillir le comique d'une situation. C'est aussi un personnage qui peut à tout moment emmener l'œuvre là où personne ne pouvait prévoir qu'elle irait. Et c'est là que réside sa beauté à lui” (74).<sup>24</sup>

Had the story been published with one of the earlier draft endings — including one that detailed Sam hanging himself (“Sam Lee Wong” [ca. 1960b]) — Daunais's conclusion would inevitably have been very different.

### **New Perspectives on the Chinese Restaurant Industry in Western Canada**

Roy's novella was inspired by her observations as a journalist in western Canada and depicts a painful chapter in Canadian history. With its

focus on a Chinese immigrant to Canada, it is but one of the examples in Roy's oeuvre of the author's nuanced depiction of the human condition and the broader themes of marginality and belonging.<sup>25</sup> Roy's story would have been very different indeed were it to have showcased the experience of a head chef in one of the larger Chinese restaurants in western Canada, such as City Café and Chinese Restaurant in Lacombe, Alberta, or The Seven Seas in Edmonton. Rather than being a small prairie diner, The Seven Seas was the largest such establishment in western Canada between 1948 and 1977 — bustling with life and energy (Deer).



Figure 1: Interior of City Café and Chinese Restaurant, Lacombe (ca. 1900-35). Glenbow Archives ND-2-109.

Instead of telling such a story, Roy provides a stark and poignant portrait of human isolation as embodied by Wong. His dilemma is perhaps best signalled by Mathieu Belisle, who highlights that the story's intense focus on the effects of loneliness drives the narrative and casts Wong in a very uncomfortable role (98-99).

In Roy's story (*Un jardin* [2012]), bitter are the ironies resulting from the miscommunication and lack of communication between Wong



Figure 2: Interior of City Café and Chinese Restaurant, Lacombe (ca. 1900-35). Glenbow Archives ND-2-133.

and the villagers, signalled through the narrator's rhetorical questions. At first, for example, knowing only rudimentary English, Wong communicates through an "immense sourire très humble" (58). Is this, the narrator asks, because the smile takes the place of words, "[p]arce qu'il ne savait autrement se faire comprendre?" (58).<sup>26</sup> Gradually, however, it becomes clear that Sam has the potential to be a skilled communicator. Smouillya, a local man of French extraction and one of Sam's regular patrons who writes letters for Sam, notes at one point that the Chinese in general are recognized as gifted communicators to explain why he has created for Sam such an eloquent voice and tonal register: "Car à toi et les tiens fut toujours départi un don exceptionnel d'expression" (77).<sup>27</sup> Ironically, Sam has not read the volume of travel narratives on ancient Cathay in which Smouillya gained this insight, nor is he knowledgeable about his own heritage. When asked if he has read the treatise, he replies that he will know his own people only after his death (77). By the time he learns English, for he is quick to pick up the language, he has also learned the habit of speaking in the register expected of him. "You

make . . . trip . . . good?" he asks the inspector in "son anglais le plus bas" (88).<sup>28</sup> By the time he is left promising the health inspector "Me buy soap very strong and all scrub," he has gleaned enough to realize that his dilemma will not be resolved by soap alone (88). The bitterness is never spoken aloud in these encounters, but the ironies of the unrealized communicative potential are painfully apparent.

That Wong can be known only at a distance, obliquely, by both narrator and reader, is echoed in the inability of characters within the story to come to know him. And it is the focus on portraying human isolation that earned the story the highest praise from the late and well-respected literary critic Gilles Marcotte. In 2005, three decades after publication of the story, Marcotte recounts how, on belatedly reading *Un jardin au bout du monde*, swept away by emotion and admiration, he considered the story to be Roy's "chef d'oeuvre" (58). Marcotte found more than a sympathetic portrayal of the restaurateur; he found a profound and moving vision of the human condition when reduced to first necessities (58). For him, the artistry of the narrative evocation had to do with its minimalism, so similar to the landscape that it evoked. Marcotte was also particularly struck by how few details are provided about Sam. Whereas other characters are described with adverbs and adjectives, such as the "violent" dispute that Jim Farrell has with his wife, presented as the lovely, young Margot, Sam seems to be visible only from a distance (59). Marcotte notes that the protagonist will inevitably stay enigmatic for narrator and reader alike (59). Astutely, he also understands how Sam, the character, is at a distance from the author herself. The hills that figure so frequently in Roy's oeuvre reappear in this novella, but here they seem to belong to Sam, so intense is his focus on them, so pivotal are they to his sense of self and belonging. Marcotte notes that, within Roy's larger oeuvre, the hills are part of her particular writerly landscape. For example, "dans *La Route d'Altamont*, les collines appartiennent à l'univers intime de Gabrielle Roy." However, the hills that speak to Sam seem to communicate on a level not entirely available to Roy's narrator: "[C]elles qui parlent pour ainsi dire au Chinois semblent échapper à la narratrice, être arrachées à la possession personnelle pour être attribuées totalement, sans résidu, à ce personnage presque impersonnel qui ne cesse de les regarder, de les rêver à partir du village" (60).<sup>29</sup> Marcotte points out that nobody else can really see these hills because they exist only in relationship to the hills of Sam's memories of childhood.

Marcotte's essay praising Roy's novella ends on a realistic note, admitting that it is not widely read and that its form, extreme discretion, and refusal of any "ornamentation" excluded it from publication in France during Roy's lifetime.<sup>30</sup> Consequently, it remains to be read within the context of Quebec ("ou canadienne," Marcotte writes in parentheses) literature, as a reflection of our historical and geographical heritage. But he concludes that to read it in this context is not to read it widely and frequently enough (61).<sup>31</sup>

My own essay began by lamenting the lack of attention given to the story's long gestation and how such attention could enrich our understanding of the authorial process in developing this portrait of human dignity and isolation. Nevertheless, Marcotte's high praise of Roy's novella more than thirty years after its publication, as well as thoughtful engagement by a wide range of literary commentators in both French and English over the years, reveal the story's long-standing ability to provoke consideration and lively discussion. Roy herself spent a long time with Wong as she deliberated about how to conclude her novella appropriately and how to bring to the creation of her portrait of human isolation an "ethics of care." The published novella offers an ending that provides thematic and narrative closure. However, unlike many of the variant draft endings that would have offered readers a glimpse of Wong's eventual death, the published story allows Wong to live on, close to his beloved hills, to make his life decisions. In this way, his "curieuse insistance" continues to engage readers just as it originally prompted Gabrielle Roy to bring him to life.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed discussion of the gestation of one other story in this collection, also first conceived during the 1940s, see Montreuil.

<sup>2</sup> All quotations from Roy's materials appear in the original French, with English translations by Étienne Gratton provided in notes. That the translation is of a citation is signalled by quotation marks, as for the following: "The Chinese man's peculiar insistence in reminding me of him, in reminding me in particular that I was perhaps the only one to have imagined his existence and thus the one that could bring him to life!"

<sup>3</sup> "I saw on the doorstep of the café he owned a man one sees in every hamlet and every small town of the West, a man who seems always bored but never discouraged, a man one names Charlie everywhere: the Chinese restaurant owner." See Ricard, *Gabrielle Roy, une vie* 557n133.

<sup>4</sup> Other examples of Canadian novels written by non-Asians and portraying Asian characters (though seldom protagonists) include Nellie McClung's *Painted Fires* (1925), Ethel Wilson's *Lilly's Story* (1952) and *Swamp Angel* (1954), and Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel* (1964). Robert Kroetsch's *Badlands* (1975), William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), and Peter Oliva's *The City of Yes* (1999) also show this pairing of non-Asian authors and Asian characters. All were written and published in English, which makes Roy's novella all the more an exception. I thank an anonymous peer reviewer for suggesting some titles on this list.

<sup>5</sup> Horizon is the name of a former hamlet in Saskatchewan and the name of the town inhabited by the protagonists of Sinclair Ross's 1941 novel *As for Me and My House*. See Harrison.

<sup>6</sup> "First, I considered sending the Chinese man [to] hang himself to a tree branch in the hills. That way, he would die incognito, in the same silence he had lived in. Second, I thought of sending him quite simply in[to] the mountains, without any other detail. He would disappear in the distance, and we would never know what would have been in store for him."

<sup>7</sup> "But, on a morning of crisp cold, he was seen going beyond the village's last houses and continuing on his way toward the hills, carrying under his arm what looked like a large, thick book."

<sup>8</sup> "He went back home alone. The night was so cold and clear and bright that it seemed to contain all the memories of each life. Only then could Sam Lee Wong believe that he understood what had happened. Mr. Mayor was talking about him. He was the one going away. And his gaze fell, stunned, to the ground. On a few occasions already, as above and beyond the affairs of the village as he was, he had seen this incomprehensible turn of events happen; they celebrated someone, and then he left, he always left. There was nothing left to do when a whole village had decided one morning to love someone so much."

<sup>9</sup> "A few days later, children who went up there with their sleighs had discovered the body. It was hanging, the soles barely off the ground, to the branch of a tree as short as he was, a lone specimen of its species on the naked slope of the hill which looked like him in some ways."

<sup>10</sup> "It is thanks to a false spring brought in the middle of winter by a Chinook wind blowing its warm breath for two days exposing the earth that Sam Lee Wong's body was discovered not very far from the village, at the bottom of a dale."

<sup>11</sup> "Sam Lee Wong" (ca. 1960-70a); "Sam Lee Wong" (ca. 1960-70b) 68; "Sam Lee Wong" (1969a) 63; "Sam Lee Wong" (1969b) 63; "Sam Lee Wong" (1973) 60; "Sam Lee Wong" (1974a) 61; "Sam Lee Wong" (1974b) 60.

<sup>12</sup> “It is thus that, at the end of the end, Sam Lee Wong China? Horizon 1958, rests among Christians as among his own.”

<sup>13</sup> The original text of the manuscript including modifications by the author reads as follows: “Un compatriote de Sam Lee Wong, ~~plus~~ plus tard venu ouvrir à Horizon un restaurant moderne, y a fait graver des caractères étranges. Ils fascinent sous le haut ciel de la Saskatchewan, entre les herbes de la plaine” (“Sam Lee Wong” [1973] 61); “Un compatriote de Sam Lee Wong, plus tard venu ouvrir à Horizon un restaurant moderne, y a fait graver des caractères étranges. Ils fascinent, entre les herbes de la plaine, sous le haut ciel de la Saskatchewan” (“Sam Lee Wong” [1974a] 61). “A compatriot of Sam Lee Wong who later came to Horizon to open a modern restaurant had the stone engraved with strange characters. They are an object of fascination under the high skies of Saskatchewan beneath the plain’s grass.”

<sup>14</sup> “I could leave Sam Lee Wong here. This saddens me. The desire to accompany him a bit further toward what could be his life’s denouement holds me. But what is peculiar is the manner in which two possible endings appear clear to me. I have written them both; I still don’t know which to choose. The idea therefore came to me to defer to the reader: he should choose the denouement that will seem the most in line with Sam Lee Wong’s character.

The ordinary and unfortunate story of my friend Sam Lee Wong could end here. I have however felt regret to abandon him, and I carried on in his company for some time. I discerned two manners to end it. I wrote them both. But now I don’t know which to choose, which one seems to me really the most truthful. I therefore suggest them both to the reader. To each his own denouement which will seem the most accurate — or to invent another one, depending on his inclination.”

<sup>15</sup> Psalm 121 (KJV) includes the line “I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help.”

<sup>16</sup> “He lifted his eyes to the hills. There, toward which he had always been walking, couldn’t be far now.”

<sup>17</sup> The interrogative mode is used to describe Sam’s experiences regarding the reason for his presence in Horizon : “Pourquoi, tout d’un coup, au milieu d’eux qui étaient bien assez seuls, ce Chinois sans attache, sans rien?” (*Un jardin* [2012] 60); “Que signifiait la présence à Horizon de Sam Lee Wong?” (61). The interrogative mode also signals the extent of his tolerance — “. . . que n’avait-il toléré?” (73) — and his desires — “. . . et pour ce qui est des autres besoins, en avait-il vraiment jamais eu!” (85) — as well as his insistence on returning to China after his death: “Tant qu’à ne pas retourner vivant au pays, pourquoi tenir à y retourner mort?” (76).

<sup>18</sup> “Of a type destined to be treated as inferior.”

<sup>19</sup> “In the name of another.”

<sup>20</sup> “Gabrielle Roy avoids a trap identified by Homi Bhabha where the representation of the colonized man’s displacement and alienation equates de facto to an appropriation of his discourse. Indeed, Roy succeeds at least partly in using what Bhabha calls a commendable strategy. This strategy requires the imitation or the representation of the colonized subject to be ambiguous enough to [shatter] the discourse in order to cede to the newly created subject a partial presence.”

<sup>21</sup> Another example in her oeuvre of Roy’s extended deliberation over the direction of a particular work involves the gestation of *Le temps qui m’a manqué*. For an excellent discussion, see Fortier, “Les passages.”

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Leer.

<sup>23</sup> “The great paradox — the great irony — of the so-called ethical literature lies there: it gives life and existence to the most humble and poorest of characters, it fights against forgetfulness for those excluded or dead, but all of this at the same time as it takes ‘the other’ in charge, as it in some way turns the other into a prisoner or some sort of instrument.”

<sup>24</sup> Sam “is a free person to come and go, free not to be adequate, free, for example, to welcome the humour of a situation. He is also a character who can at any time take the work where no one could foresee that it would go. And that is where his beauty lies.”

<sup>25</sup> Other examples include fiction depicting Doukhobor and Ukrainian immigrant communities in Canada, the Inuit, and the francophone communities in western Canada (to which Roy herself belonged).

<sup>26</sup> “In place of language? Because he did not know how else to make himself understood?”

<sup>27</sup> “Because you and your people have always been given an exceptional gift of expression.”

<sup>28</sup> “In his most rudimentary English.”

<sup>29</sup> “[I]n *La Route d'Altamont* [originally published in 1966], the hills belong to Gabrielle Roy's intimate universe; the ones that talk to the Chinese man seem to elude the narrator, to be pulled from personal possession in order to be completely assigned, without hesitation, to the almost impersonal character who is constantly looking at them, dreaming about them from the village.”

<sup>30</sup> Unlike Roy's first six books, *Un jardin au bout du monde* was never published in France during her lifetime. However, the novella about Wong was reproduced in the French literary review *L'atelier du roman* published by Flammarion in a special issue devoted to Roy in June 2010 (Marcotte 62). The story appeared alongside articles by Daunais, Marcotte, Ricard, and others.

<sup>31</sup> “Je concède qu'il peut être légitime de la lire comme une oeuvre purement québécoise (ou canadienne), portant une expérience historique et une expérience du paysage qui nous appartiennent en propre. Mais la lire ainsi, ce n'est pas la lire assez” (61).

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