The Colour of Colour

Winnie Wong

Matthew Wong, *Blue City*, 2018

People think that painting is about colour
It's mostly composition
It's composition that's the whole thing
—Agnes Martin, *The Untroubled Mind* (1972)

IRON MAN

In 1901, as Pablo Picasso journeyed into his Blue period, an aspiring artist working in a laundry in Winnipeg told a Canadian census enumerator that he was 23 years old and had been born in 1877 in China, and that he had immigrated to Canada in 1898.[1] That young man, Lee Youk Tien (李玉田, literally "Jade Fields"), would take on the sobriquet Tie Fu (铁夫, literally "Iron Man"), using that name to sign the oil paintings he began to paint. On that 1901 census sheet, he and his roommate are classified with the colour "yellow," while every one of their neighbours is classified with the colour "white."[2] Most of these neighbours had also immigrated to Canada from many other countries around the same time as Lee Youk Tien, but nearly all of them had since become "Canadian" citizens. Lee Youk Tien and his roommate were among the very few on that census sheet whose country of origin remained their country of citizenship: "Chinese."[3] (fig. 13).

The following year, the Canadian government set up a Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration. This Commission, which studied the attitudes of white Canadians toward the Chinese workers among them, declared that the Chinese "are not and will not become citizens in any sense of the term as we understand it."[4] In its concluding report, the Commission recommended prohibiting any future immigration of Chinese and Japanese people to Canada, increased the head tax levied on every Chinese person who arrived in the country, and lauded the governments of British Columbia and the United States for having already implemented such barriers.[5] By 1923, Chinese people would be banned from entering Canada altogether. Such laws were enacted in many Western countries and would become the basis for future legislative bans against peoples tabulated by colour and creed. Of course, there were even loftier and more "legal" justifications for the dispossession, forced migration, and enslavement of people of other "colours." If the composition of a nation is its "whole thing," then the silent erasures and deliberate violence enacted in the name of colour is part of it too.

Sometime after the Royal Commission rejected his suitability for Canadian citizenship, and in the midst of exclusion acts in both Canada and the United States, Lee Youk Tien somehow found his

Fig. 13
Census of Canada, 1901. Manitoba, District no. 12 Winnipeg, Ward 4, Page 5.

Fig. 14
Agnes Martin, *White Flower I*, 1985
Acrylic and graphite on canvas, 72 × 72 inches (183 × 183 cm)
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, purchased 1995
Accession No. 37845

way to New York City.[6] That journey is shrouded in mystery, but he was likely not the only aspiring artist crossing the border under uneasy circumstances: Winnifred Eaton, the Chinese-French-Canadian author who wrote under a Japanese pseudonym, fictionalized the experiences of her sister in a 1916 short story about a struggling artist making her way from Montreal to Boston by train.[7] In New York, Lee Youk Tien studied art, painted, and joined the revolutionary political movement led by Sun Yat-Sen who, from exile, was advocating for the overthrow of the imperial government in China and the establishment of a modern democratic republic. Lee Youk Tien served as secretary of the New York branch of Sun's Revolutionary Alliance (*Tongmenghui*) for six years.[8] What remains of Lee Youk Tien's artwork from his time in New York are portraits of white Americans: a musician, a professor, a doctor, a bullfighter, a college student, an artist. These surviving works, signed "L.Y. Tein," suggest he made his living as a portraitist, although he later made far grander claims about his career in America. His actual training and artistic achievements, unlike his revolutionary credentials, are generally undocumented.[9]

In 1930, no longer a young man, Lee Youk Tien returned to Hong Kong, then a British-ruled colony not far from his own birthplace, Heshan (or "Crane Mountain"). There, he reinvented himself as "Li Tiefu," acclaimed as one of the fathers of Chinese modernist painting and renowned as the first Chinese painter to study oil painting in the West. He was invited to paint and exhibit throughout China, and, after the founding of the new socialist republic, would teach at the newly established Fine Arts Academy of Guangzhou during his final years.[10] Upon his death, the artist gifted his works and legacy to the academy and the nation. There could not be a wider gulf between Li Tiefu and the 1902 Commission's image of the Chinese labourer. Whereas the Commission had declared Chinese workers like him to be "too servile," he became a political revolutionary. Whereas the Commission found Chinese people like him to be "unfit for citizenship … in any sense of the term," Li Tiefu became an artist in the most modern sense of the term.

Modernism is a powerful mechanism of self-reinvention, and the story of Li Tiefu's transformation from Canadian laundry worker to the father of Chinese modernist painting is far from unique (and perhaps not even entirely true). Like the stories of so many artists—and immigrants—Li Tiefu's legend is filled with myth making, self-aggrandizement, and unlikely feats. In modern Chinese history, Chinese individuals who study abroad and then return to contribute to a new socialist nation are always portrayed as heroes. That narrative is crucial to the idea that a modern Chinese collective continually improves itself through patriotism that supersedes all other differences—for better or for worse. For more than half his lifetime, Li Tiefu lived and worked in North America. Yet to the nations of Canada, America, and China, on the tabulated grid that is a census, a form of citizenship, and a nation-state, he was, and only has ever been "Chinese."

YELLOW

Matthew Wong was born in 1984 in Toronto, Ontario, nearly forty years after the Chinese Exclusion Act came to an end in Canada and race was removed from the country's immigration criteria. In 1991, just as many Hong Kongers were immigrating to Canada, his parents decided to return to their native Hong Kong. (His mother, Monita Cheng, had originally immigrated to Toronto in the 1970s.) Wong, who was seven years old at the time, attended an English-language private school for American expatriate children, where he and his closest friend were among the very few ethnically Cantonese returned-emigrants. Wong's mental health deteriorated and, when he was fifteen, he and his parents returned to Toronto. After completing high school there, he moved to the United States to attend the University of Michigan. Following his college graduation, the family returned once again to Hong Kong.

There, Wong bounced around, hopping between poetry clubs and an unlikely corporate internship before ultimately deciding to study art at the City University of Hong Kong. In 2012, he obtained a Master's of Fine Arts in Creative Media, with his formal training primarily focused on digital photography. During the next three years, Wong taught himself to paint in a studio in Zhongshan, a city that had renamed itself after Sun Yat-sen ("Sun Zhongshan"), whose revolutionary movement Li Tiefu had so fervently supported. Wong's studio also just happened to be located in Cuiheng, the proud village where Sun Yat-sen was born.

It was not until late 2016 that Wong himself finally "returned" to Canada, this time to Edmonton, Alberta. On the Canadian prairies where Li Tiefu had lived over a hundred years ago, Matthew Wong embarked on the most productive period in his painting career, a period that ended abruptly when he died by suicide in late 2019. He signed his paintings on the verso with only his Chinese surname, Wong, or "王" (literally, "King"). This is not to be confused with the other Chinese surname Wong, or" 黃" (literally, "Yellow.").

Would it be ridiculous to think of Matthew Wong as a "returned" Canadian artist, a self-made artist like Li Tiefu, who, after years abroad developing his craft, returns to his homeland to revolutionize the course of Modernist painting for the betterment of his country? Would that be as ridiculous as thinking of Li Tiefu as a "Canadian" artist, this unwanted immigrant whose time as a Winnipeg laundry worker must have contributed to his socialist political consciousness? Canada does not foster a myth of nation-building that involves its ethnicized peoples. It is as if the country was already built by the time its "yellow," brown, and Black immigrants arrived. Yet there they were, "Iron Men" laying the very foundations of the country in its earliest settler-colonial days. And there they were, too: "white" immigrants, arriving at a land that was also not their own, but a land of which they made themselves "citizens." The contemporary "crisis of whiteness" in Canadian arts institutions is not only a question of representation.[11] It is also a crisis of historical retrieval: the failure of a nation to picture its "coloured" people within its originary tales, its heroic narratives, and its modernity. It is a reluctance to bear witness to the colour in its composition.

Neither does Canada nurture, let alone celebrate, repatriation. Contemporary Canada imagines itself as an immigrant nation, but does not conceive of itself as encompassing a diaspora. Canadians become invisible immigrants once they leave Canada, but the Canadian-born celebrities so visible in American culture can alternately flatter or gnaw at the proud Canadian psyche. In 2010, the percentage of Canadians living abroad as a proportion of its population was larger than the Chinese diaspora.[12] As the Chinese-Canadian artist Ken Lum once opined: "Canada's artistic centre is neither a centre nor a margin; it is but a centrifuge, a study for specialists in chaos theory."[13] If that is the case, is there not something to be said about a returned artist like Matthew Wong—an artist who contradicts Canadianness not by leaving, but by returning?

Let us acknowledge Canada, then, as a native land that has sustained many arrivals, departures, displacements, and returns—rather than the orderly mosaic of settler-colonialists we have been taught to become. For modernity indeed encompasses the storied itineraries of people like Li Tiefu and Matthew Wong—forced or desired, underground or privileged, physical or metaphorical. Let us also reconsider a legendary modernist like Agnes Martin, born at the intersection of two rail lines in Macklin, Saskatchewan. We Canadians could worry less about her disgruntled youthful departure from Vancouver, and wonder more about her unheralded returns to Canada during the most transitory periods of her life.[14] Her paintings are celebrated as a mystical obsession with the rectilinear grid (fig. 14), but in the history of Canadian art as I would like to imagine it, they would also be an interrogation of the landscape of whiteness: its ceaseless territorialization, its prison of boundaries, its silencing violence. The problem of colour is how we

Fig. 15
Matthew Wong, *The Golden Age*, 2018
Oil on canvas, 80 × 65 inches (203.2 × 165.1 cm)
Private collection

Fig. 16
Li Tiefu, *Autumn Scenery*, 1934
Watercolour on paper, 14⅞ × 22⅞ inches (37.7 × 58.3 cm)

Fig. 17
Li Tiefu, *Xiyan Temple*, 1943
Watercolour on xuan paper, 15⅞ × 22¼ inches (40.3 × 66.7 cm)

imagine colour itself: where we see it and where we refuse to. What we make it represent and what we don't.

Upon Matthew Wong's final return to Canada, before making his *Blue* series, he painted many works that pulsated with the colour yellow. In these 2018 landscapes, where he was working from Edmonton at nightfall, yellow appears as an ethereal glow, a tropical heat, a depraved warmth, as gritty specks of insistent light, and as a blinding demand. Yellow marks the geometric divisions of Wong's forested scenes; yellow cuts swaths into the rectilinear conventions of land and sky or opens bands of distance in seascapes that rise into hot sunsets. In the all-yellow painting *The Golden Age* (2018; fig. 15), so bright and raw on white that we can barely perceive anything, it is hard to imagine there was any night, any darkness, any blue. And yet, its archetypal phallic, vulvic, and fountain forms hint at the "golden shower" of a certain debauched "pee tape" we all imagined seeing together (but never did) in 2016. So many of Wong's paintings seduce with an unbearable beauty. But there is a hardness too, a quality we can see only when we walk with the artist through the ugly annals of solitude and the deceptive world of pretty pictures. Look up "yellow" in an English-language thesaurus and see its many hateful meanings. To consider Matthew Wong's place in a reimagined history of Canadian art, to see the *Blue* at the abrupt end of his life, let us look at the yellow that was his return.

THE LONG WAY HOME

For both Matthew Wong and Li Tiefu, the city that was formative to their artistic development was not the city of their birth nor the one where they died. It was Hong Kong.

When Li Tiefu lived in Hong Kong in the 1930s and '40s, it was a city consumed with colonization, resistance, war, occupation, and revolution. In his oil-on-canvas works from that period, Li Tiefu often painted bits of vegetables and parts of fish before they were cooked. On canvas they look like rich morsels on the brink of being transformed into meagre sustenance; the metamorphic effects of everyday, bodily struggle are suggested in the artist's pitiable attention to what he has to cook and eat. He also painted chromatic watercolours, situated in mountainous and maritime landscapes teeming with rain and mist. In these paintings he allows the literal water of his medium to seep warily into the outlines of land or the iconography of local plants, fishermen, or solitary figures. Sometimes, the landscape structure bends and breaks into pure liquid experimentation. Li Tiefu lets wash and pigment blend together: sky into water, water into soil, soil into rock. Colour meets

in wet black-brown edges that snake across rain-drenched vistas like an untamed horizon. "Was the ground ever really there? What can water become?" ask Li Tiefu's tenuous paintings (figs. 16, 17).

Formless and colourless, "mud," or the collision between the monochrome ink tradition and the chromatic oil tradition, emerges in Matthew Wong's early paintings as it does in Li Tiefu's late ones. While teaching himself to paint in his Zhongshan studio—first in ink, and then in oil and watercolour—Wong moved haltingly through the compositional conventions of Chinese and Western landscape painting, iteratively finding horizon lines, figure-ground, and human figures, through ink and water, or pigment and knife. One of these earlier oil paintings was left untitled when he completed it in 2014, but he reworked it a year later and retitled it *The Long Way Home* (fig. 1, p. 12). His parents have since gifted the work to the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, a city that, by one definition, could be considered Wong's home (the struggle to return there is hinted at in the history of the painting). The final composition of *The Long Way Home* (figs. 18, 19) is built of a basic orange-yellow sky over an aqua-blue ground, the two divisions crisscrossed by a thickening buildup of pigment. Two figures are scraped out of black mire. One looks like a muscular iron worker from the age of revolution. He gazes over his broad shoulder at a desperate seeker running toward him, grasping their way out of a fiery glow.

Both Li Tiefu and Matthew Wong travelled a long way in life before immersing themselves in the world of painting. Upon arrival, each found his own ambiguous expressions in landscapes. In Matthew Wong's oils and Li Tiefu's watercolours, landscape becomes a genre that depicts no place, becoming instead the scene in which each artist composed his resistance to belonging. Both renew the counter-traditions of Western and Chinese landscape painting with a diasporic psyche: one that travels without landing, that names without wanting to be named, that is as fleeting as it is sure. Pounding the canvas with marks or watching pigment trail across paper, both artists react against the land that cannot hold us, the colours on which we float and fly.

21st-century Hong Kong, the hypermodern city of transnational finance and precarious skyscrapers that Matthew Wong grew up in, barely appears in his Canadian-period paintings. But one does not erase such a powerful urbanscape from memory. It emerges and recedes in his 2018 painting *The Road* (fig. 20). This is a lush but uneasy landscape, where a lemon-yellow sun is obscured behind branches that claw at the sky. A parade of teal mountains marches across the upper corner. Squeezing itself into half the canvas, a glorious autumnal tapestry retreats, the fading sunshine tries to

Fig. 18
Matthew Wong, *The Long Way Home* (detail), 2014–2015
Oil on canvas, 39½ × 31⅝ inches (100.4 × 80.5 cm)
Art Gallery of Ontario, gift of Monita and Raymond Wong, in memory of their son, Matthew Wong, 2020
2020/148

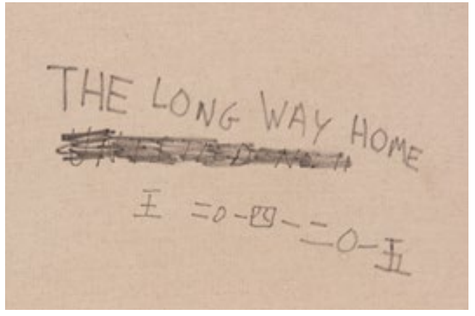

Fig. 19
Matthew Wong, *The Long Way Home* (verso detail), 2014–2015
Oil on canvas, 39½ × 31⅝ inches (100.4 × 80.5 cm)
Art Gallery of Ontario, gift of Monita and Raymond Wong, in memory of their son, Matthew Wong, 2020
2020/148

Fig. 20
Matthew Wong, *The Road*, 2018
Oil on canvas, 70 × 60 inches (177.8 × 152.4 cm)
Private collection

hold onto its own light. A fence of blue-green cypresses grounds an inexorable movement across the canvas from the right. In this crowded gap, two dotted birch trees rise. Their branches intertwine, and if we blink, in their white arms we see the glinting cross-braces of the Bank of China. It is an unmistakable and yet invisible stroke. "A thing is a thing in which it isn't," the painter Nikil Inaya believes Matthew Wong would have said.

Hong Kong's Bank of China Tower was designed by I. M. Pei, the master modernist architect born in nearby Guangzhou, whose "return" to China was symbolized by his work on this spectacular building. A feat of engineering erected on a triangular patch of land where the British kept a prison and the Japanese army tortured prisoners, Pei's design was said to have been inspired by a child's game of pick-up-sticks; and then it was said to have been inspired by Hong Kong's famous bamboo scaffolds. As with so many Pei buildings, the form, rising like a sword in the skyline, stirred up vehement local opposition. Then decades passed and it became an icon of the city, as identifiable as any other. Once again, the triumph of Modernism lies in its capacity for reinvention. Writing in the *New York Times* just as the building was completed in 1989, Pei wrote of his long-held dream to return to the country of his birth. Pei died in New York in 2019 at the age of 102, the year after Wong painted *The Road*.

When he left Hong Kong for further explorations in early 2016, Matthew Wong lived and painted for a few months in Los Angeles. Santa Monica appears in the titles of his paintings at this time and thereafter; it is one of the rare places to be named in his titles, as if he felt a fondness toward the city that he did not feel for any other place. America, after all, provided the culture in which he was immersed for much of his schooling, and California is the imagined home of any quintessential global consumer. From this point onward, a compositional leitmotif appears in Wong's work, a leitmotif that returns as pictures-in-pictures throughout his *Blue* series (*Unknown Pleasures,* 2019, p. 57; *End of the Day,* 2019, p. 101; *12:30 AM,* 2018, p. 77; *Blue Smoke,* 2018, p. 93). Developed for the exhibition *The Horizontal* at Cheim & Read, these are beachy sunset compositions that utilize wide bands of colour dragged across the canvas. Sometimes bare canvas left between each stripe suggests a horizon line, but sometimes there is just the compression of two intense colours that demands the naming of a horizon. Even in this saturated paradise, there is a gap.

Matthew Wong was not an accomplished colourist, but he was a confident stager of "colour situations," as he described them to the painter Soumya Netrabile. He worked on paper towels for a palette,

squeezing pigment onto a surface that did not allow for much mixing, though it did perhaps encourage a great deal of brush control. In some of his works, straight colour acts as a situational structure, and the old history of Post-Impressionist French painting is revived in our memories. In other works, colour compresses, depresses, overwhelms the worlds he has imagined. Across Matthew Wong's oeuvre, colour labours with and between spaces, just as he lived and worked between spaces of belonging and un-belonging. This history of places is also a history of colours.

In *Blue* then, I see yellow. Yellow is the shooting star that escapes the glacial sky of the cerulean *Untitled* (p. 107). It is the sun-drenched clover fields of the Grecian aquamarine *Blue Odyssey* (p. 95). It is the creepy bone-like fallen birch trees that are themselves like flattened bank towers, placed among a pair of sharp scissors, abandoned eyeglasses, a stiff drink, and an old letter in the lapis lavender of *5:00 PM* (p. 51). It lights the last steps of the long way home in the engulfing midnight of *Untitled* (p. 85). Yellow takes us home, breaks up the darkness, then limns its own demands. And in these disconsolate snowscapes of the Canadian prairies, yellow is an invitation, out of the blue. Because at the threshold of home, another journey always begins. Because sometimes, home is the untenable birthright for which we are responsible. Sometimes, home is the only place that will have us. And sometimes, home is just the place we no longer belong.

Notes

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1. 1901 Census of Canada, Manitoba, Winnipeg, District D, Subdivision. On Winnipeg's Chinese immigrants from Heshan village and laundries of the period, see David Chuenyan Lai, *Chinatowns: Towns within Cities in Canada*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1988), 94–95.

2. "47. The races of men will be designated by the use of 'w' for white, 'r' for red, 'b' for black and 'y' for yellow. The whites are, of course, the Caucasian race, the reds are the American Indian, the blacks are African or negro, and the yellows are the Mongolian (Japanese and Chinese). But only pure whites will be classed as whites; the children begotten of marriages between whites and any one of the other races will be classed as red, black or yellow, as the case may be, irrespective of the degree of colour." From *Fourth Census of Canada 1901, Instructions to Chief Officers, Commissioners, and Enumerators*. Census Office, Canada (Ottawa: Government Printing Bureau, 1901).

3. "...it is proper to use Canadian in column 15 as descriptive of every person whose home is in the country and who has acquired rights of citizenship in it." *Fourth Census of Canada 1901, Instructions to chief officers, commissioners, and enumerators*. Census Office, Canada (Ottawa: Government Printing Bureau, 1901).

4. *Report of the Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration: Session 1902*. Printed by Order of Parliament. (Ottawa: S.E. Dawson, Printer to the King's Most Excellent Majesty, 1902). Sessional Paper No. 54, 278.

5. *Report*, 279.

6. Ke Chi, ed., *Li Tiefu* (Guangzhou: Lingnan Fine Arts Press, 1985).

7. Winnifred Eaton. "Herself and the author of *Me. Marion: The Story of an Artist's Model [Part 4].*" Illustrated by Henry Hutt. *Hearst's International*, July 1916, vol. 30, no. 1, 9–11, 57–59. *The Winnifred Eaton Archive*, edited by Mary Chapman and Jean Lee Cole, v. 1.0, August 16, 2020, https://winnifredeatonarchive.org/Marion5.html. With headnote by Karen Skinazi.

8. A 1909 commemorative photograph of the New York *Tongmenghui* includes Sun Yat-Sen and Li Tiefu listed among the fifteen leaders and participants. Li Tiefu, *Li Tiefu: Collections of the Art Museum of Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts,* 2 vols. (Guangzhou: Lingnan Fine Arts Press), 2018.

9. Chen Xiaoping, "*Ruhe chongjian Li Tiefu shenping?* [How to reconstruct Li Tiefu's biography?]," *Nanfang Dushibao*, 19 SEP 2017.

10. Li Tiefu, *Li Tiefu: Collections of the Art Museum of Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts,* 2 vols. (Guangzhou: Lingnan Fine Arts Press, 2018).

11. Sean O'Neill, "A Crisis of Whiteness in Canada's Art Museums," *Canadian Art*, June 23, 2020, https://canadianart.ca/features/a-crisis-of-whiteness/.

12. Jennifer Welsh, "Our Overlooked Diaspora," *Literary Review of Canada*, March 11, 2011. In "Canadians Abroad," a project paper for the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada from January 2009, Kenny Zhang notes that a Canadian living abroad for over 5 years is no longer counted in the official population.

13. Ken Lum, "Canadian Cultural Policy: A Metaphysical Problem," in *On Cultural Influence: Collected Papers from apexart International Conferences 1999–2006* (New York: Apexart, 2006).

14. Christopher Régimbal, *Agnes Martin: Life and Work*, Art Canada Institute, Digital Books Project, 2019. https://www.aci-iac.ca/art-books/agnes-martin.