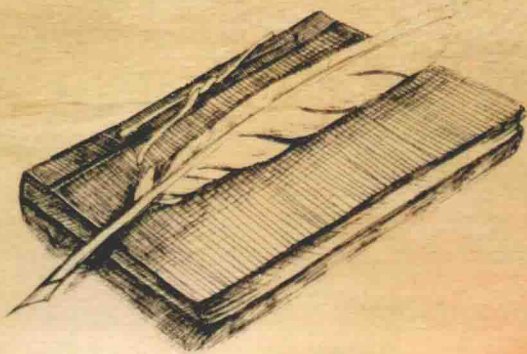


欧文·韦斯特 与美国西部神话

王华荣 著



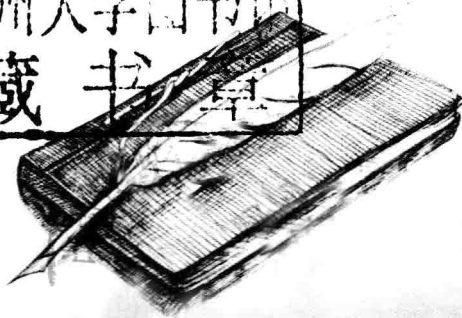
*Owen Wister
and the American Western Mythology*

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FOREWORD

In the summer of 1885, a well educated young man in his mid – twenties from an established eastern family in Philadelphia traveled to the far west of the United States, out to the Wyoming territory. Educated at Harvard University, Owen Wister first had gone to Paris to study composition, but a career in music did not follow and his efforts in business, spurred by the insistence of his physician father, had not gone well either. His health suffered and on the advice of his doctor, he went out west. What transpired was a literary love affair with a region and its people, especially the cattlemen and cowboys who toiled under the big open skies of Wyoming. Eventually, that location became the source of Wister’s famous novel, *The Virginian*. Published in 1902, Wister’s characters and story became the archetype for western fiction written throughout much of the twentieth century with the laconic cowboy hero, his eastern – bred sweetheart, and a despicable villain who forces a final showdown.

More than a century after *The Virginian* appeared in print, a man from the far east of southwest China, came to Arkansas for a

year to read, research, and contemplate the American West. He began writing this book that you may now read and appreciate. Huarong Wang, then Dean of the English Department at Honghe University in Yunnan Province, contacted me via the nearly instantaneous correspondence provided by email. He knew my work on the history of the American West as well as that of my wife, Professor Carol O'Connor. His own graduate work on the master's level in China had focused on the frontier novels of James Fenimore Cooper, but now his interests had expanded to other American writers and their representation of the westward expansion of the United States. Huarong Wang had been awarded a scholarship from the Yunnan Provincial Department of Education to come to the United States and I was delighted by his desire to spend twelve months in 2010 at my university as a visiting scholar.

I had to warn him nonetheless that Arkansas State University was not located in the heart of the American West. In fact, Jonesboro, Arkansas where he would be studying and writing only could be considered part of the trans - Mississippi West because it was some fifty miles beyond the great river in an area that culturally identified more with the American South. Indeed, the doctoral program in Heritage Studies that I directed looked broadly at American society and culture with international topics as an important part of our students' research. Perhaps the expansive views on culture and history embedded in Heritage Stud-

ies allowed Huarong Wang to take on the larger concepts suggested in prominent American novels. Just as Owen Wister found a personal epiphany in 1885 during his time on a ranch in Wyoming, Huarong Wang reached a broader understanding of the myth – making that stories, such as *The Virginian*, have created about the American West. He refined his knowledge and interpretation in lively conversations with our faculty and students. He also read much of the scholarship on the West produced over the past twenty – five years, what has been labeled the “New Western History.” These writings questioned the point of view taken by Wister and by his contemporaries, especially the historian Frederick Jackson Turner, the artist Frederic Remington, and the multi – talented nationalist leader, Theodore Roosevelt.

Huarong Wang’s examination of Owen Wister and his seminal novel will enlighten readers in China about how simple heroic tales set in exotic frontier locations in the United States became an aspect of nationalistic idealism. The “cowboy hero” had existed in American popular fiction before Wister’s *Virginian*, but the cultural influence of this figure took on greater significance because of his representation in the novel – and later in Hollywood films and television series. As Huarong Wang explains in this fascinating study, the myth of the American West took shape before Wister wrote his fictional tale, but once his hero rode into the popular imagination, the power of this mythology increased and galloped ahead throughout the twentieth century. This well

crafted, thoughtful book contributes to our ongoing interest in the significance of stories that can reveal larger cultural issues and influence national identity.

Dr. Clyde A. Milner II
Director, Heritage Studies Ph. D. Program
Professor of History
Arkansas State University

PREFACE

Huarong Wang's treatment of Owen Wister's novel *The Virginian* provides a special focus on what it means to take a journey to the West. Professor Wang's analysis of Wister's biography explores the transformation that Wister experienced as he traveled away from his upper class roots in the East to explore the land, and ultimately his own self, in America's West. Wister left behind a restrictive family and social life as well as a Harvard education on his sojourn west. In the process, Wister discovered a love for the land and its people. The richness of Wister's experience in the West provided a lifelong inspiration for him to forge creative literary works that continue to contribute to the richly symbolized, and often highly romanticized, images of western history. As Professor Wang so thoroughly and sensitively shows, the appeal of these narratives about the West have had a tremendous influence not solely on Americans' ideas about our own history and culture but also on ideas about American identity held by people across the globe. It is to Professor Wang's great credit as a scholar and writer that he vibrantly conveys a multi-

faceted understanding of Wister's influence in forging such a strong sense of America's regional and national identity.

Merging the motif of taking a journey with a striving for knowledge is a time-honored trope in literary creativity. Professor Wang understands the symbolic force of this process both in the life of Wister as well as in novels like *The Virginian*. It is a process that Huarong Wang, himself, experienced when he traveled from Mengzhi to Jonesboro, where he spent a year in Arkansas. Like Wister, and Wister's literary characters, Professor Wang explored the new environment with curiosity, courage, and a keen mind. But — as his book shows — — this Chinese professor and dean moved beyond Wister's understanding of the West to gain deeper insights. I'm speaking here, not solely of the West as a region of America but of America, itself, as seen by a talented Asian scholar. Professor Wang's exploration included physical journeys as he visited historic sites, natural parks, cultural events, academic conferences, and American classrooms. He also sensitively explored his own ideas about America, surprising his new friends and colleagues with the breadth and depth of his knowledge of our own nation's history and gently encouraging them to recognize and explore what we too often take for granted. This process of personal exploration showed Professor Wang's openness to new ideas and his willingness to critique his own preconceived notions about the country that hosted his visit for a year.

I, personally, found that Professor Wang's ability to think creatively and critically to be especially evident in our numerous discussions about the meaning of tradition, symbolism, myth, history, and scores of other topics. In his book, his wide – ranging curiosity is clearly evident. It is also coupled with his sharp sense of critical thinking. As a folklorist, I found these admirable qualities evident in his discussion of myth. I am one of the folklorists who criticize a loose definition of terms like “myth” and “legend”. Most folklorists regard both terms as names for genres, and we often view myth as sacred stories set in the far – distant past that differ from legends in terms of their temporal setting, content, and seriousness of narrative style. On the other hand, folklorists do recognize that stories and images contribute to a vast system of symbols and symbolic associations. In this respect, I heartily agree with Huarong Wang's characterization of western writers' work as “mythic”. Their narratives, characters, themes, and other elements of fiction all contribute to a vast and resonant system of associations that encapsulate ways of thinking about people, places, and things. Professor Wang clearly and insightfully shows how novels like *The Virginian* can be read for gaining a deeper understanding of these symbolic values – values that include spiritual and religious associations that truly are mythic.

Writing a book, like visiting a new land, can be understood through the metaphor of taking a journey. In gaining a rich and

meaningful understanding of the wider world and one's individual self, Huarong Wang moves beyond Wister's limitations to give his readers an understanding of the West that is deeper than the highly romanticized imagery that permeates Wister's ideas about the American West, and ultimately, America, itself. Unlike Wister, Professor Wang was able to challenge and reject the negative aspects of a mythology that too often overemphasizes individualism, masculinity, nationalism, and the grand master narrative of progress. While all these elements are important components of a Western identity, Professor Wang – unlike Wister – critiques a too facile acceptance of these values by showing they are purchased at a price. The cost of these values is expensive. It includes a lack of awareness of the importance of healthy community life, a denigration of contributions by women and girls, and too often a fervent jingoism that can manifest itself in ideologies of racism, colonialism, and worse. Furthermore, the mythology that Professor Wang understands and comes to challenge provides him with a chance to challenge readers to understand how environmental degradation and economic exploitation far too often accompany the Americans' dreams of economic progress.

One element of taking a journey is that the deeper insights into one's own travels become deeper and more meaningful when the voyager tells his or her own tales. The sharing of experiences opens up others to one's own highly personal vision of the world. Sensitive readers of Huarong Wang's book will come away with a

stronger sense of what they can learn about other people, and themselves, as they explore what it means to take a trip into the West.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

No book is the product of any one person. This book is surely no exception. In doing the researching the American Western mythology by using Owen Wister as a window, the outcome of which is the book, I profited from the assistance of a number of people. My sincere gratitude first extends to Dr. Clyde A. Milner, a scholar on the American West and a history professor and the director of Heritage Studies Ph. D Program in Arkansas State University. Dr. Milner hosted my visit to ASU in the year of 2010 and enlightened me on various aspects on the American West and mythology. His guidance and encouragement is important for me to accomplish this research. I would also like to thank Dr. Gregory Hansen, a folklorist and professor of the English department of ASU, who led me into the fascinating world of American folk music and widened my scope on American popular culture. He read the entire manuscript at the crucial stage and gave me valuable suggestions for revising it. My further thanks go to Dr. Norman Stafford and Dr. William Clements, two professors in ASU with whom I had some profitable discussions which have opened new areas of investigation and helped

me to clarify some of my own notions. I indebted, too, to Dean B. Ellis Library, the library of Arkansas State University, which facilitated my research with its excellent collection of books, journals and media resources. Finally, I thank my wife and my son, who understand my research efforts and support steadfastly my writing of the book.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1	INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 2	THE DISCUSSION OF “MYTH” AND “THE WEST”	5
CHAPTER 3	AMERICA’S TRADITION OF MYTH – MAKING OF THE WEST BY INTELLECTUALS	20
CHAPTER 4	OWEN WISTER’S MYTH – MAKING BACKGROUND	57
CHAPTER 5	OWEN WISTER’S WESTERN MYTHOLOGY	99
CHAPTER 6	THE STRONG APPEAL OF WISTER’S MYTHOLOGY IN AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE	155
CHAPTER 7	LOOKING INTO WISTER’S MYTHOLOGY FROM THE NEW WESTERN HISTORY	163
CHAPTER 8	CONCLUSION	196

CHAPTER 1**INTRODUCTION**

Geographically and culturally, the American West has always had a magnetic appeal. It is part of the American mythology; the images, symbols, ideas and beliefs on the American West represent America, itself. The West distinguishes itself sharply from the rest of the United States. The uniqueness of the West makes the United States of America even more unique. To some extent, America differentiates itself from Europe because of the West and the westering experience. The history of the West has become an important part of America's history and the culture it represents has become an inseparable part of American cultural heritage. The West easily arouses people's curiosity. It also easily triggers their imagination.

My, own, interest in the American West began eight years ago when I was working for MA in the English Department of Yunnan University, China. I became so intensely interested in

Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis that I decided to write my thesis on the American frontier. I finally chose the topic "Independence and Cooperation, the Dual Characteristics of the American Pioneers and their Influence on Post - frontier - age Americans." To me, the topic was a big challenge despite my irresistible interest in it. The leading problem, however, at that time was the lack of research material. Compared with other research areas of American Studies, the frontier was such an unpopular one in China that the English scholarship on it was scarce. However, I strove to get what I can from every possible channel. Baodi Zhou, the then supervisor on my thesis, brought some materials to me when she came back to China from a scholarly visit to the United States. Overcoming the difficulties involved in my research, I managed to finish my thesis. My interest in the American frontier and the West remained unabated with the passage of time. Then in the year 2010, I received the chance to study and research on the American West in Arkansas State University with Dr. Clyde A. Milner, the director of Heritage Studies Ph. D Program of ASU. Dr. Milner, an expert on the American West, who had acted for eighteen years as the editor of *Western Historical Quarterly* and had written or edited several books most notably *The Oxford History of the American West*, led me into a world of wonder. Under his guidance, I read widely and intensely on the American West and frontier. It was during this process that I decided to do a more specific research on