

# Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter

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Editor, Mildred R. Bennett

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## WILLA CATHER AND CHINA By L. C. Chang

### Explanatory Remarks

Forty years ago when I was to write a dissertation for my B.A. degree, I planned to write it on an American woman author.

I had read novels by woman authors, among which were *Pride and Prejudice*, *Jane Eyre*, *Gone with the Wind*, etc. I thought they were pleasant to read and moving, and they had a touch of femininity. These novels were about women, their virtue, their sorrow and joy, their jealousy and sentimentality. I could not decide which author to write on.

Then I happened to get a copy of *O Pioneers!* from the school library. After I had finished it, I was deeply impressed by the touching story in simple language. The heroine stood out, very impressive and familiar, with flesh and bone. Then there was a grand picture of the endless prairie, the inexhaustible steppe. It was bleak yet beautiful, desolate yet attractive, a wilderness that makes one awesome.

Then I read *My Ántonia*, *The Song of the Lark*, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. Each novel had a different theme. Yet they showed the characteristics of the author.

Her novels are not to amuse people, like *Rebecca* or *Wuthering Heights*, nor to preach, like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. She wrote about the hard life of the simple, frugal pioneers. Her heroines were without "the scent of cosmetics;" they were entirely different from Scarlet O'Hara who fascinated the men around her, or Cleopatra, for whose sake Antony threw away the world.

In my college days in the 1940's I liked to read such novels as *Gone with the Wind*, *Rebecca* and *Back Street*, the best sellers at that time. And then my knowledge of the American people was very limited. The intellectuals were either like my American professors in my college days, scholarly, intelligent, and respectable, or like the movie stars of the forties: Ginger Rogers or Katharine Hepburn; and the children were like Shirley Temple. They were very different from us Chinese, because they were foreigners.



L. C. Chang

However, in Willa Cather's novels, I found the characters were more real, nearer and dearer to us than Ginger Rogers or even Shirley Temple. I felt they were like our own folk. I read many of her novels. Among them I loved *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia* most.

Thirty more years passed. Then in the spring of 1980, when Mrs. Lohr of Columbus came to visit China, I asked her where she came from and she said that I might not know the state of Nebraska. I said, "Yes, indeed, I wrote a disserta-

tion on Willa Cather, the pride of the Nebraskans." She was surprised and afterwards sent me a library of Willa Cather's novels.

Re-reading her novels opens a new world for me that I was not quite able to see forty years ago. I find that many of the characters in her novels are so amazingly like their Chinese brothers and sisters. We have Chinese Alexandras and Ántonias, we have Chinese Henry Colberts and even Ivars. They are not foreign to us. We can meet them in our daily life.

### I. *The Land*

The most outstanding feature in her novel is the love of land. There are beautiful passages telling us of her love of land in *My Ántonia* and *O Pioneers!*

Nebraska may not be a very beautiful state. There are, I dare say, other states, that are more beautiful than Nebraska. Yet, Willa Cather gives us incredibly beautiful descriptions of the land. She has succeeded in bringing the many moods of the four seasons radiantly alive.

"The earth was warm under me . . . I did not want to be anything more. I was entirely happy. Perhaps we feel like that when we die and become a part of something entire, whether it is sun and air, or goodness; to be dissolved into something complete and great. When it comes to one, it comes as naturally as sleep."

"If one . . . looked off at the rough land, the smiling sky, the curly grass white in the hot sunlight; if one listened to the rapturous song of the lark

... the drumming of quail, the burr of the locust against that vast silence, one understood what Ivar meant."<sup>2</sup>

"We come and go, but the land is always here. And the people who love it and understand it are the people who own it — for a little while."<sup>3</sup>

Few writers describe the land with such trancelike beauty.

We Chinese love and worship the land. It keeps us alive with food and water. On this land generation after generation we grow up, give birth to sons and daughters. We work, die and are buried here and become ashes coming back to and mingling with it, our beloved motherland.

The love of land means the love of one's native place. If one is going afar, one takes a handful of earth from his own hometown and brings it along with him. When he falls sick, he takes a handful of the earth from his hometown and boils it and then drinks the water. It'll give him strength to get well. What makes one more calm and gives peace of mind than to be accompanied on his journey by a part of mother earth who is greater than mother, and who is omnipotent?

In olden times, the overseas Chinese, when they grew old, yearned to go back to the motherland and live among their own people. Even those who had gone away far from home, they would be homesick and longed to go back to their hometown and die and be buried there, "like the fallen leaves returning to the roots" — so goes an old Chinese saying. As Antonia says, "I like to be where I know every stick and tree, and where all the ground is friendly. I want to live and die here." Like the French refugee woman in *One of Ours* wanted to go home to die! Only back home, do we feel at home.

## II. The Family

We are told that the westerners put little emphasis on family. The married couples do not live togeth-

er with their parents or in-laws. When the children grow up, and have their own jobs, they leave their parents and live independently. The relationship between them is like that of relatives and friends.

But such is not the case of Willa Cather's characters. In her novels one can find descriptions of close ties between family members. In *My Antonia*, when Jim first came to his grandparents, he could see his grandmother was crying. And then she exclaimed how Jim looked like his father. What a universal emotion these simple words convey! Then the way his grandmother later brought him up is exactly the way a Chinese grandmother would bring up her orphaned grandson.

Antonia herself has a deep love for her father and mother and the other members of the family. She loved her father dearly and admired him deeply. She had a warm feeling toward her mother and bore the heavy burden of their family.

In *O Pioneers!* we find Alexandra values the precious memories of her grandfather and father. Before she was to come to Nebraska, Alexandra told Emil of their grandfather with reverence. She cherished the fond memories of his father "that he was very intelligent, he had better opportunities not to make money, but to make something of himself."

When the Bergson children discussed selling land and moving away, her mother, Mrs. Bergson, told her children that she was going to stay and be buried by her husband even if the rest of them moved away.

To the Chinese, the word "family" has always had a very important meaning. The family is the basic unit of a nation. "One can not rule the country before one has tempered oneself into good steel and put one's family into good order," said an ancient Chinese scholar.

In the Chinese viewpoint, family has a broader meaning than

the love between mere couples. It includes: (1) the deep love for the children, (2) the blood and flesh relationship between the sisters and brothers, (3) the filial piety, respect and devotion to parents.

The basic unit of a family, a small family, consists of father, mother and children. If a married couple have no children, everyone will feel sorry for them, and the husband and wife are considered unhappy. "Children are the hope and future of mankind," said a well-known Chinese politician.

A Chinese writer once said, "Oh, give me my child sitting on the lap, it's warmer and more precious than a pile of my own works!"

There are widowers or divorcees who never marry again for fear of hurting the feelings of their young children. They would rather give up their own happiness than that of the children. They consider the happiness of the children so important that they would sacrifice theirs for the sake of the children.

A married man is still a member of the "bigger family." Not only should a decent man love his parents, but he should also love his brothers and sisters. There is a "flesh and bone" relationship between them. One who ill-treats his brothers is like hurting his own limbs. When the mother dies, the eldest daughter takes up the duty of the mother, like Alexandra to Emil. If the father, the breadwinner of the family, dies, the eldest brother, though married, is obliged to bring up the younger ones and support the mother as westerners do their children only.

The grown-up children, even married and having their own children, have the responsibility of supporting their parents when they grow old and need to be supported. Failing to do so, they will be considered ungrateful and dishonorable and will be condemned by public opinion.

The Chinese tradition honors filial piety as man's most important

virtue. People are taught to respect age since childhood. The old people have contributed much to society. They are more experienced and more mature and wiser. With respect, people call the aged the elderly. If you respect age, you should first of all respect the elders of your family, your parents and grandparents, because they have given much to you. Filial piety teaches people to love their parents more than they do their children.

Some Chinese writers once said, "Loving one's own children selflessly is merely an animal instinct which most birds and animals have. But loving and respecting one's parents and paying them filial piety requires sensible reason. It is a sign of civilization."

In modern China, family still plays an important role in everybody's life. The western custom of putting emphasis on individuality has had little influence on Chinese people, who still insist on the importance of the family. It is in the family where the future generation is brought up, the youngsters are looked after and educated, and the elders are respected and cared for. "There is no place like home," indeed.

### III. Frugality

The people in Willa Cather's novels are never extravagant. Far from it, they are very frugal. They live a simple life, and detest luxury and fashionable things. Even after they have grown more prosperous, they still keep thrifty and never spend money lavishly. Thus they are free from material pollution.

In *One of Ours*, the Wheeler family would order a new automobile without hesitation. But it was considered extravagant to go to a hotel for dinner.

In *My Antonia*, Antonia made herself cloth working slippers out of Mr. Harling's old coats. And in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, the mistress had the Negroes weave carpets out of worn woolen fabrics.

The country people never had to spend money for doctors, but cured all diseases with roots and herbs.

All these habits are quite familiar to us Chinese.

Perhaps, the most outstanding quality of the Chinese is frugality. Since childhood, a Chinese is taught to be frugal. It is a sin to be wasteful. "Don't use things more than needed." is what the parents would tell the child. He is, moreover, taught to have the habit of never throwing away food. This is considered a serious sin. Mother Earth provides us with crops and the farmers toil for it. As a famous Chinese old saying goes, "Every single grain is the result of toil," so we have no right to throw it away.

Even if a Chinese gets wealthy, he must be frugal. Frugality itself is a virtue. One is frugal not because one is poor, but because one is modest and of good behavior.

There are many old tales and stories about great men on frugality kept down in Chinese history, among which one is about Yue Fei, a Sung Dynasty (A.D. 960-1279) general. At that time, the government was inefficient and corruption prevailed. The officials took bribes and the officers were afraid of warfare. The state was invaded by the savage and powerful Mongolian tribes from the north. General Yue led an army and drove the enemies out. It is recorded in the history that he once said, "The country will be unconquerable if the officials love not wealth and the officers fear not death."

The Chinese people, as a whole, are thrifty and live plainly. One brilliant example is Chou En-lai, the late premier of the People's Republic of China. (He held that post since the new Republic was founded in 1949, until his death in 1976.) He was considered the very embodiment of all the Chinese virtues.

After the founding of the new China, some people suggested erecting a big building for the State

Council and even had a model made. The Premier firmly turned down the suggestion, and said that he would never allow building a mansion for the State Council during his term of service as premier. The house he lived in was quite old, but he refused to have it rebuilt. He wore simple clothes and ate simple meals, the meals the ordinary people ate. To save state expenditure, he spent his own money on things which would otherwise be provided for by the state such as medicine and newspapers for himself and soap for his attendants.

If one leads a simple life and is thrifty, one can be liberated from the bondage of money and build up one's character.

### IV. Tradition

Tradition includes beliefs, customs and the way of living, handed down from generation to generation. It is like a language that clings to a people and is hard to get rid of. To love tradition is perhaps a universal predilection.

We Chinese cling to our traditional beliefs and customs more than any other people in the world. China is a country of rich tradition. She has a splendid past and an early civilization, of which we are very proud. We love our tradition so much that no outside influence can prevail over it. We treasure our traditional painting, artistry, folk music, cooking and even acupuncture, to name a few of the hereditary arts and techniques. We value and appreciate things Chinese. Nine out of ten overseas Chinese like Chinese food. Some even wear Chinese clothes. Many insisted that their children should learn the Chinese language and know the Chinese way of living. They should be taught what their forefathers back home did and how they lived. They should always remember their "roots." To forget their forefathers is intolerable.

So it is no surprise that we are interested in Willa Cather's deep

love for American tradition. Unlike most American writers, she lays emphasis on history and tradition in her novels. History awed and stirred her. She does not write about problems of the development of big industry in the United States, nor the evils of capitalism. She never pays attention to the growth of the immense wealth accumulated by the rich. She tells us the story of the early American inhabitants, the Indians, their incredible achievements centuries ago. She lets us see it in physical form. In *The Song of the Lark*, she values the carbon from the rock roof of the cooking stove of the ancient people. She lets us feel the Indian woman with a baby hanging to her back as she climbed up the mountain thousands of years ago. In *O Pioneers!* she saw the past of Nebraska, the people living there long before the early European settlers and the great creative force of the prairie.

She loves the past. To love the past is to love tradition. She abhors modern things. To her, new things are ugly. Beauty lies in the association with the old. "An old house built in miserable taste is more beautiful than a new house built and furnished in correct taste," the Cather biographer Mrs. Bennett tells us.

#### V. Her Art of Writing

Somehow, there seem to be two kinds of novels. One is to amuse the readers and give them relaxation, or just satisfy their curiosity. Such books, the so-called best sellers or popular novels, die out as quickly as they get booming. They are not very much of art, just like the pictures in the advertisement, alluring and pleasing, but of little artistic value.

To the other category belong novels of enduring art. They stand the test of time and are of universal value. The greater their quality, the longer they last. Writing this kind of novels is not simply self-expression, but, as Willa Cather says,

"that the writer must be so in love with his subject that he forgets 'self' in his position." And, as she goes on, "the book is made with one's own flesh and blood of years." Her novels belong to this group.

In her book *The World of Willa Cather*, Mrs. Mildred Bennett tells us of Miss Cather's economical artistry in the choice of her words, "She would search months for the proper word . . . and her final choice could seldom be bettered." She hated "weasel words," or flowery style.

In her novels, there are many examples like these: In *My Antonia*, she writes: ". . . as if we could hear the corn growing in the night." In *O Pioneers!*, she writes: "The gate stared him in the face . . .". Here, the words "hear" and "stare" are fine examples of words that "could seldom be bettered."

Her descriptions of the 19th century Nebraska are deeply touching, leaving the readers an indelible impression of it. Nebraska may be wild and monotonous at that time, and perhaps few people would find it beautiful. But Willa Cather, who herself worshiped the land and its courageous people, makes the readers worship the land and its people, the pioneers, too.

Her description of the characters is vivid and unforgettable. They are ordinary people, who live a simple life and do not admire city life and modern comforts. They are mothers who do not like to kill anything. "It makes me kind of faint to wring an old goose's neck." (*My Antonia*, p. 222) These words appeal to Orientals especially, who preach not to kill any live creature that has a strong desire to live. "Seeing them enjoy life, how can we bear the sight of their being slaughtered?" said an ancient Chinese scholar.

Antonia and Alexandra speak an international language of the hard-working people all over the world. They transcend the boundaries of

their birth and age and times. The working people in different countries have the same feeling of love, courage and dignity. In fact, I meet with Chinese Alexandras in my everyday life. I have Mahailay among my aunts; and Henry Colbert, upright and reliable, among our men.

As to Ivar, I simply can not choose a suitable word to express my mixed feelings toward him. It is between "understand," "love," "adore" or "sympathize with." I think I know him, for I have an acquaintance just like him.

In China, Willa Cather's works have not been so widely read as Mark Twain or Theodore Dreiser. Perhaps, hers are not typical of American literature, which deals with the growth of big industry and the problems of workers and the evils of capitalism. Yet, hers are unique and have a universal appeal.

I am glad to say that the Chinese reader's interest in Miss Cather is growing. Some of her best short stories have been translated into Chinese and published recently in Peking and some other cities. A short biography of Willa Cather and a brief introduction of her works in Chinese can be found in a newly published book *Brief Biographies of World Famous Authors*, which is compiled by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, an authoritative organization in Peking. One comment reads: "After reading her novels, we have a deeper understanding of the hard life of the early settlers and admire them all the more."

On my recommendation, some of my students are trying to translate more of her works and hope to arouse more interest among Chinese readers. I believe that will help the Chinese people to know more about the great American people and to strengthen the friendship between the two peoples.

— L. C. Chang  
February 24, 1982  
Shanghai, China

## FOOT NOTES

<sup>1</sup>*My Antonia* (Houghton, Mifflin Company, Edition 1949) p. 15.

<sup>2</sup>*O Pioneers!* (Houghton, Mifflin Company, Edition 1941) p. 38.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.* p. 308.

### Willa Cather: The Northeast Perspective

June 17-23, 1984  
Merrimack College

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## WESTERN LITERATURE ASSOCIATION 1983 ANNUAL MEETING

Vi Borton and I started early Wednesday, the 5th of October for St. Paul, Minnesota. We picked up Helen Stauffer (author of the recent biography of Mari Sandoz) of Kearney State College at the I-80 interchange near Grand Island and turned east toward Iowa. We decided not to take the interstate through Iowa and Minnesota just for the fun of seeing more country, landscape and lakes. As evening came on, still full of anticipation we kept on, reaching the Radisson St. Paul Hotel (after a twelve-hour drive) in time to see John Murphy of Merrimack College, North Andover, Massachusetts, looking for other Cather buffs.

We delighted in the fact that three and a half of the seminar sessions featured Willa Cather. Susan Rosowski chaired the session on *Western Connections in Willa Cather Studies* with papers by (1) Marilyn Arnold, "Cather's 'The Way of the World': An Early Glimpse at the Lost Frontier" (Brig-

ham Young University, Provo, Utah), (2) Robert Thacker, "Willa Cather's Prairie Landscapes" (St. Lawrence University, Canton, New York), (3) Susan Rosowski, "Willa Cather's Great Plains Pastoral: *O Pioneers!*" (University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, Nebraska).

The next Cather session, *Some Overlooked "Truths"* chaired by Max Westbrook of the University of Texas, featured: (1) Mary Lynn Broe, "Comic Mythology in *Youth and the Bright Medusa* (State University of New York at Binghamton, New York), (2) Darlene Ritter, "The 'Least' of Cather's Characters" (Midland Lutheran College, Fremont, Nebraska), (3) Cynthia H. Taylor, "*The Professor's House: The Attractions and Dangers of Nostalgia*" (University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota).

The third session had to be called half-Cather. *Pastoral and Other Influences in the Writings of Cather and Rolvaag*, chaired by Darlene Ritter of Midland Lutheran College, Fremont, Nebraska, opened with (1) Cynthia Briggs of Cincinnati, Ohio, reading "The Language of Flowers in *O Pioneers!*", (2) Claire Mattern read: "Esias Tegnaer, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Willa Cather: Firthjof Comes West." (University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, Nebraska.)

Ann Ronald, University of Nevada-Reno, Nevada, chaired *New Directions in Cather Studies*. (1) "Sexual Imagery in *One of Ours* by Ron Butler (Henderson Community College, Henderson, Kentucky), (2) "Willa Cather's Early Short Stories: A Feminist Perspective" by Richard A. Milum of Ohio State University, Lima, Ohio, and (3) "The Art of Five Cather Nebraska Love Stories" by John Murphy (Merrimack College, North Andover, Massachusetts).

George Day, faithful Cather scholar from the University of Northern Iowa, arranged the meeting and filled every space with exciting material about writers who

wrote and are writing as Cather did in her time. Special attention came to the poets, some of them reading their own poetry. The Distinguished Service Award went to Dr. N. Scott Momaday, Kiowa Indian, poet and legend maker, who teaches in Tucson, Arizona. The honored guest for Saturday's luncheon was Meridel LeSueur, who having been victimized by the McCarthy witch hunt, now publishes and flourishes at the age of eighty-three. Her Indian prayer at the luncheon, while we all hummed in unison, made the goose flesh come out on our arms. She wears the luminous aura that surrounded the late John Neihardt.

Besides meeting the regular Cather scholars, we had the privilege of meeting Dr. Momaday, Meridel LeSueur, Max Westbrook, Robert Schuler (a Cather fan and poet from Wisconsin), our old friend Patrick Morrow from Auburn University in Alabama. Blanche Gelfant, who wrote the fiery article on the reaping hook in *My Antonia*, presented a vivid and clear treatise on LeSueur's Indian poetry.

Altogether we felt that Cather scholarship thrived and grew, and that new and older writers were creating more and more beautiful, timely work.

— MRB

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Attention Virgil and Dolores Albertini of Maryville, Missouri! An announcement concerning kolache: Elizabeth Boyd, daughter of Anna Pavelka, the original Antonia, brought Dr. W. K. Bennett a plate of square kolache. She said that her mother made them both round and square, but the square ones were preferable because the fruit could be distributed throughout the dough instead of being a puddle in the center of a round one. (When Virgil teaches *My Antonia*, Dolores makes kolache.)

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- To promote and assist in the development and preservation of the art, literary, and historical collection relating to the life, time, and work of Willa Cather, in association with the Nebraska State Historical Society.
  - To cooperate with the Nebraska State Historical Society in continuing to identify, restore to their original condition, and preserve places made famous by the writing of Willa Cather.
  - To provide for Willa Cather a living memorial, through the Foundation, by encouraging and assisting scholarship in the field of the humanities.
  - To perpetuate an interest throughout the world in the work of Willa Cather.
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Dodd, Mead and Company of New York have issued a new paperback of *Early Stories by Willa Cather* (1957) selected and with commentary by Mildred R. Bennett. The cover of the paperback features a photograph of red grass along a country road, taken years ago by Mrs. Bennett and Carrie Miner Sherwood.

er from National Public Radio spent several days in Red Cloud, interviewing anyone who knew about Miss Cather. They declared that one of their most exciting visits was with Leo Pavelka, the Leo Cuzak of *My Antonia*.

write. His students show particular pride in his writing accomplishments.

National Public Radio broadcast three half-hour sketches of Willa Cather. A photographer and report-

Off the record . . . Ron Butler of Henderson, Kentucky, says he has not been the same person since he attended the 1981 Cather seminar, where he received encouragement and inspiration to research and

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This message lets you know we do appreciate you and your confidence.