MARY ELIZABETH WOOD (1861–1931):
AMERICAN MISSIONARY-LIBRARIAN
TO MODERN CHINA

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Library service in America made rapid progress in the fourth quarter of the nineteenth century. The American Library Association was founded, the American Library Journal began publication and professional librarians began to formulate the system of library education that exists today. These and other ideas on library service were carried to China in the first quarter of the twentieth century. There they were grafted on to the social structure of Chinese society with its unbroken literary tradition extending back to the second millenium B.C. The bearer of these new ideas was Mary Elizabeth Wood (1861–1931), an American missionary-librarian to China.

Early Life of Mary Elizabeth Wood

Mary Elizabeth Wood was born of old New England stock. At the time of the War of Independence (1776–1883) her family lived around Concord, Massachusetts. Naturally, when the war broke out her ancestors were drawn into the conflict. They were on the colonial side. One of her forebears, Ephraim Wood, was a revolutionary war general. Successive generations lived in the same area; however, one descendent, Edward F. Wood, broke

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away in 1859 to settle on a farm near Batavia, New York. He
married Mary Jane Humphrey, also a New Englander, and they
settled down to raise a family of eight children, seven boys and
Mary Elizabeth.\(^1\) In the time honored tradition of her day, Mary
stayed home to assist her mother with the household chores.
Intermittently she attended public and private schools. After
she reached adulthood this education served her in good stead.
She was appointed the first librarian (1889) of the newly founded
Richmond Memorial Library, a public library located in Batavia,
New York, at the age of twenty eight.\(^2\)

Miss Wood enthusiastically entered into her career as librarian.
Probably free of family responsibilities and earning a regular
income for the first time, she developed the library and partici-
pated in civic affairs. By temperament she was highly motivated
and independent-minded, characteristics which enabled her to
bring to fruition numerous projects in which she was involved.

A decade slipped by in this manner and then there was a
dramatic change for Miss Wood—a voyage to China. In 1899 her
youngest brother Robert E. Wood whom she regarded with special
affection, completed his training for the Episcopal priesthood
and set out for China as a missionary with The Domestic and
Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church
in the United States. Shortly after his departure she set out to
visit him. After a long ship-board voyage she arrived in China,
a spectacle that must have captured her imagination for she
remained in China with only occasional trips to the United States
until her death in 1931. It was here that she brought her talents
to bear on the unique problem of public library service in modern
China.

**Episcopal Mission in Central China**

American Protestant missionaries began to arrive in China
in the 1830's.\(^3\) Among them were representatives of the Pro-
testant Episcopal Church, a result of a decision by the board of
directors of The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society meeting
in Philadelphia in May of 1834. They chose to establish a mission
in China, rather than other places in East Asia, because it offered
‘the largest opportunity for the missionary work of the church’. Two
months later Reverend Henry Lockwood of New York was
appointed to the post; however, almost one year was to pass
before a second clergyman was appointed to the mission, the
Reverend Francis R. Hanson of Maryland. The two men set out
for Canton in June of 1935. They were cordially received by a
handful of American residents, but treated brusquely by the
Chinese who referred to them as ‘foreign devils’.

Their position in Canton apparently was precarious as Lock-
wood and Hanson shortly moved first to Singapore and then to
Java. As a result of the Opium War of 1839 missionaries were
given a protected status in certain locales in China. Thus in
1844 when Reverend William J. Boone was elected Missionary
Bishop to China he settled in the large city of Shanghai. By
1850 the mission began to take on a semblance of permanency.
Buildings were erected, the staff was increased, social service
programs were instituted (the most popular being day boarding
schools), outlying stations were established and, of course, bap-
tismals were performed. All this was shattered in 1854 by the
awesome civil disturbance referred to as the T’ai-p’ing Rebellion.
It was not until 1858 that the rebels were subdued, but then
only by the foreign powers who imposed a treaty on China which
gave the Europeans many privileges they had not previously
enjoyed. One of these gave all missions the freedom to propa-
gate their faith anywhere in China; however it was not long
before the American Civil War (1861–1865) broke out, severely
limiting funds for missionary activity abroad.

The most devastating blow to the missionary effort of the
Protestant Episcopal Church, however, was the death of Bishop
Boone in 1864 at the relatively young age of 53. His twenty-
seven years of effective leadership had put the mission in China
on a sound footing. Thus in 1868 two years after his successor Reverend Channing M. Williams was installed as Missionary Bishop to China, he was able to make a trip into the interior to select a site for a station which he intended to make the center of the mission. He selected the city of Wu-chang, a major industrial center along the Yangtze River. It was here at the age of 38 that Mary Elizabeth Wood came to undertake her life’s work—promoting public library service in China.

Public Library Service

Mary Elizabeth Wood gradually settled into the Protestant Episcopal Mission (housed in Boone Compound) at Wu-chang where her brother Robert E. Wood had recently taken up the position of pastor of St. Michael’s Parish Church. Shortly after her arrival she began to teach English at the Boone School, a preparatory school started in 1871 by the Protestant Episcopal Mission several years after the station had been opened at Wu-chang. In the course of time this preparatory school was to grow into a university, one of the outstanding institutions of higher education in China, for training leaders for the indigenous Christian church. This transition from preparatory school to university was begun in 1885 by the Reverend Sidney C. Partridge. For fourteen years he worked at the task, raising enrollment from thirty students to one hundred, enlarging the curriculum and constructing several new buildings. Then in 1899 he was elected Bishop of Kyoto, Japan. He left the institution on a sound footing, thus providing his successor Reverend James Jackson with an opportunity to build the institution even larger. This he did during the next fifteen years.

Reverend Jackson began a modest program of college work in 1906; however, he was unable to grant degrees until 1911 when he successfully completed negotiations for a charter from the University of the State of New York. Now Boone University,
as it was officially named, consisted of a preparatory school with an enrollment of about three hundred boys and a college with an enrollment of about fifty young men. Needless to say, theological education was stressed for the aim of the institution was to turn out the leaders for the Christian church in China. All of this growth required more space. Consequently, during Reverend Jackson's tenure Boone Compound was enlarged to about twenty acres. It enclosed Boone University and several related institutions, including the one founded by Mary Elizabeth Wood... Boone Library.

Miss Wood appears to have viewed her first few years in China as an extended visit. She began by teaching English in the preparatory school at the request of her brother, but soon turned her attention to library service. By 1901, two years after her arrival, she was actively soliciting contributions of books from friends abroad. Her efforts began to bear fruit within several months. She continued her efforts in this manner for the next several years, bringing books of various kinds into the educational enterprise housed within Boone Compound. At some point it occurred to her that it would be desirable to construct a library building to house the collection. This, with single minded devotion, she set out to do herself. In 1906 she returned to the United States and undertook the dual task of raising funds for the proposed library building and training herself as a professional librarian. The former she did by speaking wherever she was invited and the later at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York. She remained in the United States for about eighteen months engaged in these tasks. On returning to China she shipped furniture and other personal possessions. Apparently she had concluded by this time that she was involved in a divine undertaking. As she wrote on one occasion, 'I feel that I have a call to do this work and that it is part of God's plan for China'.

On June 1, 1909 the cornerstone was laid for Boone Library. In it were placed many things including bibles and other religious works, list of donors, faculty members and students, photographs
and an extensive array of publications both secular and religious.\textsuperscript{15} Boone Library opened its doors in 1910, on the eve of Boone University being granted its charter, with 3,000 volumes in Chinese and English.\textsuperscript{16} Several years later it could boast of 12,000 volumes, 5,000 in English and 7,000 in Chinese, as well as sixty or more serial publications.\textsuperscript{17} In keeping with trends in the United States, Miss Wood also began a program of library extension lectures on science, history and current events which attracted 400–500 people. She also persuaded the Young Men’s Christian Association to hold its public lectures in the library auditorium. In an effort to enhance the public impact of Boone Library she started a program of traveling book collections for use in government schools. Each of these book collections, consisting of works written in English and translated into Chinese, contained about sixty-five volumes.\textsuperscript{18} Also, she opened the reading rooms of Boone Library to the public.\textsuperscript{19}

Thus Mary Elizabeth Wood created a distinctive institution in China, an independent public library under her firm control which also served the largely academic community of the Protestant Episcopal Mission. The former public librarian, undoubtedly influenced also by her library training at Pratt Institute, had recreated the institution of the American public library in China, a society which was amply endowed with bibliothecarial resources, but not the idea of public library service.

**Training of Librarians**

Mary Elizabeth Wood’s efforts to create a public library movement in China culminated in a rush of significant events in the 1920’s. With Boone Library as an institutional base, she began to plan the promotion of the development of public library service throughout China. Her major institutional vehicle for accomplishing this task was to be a library school to train professional personnel for Chinese libraries. To this end she arranged for her
two assistants, Sammuel T. Y. Seng and Thomas C. S. Hu, to study in the library training program conducted by the New York Public Library. This was done in the period after 1910, that is after the founding of Boone Library. By the beginning of World War I (1917) Mr. Seng had returned from the United States and started lecturing to the public on the significance of public library service, whereas Mr. Hu was sent to the United States for library training.

The first step toward the founding of the library school came in the form of permission from Bishop John W. Wood (no relation) to organize such a program of study. To further the project she decided to prepare herself academically with an additional year of library education at Simmons College. The trip was a success. She returned to China in 1919 ready to organize Boone Library School. Initially referred to as Boone Library Training Program, it started as a department of Boone University in the spring of 1920 with nine students, three each from the freshman, sophomore and junior class. Miss Wood and her two assistants, Messrs. Seng and Hu, served as the faculty. They conducted their classes in Boone Library.

Within two years after the founding of the Boone Library School the resentment which some of the members of Boone University felt toward Miss Wood broke out into a public dispute within the mission community. The exact nature of the problem is not recorded in detail; however, it centered on the independent manner in which Miss Wood conducted her professional activities. Formally a part of the Protestant Episcopal Mission, she often acted independently of it. She solicited books and raised funds for Boone Library without any substantial assistance from the mission. Moreover, her personal calling was to promote public library service in China, a worthy goal, but not one which was entirely in concert with the objectives of the Protestant Episcopal Mission. The goal of the latter was first and foremost to promote Christian belief. For the mission, the social service activities in which it engaged were means to an end—
the spread of Christian belief; however, for Mary Elizabeth Wood the activities which she fostered (public library service and now the education of library personnel) appealed to be ends in themselves. Although a devout Christian, an exceedingly capable administrator and a genuine asset to the mission, her driving ambition to promote a nationwide public library movement in China drew many of her critics out into public dispute. Miss Wood retained the confidence of the leadership; thus despite her critics, or perhaps because of them, she moved ahead with the promotion of public library service in China.

Several significant events occurred in the mid-1920's to further Miss Wood's goal of establishing public library service in China. First, she began a campaign to have the American portion of the indemnity exacted from China by the Western powers as a result of the Boxer Rebellion of 1900 returned to China. The idea was to have the sum ($6,000,000) used for cultural purposes, one of which was library service. In her characteristic manner she went straight to the task, eliciting support from people in China, circulating petitions and making public pronouncements on the matter. Not content to propagandize from China she went directly to the halls of the United States Congress in 1924 and spoke to virtually every member of the Senate and the House of Representatives. This earnest lady, dressed in quaint clothing, made a substantial impact on the body politic. Consequently, in May of 1924 Congress passed a resolution calling for the remission of the indemnity due the United States. President Calvin Coolidge signed the matter into law shortly thereafter. The China Foundation for Education and Culture was founded to act as the agency responsible for the dispersion of the funds. Significantly, the governing board consisted of five American educators, but ten Chinese.

While in the United States she took the opportunity to attend the annual American Library Association conference held in the summer of 1924 in Saratoga Springs, New York. Miss Wood was a celebrity now. She read a paper describing recent
library developments in China and succeeded in convincing the leadership of the American Library Association to send a representative to China to survey the library situation and make recommendations for improvements. Dr. Arthur E. Bostwick, a distinguished member of the profession, was appointed to conduct the tour. Three significant events occurred in 1925 while Dr. Bostwick was on tour. First, a substantial sum was granted by The China Foundation for Education and Culture to establish a national library in the capital city of Peking and six other regional libraries throughout the country. Second, The China Foundation for Education and Culture granted the Boone Library School $10,000 a year for each of three years for scholarships and professorship, thus fostering its independence. Third, the Library Association of China was founded in Peking.

On the same occasion Miss Wood was honored for twenty-five years of service to the cause of promoting public library service in China. It was also the fifteenth anniversary of the opening of Boone Library. Mary Elizabeth Wood had reached the apex of her career. She could take pride in having successfully brought public library service to China.

Unfortunately, Miss Wood did not retire on this pinnacle of success. She was now in her mid-sixties. Worn out from years of campaigning for her cause and suffering from the infirmities of old age, the problems of her relationship with the Protestant Episcopal Mission in Wu-chang began to multiply. A major conference of missionaries was held in 1920 to survey the situation worldwide in foreign missions with the idea of setting long term goals for this Christian enterprise. One of the decisions that was made by the Protestant Episcopal Mission as a result of this conference was to make Boone University the major Christian institution of higher education in central China and to rename it Huachung University. This very Chinese name was adopted to placate the critics who increasingly looked upon Christian institutions with suspicion. Incidents occurred which led to the closing of Huachung University in 1927, a result of
which was that serious questions began to arise as to the lines of authority within the institution, particularly with respect to Boone Library School. After a great deal of debate, extending over the next several years, Mary Elizabeth Wood was given the choice of affiliating Boone Library School with Huachung University in a formal manner or going independent. She chose the latter course, a decision which was to have disastrous consequences for her library education program.\textsuperscript{28} She died a year later, 1931, on the eve of a celebration which had been planned for her to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the opening of Boone Library School, the twentieth anniversary of the opening of Boone Library and the thirtieth anniversary of her arrival in China.

Her will, dated December 10, 1930, reveals the depth of the antagonism which had developed between her and Huachung University. First, Boone Library was not to become a college library for Huachung University. It was to remain an independent public library dedicated to serving the people of China. Second, Boone Library School was to remain an independent institution, free from the restrictions that would be imposed on it if it were affiliated with Huachung University. Third, her residence in Boone Compound, Woodfern Cottage, was to be used for a variety of purposes, but never was it to come under the control of Huachung University. Fourth, the proceeds of the Mary Elizabeth Wood Foundation were to be used to support those activities which she fostered. No part of it was to be spent for the benefit of Huachung University.\textsuperscript{29} It is on this tragic note that the eventful career of Mary Elizabeth Wood ended in China. Revered by a nation, but alienated from the institution which fostered her cause. Why did this occur? In large part it is explained by the fact that her goals gradually grew to differ from those of the Protestant Episcopal Mission. As noted above, the latter existed, in the final analysis, to foster Christian belief; whereas Miss Wood, while a devout Christian, grew to adopt as her final goal the extension of public library service in China. She succeeded,
but at the expense of her relationship with the Protestant Episcopal Mission. She gave of herself unselfishly for three decades that China might have public library service and a corp of trained professional librarians.

Epilogue

Sammuel T. Y. Seng, the trusted confidant of Mary Elizabeth Wood, took up the requests she made in her will to keep her work independent of Huachung University, particularly her desire to have Boone Library School remain an independent institution. Thus through the 1930's and World War II all of the issues of concern to the late Miss Wood bearing on the relationship of her work to Huachung University were resolved with the exception of Boone Library School. Mr. Seng struggled to keep the institution alive; however, without a mission affiliation he did not have access to sufficient funds to maintain a quality program. Numerous efforts were made to affiliate Boone Library School with Huachung University, but in each case Mr. Seng found technical difficulties with the proposal. Consequently, in 1951, the year in which the Christian missionaries were expelled from China as a result of the Communist takeover, Boone Library School remained an independent institution.

References

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6. It is interesting to note that Reverend Boone's voyage from New York to Hong Kong took 131 days, more than four months. I met a missionary in Japan in 1970 whose grandparents made voyages such as these. She told me that they were an endless source of tales with which to enliven an evening far away from home.

7. In an effort to raise funds Bishop Boone issued a circular letter in 1859 for distribution in America in which he made the following estimates of the amount of money it required to support mission personnel:
MARITAL STATUS

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9. *Ibid.*, p. 69. Wu-chang was one of several large cities in this area. The other two were Hankow and Hanyang.

10. Figures on the number of personnel at the Protestant Episcopal Mission at Wu-chang are difficult to find. One source indicates that in 1920 there were 400 people in this mission in the province of Hupei which included Wu-chang. See Milton T. Stauffer (editor), *The Christian Occupation of China: A General Survey of the Numerical Strength and Geographical Distribution of the Christian Forces in China* (Shanghai: China Continuation Committee, 1922), p. 105.

11. One should note that the University of the State of New York is not an institution of higher education, but a state agency responsible for supervising education in New York State.


13. Letter from Mary Elizabeth Wood to Reverend Joshua Kimber, March 31, 1902. The Episcopal Church Archives, Southwest Theological Seminary, Austin, Texas.
   “Commemoration of the 25th Anniversary at Boone of Miss M. E. Wood is Held”, *The Independent Herald*, Hankow, December 17, 1924.


20. Letter from Mary Elizabeth Wood to Bishop Lloyd, May 21, 1917. The Episcopal Church Archives, Southwest Theological Seminary, Austin, Texas.


22. Letter from Mary Elizabeth Wood to Bishop Wood, June 16, 1918. The Episcopal Church Archives, Southwest Theological Seminary, Austin, Texas.

23. Letter from Mary Elizabeth Wood to Bishop Wood, August 6, 1919. The Episcopal Church Archives, Southwest Theological Seminary, Austin, Texas.

24. Letter from Mary Elizabeth Wood to Bishop Wood, April 23, 1920. The Episcopal Church Archives, Southwest Theological Seminary, Austin, Texas. Some time after the establishment of the Boone Library Training Program as an affiliated of Boone University it broke off to become the independent Boone Library School.

25. Letter from Mary Elizabeth Wood to Bishop Roots, July 18, 1922. The Episcopal Church Archives, Southwest Theological Seminary, Austin, Texas.

26. To attest to her firm Christian beliefs one should note that she was fearful of the Chinese government effort to foster institutions controlled by indigenous personnel. She was afraid that the whole public library movement would be swept into this trend; thereby depriving it of Christian influence. See Letter from Mary Elizabeth Wood to Bishop Wood, February 16, 1921. The Episcopal Church Archives, Southwest Theological Seminary, Austin, Texas.

28. Letter from Mary Elizabeth Wood to John W. Wood, September 8, 1930. The Episcopal Church Archives, Southwest Theological Seminary, Austin, Texas.

29. Will of Mary Elizabeth Wood, December 10, 1930. The Episcopal Church Archives, Southwest Theological Seminary, Austin, Texas.

30. The interpretation of the events surrounding the latter years of the life of Mary Elizabeth Wood is in accord with that given in John L. Coe, *Huachung University* (New York: United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia, 1962) pp. 78–82; however, I have tried to reveal more of the details of the situation in and about the year 1930, as it affects Mary Elizabeth Wood. Mr. Coe was a member of the Protestant Episcopal Mission at Wu-chang from 1923–1951, serving as a teacher and a member of the administration. Thus, he writes as a witness to the events under discussion in this paper.