

MISS MARY ELIZABETH WOOD: PIONEER OF THE LIBRARY MOVEMENT IN CHINA

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Worried about the safety of her younger brother during the Boxer Rebellion in Northern China, a young American woman left New York for a country with which she was unfamiliar. But the need for teachers in China induced her to prolong her visit.

In 1899, Miss Mary Elizabeth Wood accepted an appointment under the American Church Mission and started what was to become her new life work. It was not long before she fell in love with the country and its people, and for the next thirty-one years she made a rich contribution to the life of China, especially its library movement. Today she is known both in China and the United States as the founder of China's library system.

Miss Wood was born in Elba, New York on August 22, 1861, one of seven children of New Englanders Edward Farmer and Mary Jane (Humphrey) Wood. Soon after Mary's birth the family moved to Batavia where her father became an express agent. Miss Wood attended private and public schools, including the Batavia High School.

As a young woman she was a constant reader and she managed to cover every field of English literature.¹ This qualified her to become the first librarian at Batavia's Richmond Library when it was opened in 1889.

Ten years later, when the Boxer Rebellion broke out in Northern China, reports reached the United States that Chinese Christians, missionaries and other foreigners had been killed.

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This news was especially alarming to Miss Wood. The preceding year her brother Robert had embarked for Wuchang, China, where, as an Episcopalian missionary, he had founded St. Michael's parish. So it came about that in 1899 Miss Wood left her 10-year post as head of Richmond Memorial Library to go to China and reassure herself as to her brother's safety.

Arriving in Wuchang on May 16 of that year, she learned that her brother was safe, but that Wuchang's Episcopalian-operated Boone Preparatory School and College was suffering a teacher shortage drastic enough to hinder its academic goals.

At Robert's suggestion she accepted a position as teacher of elementary English at the school. Her work was so effective that in 1904 she was appointed as a lay missionary by the American Church Mission.

Her teaching methods in grammar and English literature were long remembered. As one of her students Archie T. L. Tsen described them:

"Two of her ways of teaching still remain very vividly with me—the teaching of English literature by questions and answers and the teaching of grammar by diagrams. We first made our acquaintance with Chaucer, Spencer, Shakespeare and many more of the famous authors through her introduction. We were also made to see that if we could not pull a sentence apart into its proper parts, the sentence could not be grammatically correct." ²

Such approaches proven to be very helpful to her students. Before long she had earned for herself the title of "Our Beloved Teacher" on the campus of Boone College.

The Boone Library and its services

Knowing the lack of children's books in China, Miss Wood interested herself in securing them. She wrote to her friends, Women's Auxiliaries, and the Church Periodical Club in the United States asking for donations of books. She received many books in so great a variety that she decided to start a library. She moved into a small house on the Boone compound—the old familiar Octagon—and in 1902 began the first circulating library in China. ³

The collegiate department was established at Boone in 1903, and a new era in Chinese education began in 1905 after the Manchu government abolished the old Chinese system of classical examinations. Now came the need for a modern library to replace the old-fashioned library which in Chinese was called "a place for hiding books." At this time Boone's library had only a few newspapers and tattered books, and was housed in a dilapidated building. Miss Wood realized the need for an adequate library building, and on her first vacation in the United States (1906), after an absence of seven years, she devoted her time and energy to raising money for a library building at Boone College.

She attended the Twenty-ninth Annual Conference of American Library Association in Asheville, North Carolina, May 23-29, 1907. Her paper "Library Work in a Chinese City," was read in the Third General Session on May 27. It was at this time that the library movement in China was first introduced to professional librarians in the United States.

Through her efforts Dr. Seth Low, late president of Columbia University made the first and generous donation. Miss Olivia Phelps Stokes, a New York philanthropist, gave money for an auditorium in memory of her sister, now called Stokes Hall. Many other friends also contributed funds for the library building. In Boston these included Bishop Lawrence and his two sisters, Mrs. Frederick Cunningham and Mrs. Loring; Miss Marion DeConway Ward and Miss Sturgis. Mrs. Charles Biddle and Mrs. John Markoe were contributors from Philadelphia. Other donations came from Baltimore and Richmond. In all she collected \$100,000 in library funds.⁴

Meanwhile gifts of books from friends in the United States continued to arrive. Lists of needed new books were sent out to secure a response. Old textbooks were also solicited and sold at auction to the college students, with receipts being spent for new acquisitions. By the spring of 1910 an English language collection of over 3,000 books had been acquired and the Boone College Library was formally opened.

Plans were immediately drawn by Miss Wood for making the Boone Library a public as well as an institutional library

by making its services available to the people of the three neighboring cities of Wuchang, Hankow, and Hanyang. However her hopes that students would take advantage were shattered. Students in other schools would not use the Boone Library because of the long school hours plus rules of the government schools together with the fact that Boone Library is located some distance from the center of Wuchang. So Miss Wood tried a new idea—attracting students with university extension lectures. To seek support and to explain the purpose of those proposed lectures she called on principals of all the leading government schools in the three cities.

Lectures on various subjects were planned for both fall and spring semesters and invitations, issued in proportion to the number of students in each school, were sent in advance to the various schools and public institutions. Every lecture began with a concert. In this way Boone Library was able to sponsor lectures covering subjects of public health, good government, natural science and the like. Media such as lantern slides and educational films were frequently used in the presentations. Two off-campus reading rooms were opened at St. Michael's Church and Trinity Church: the former to serve residents of the area, military, students and policemen; and the latter, merchants and shopkeepers.

But the university extension lectures again failed to attract students from the government schools. Miss Wood returned from her second vacation in the United States to pursue another approach—sending books to schools and others. This time her idea was widely accepted by the principals, and China's first travelling library was started in 1914.

Samuel Seng recalled:

“Not only were travelling libraries sent to the government schools and mission schools in the city, but also to some public institutions, like the Hanyang Iron and Steel Works, Canton Hankow Railway, Yangtze Engineering Works, etc. Sometimes they went to far away places on the Yangtze-Yuhan, Kiukiang, Nanchang, Shangsha, Shasi, Ichang. One went to Kaifeng in Honan, and another to Yung Ching in Chili, and still another travelled to Peping. These libraries usually made up of lots of 100 books or more. Sometimes they contain all Chinese books, sometimes

all English books, and sometimes half English and half Chinese.”⁵

The greatest task was to find up-to-date scientific materials in the Chinese language. Even so the outreach service proved to be very successful and beneficial, even though the service was slow. Nevertheless, the library service steadily increased and Wuchang soon became known as “The Boston of China.”

The Boone Library School

As services expanded, Boone Library came to need more trained personnel. With the help of friends in the churches of the United States, Miss Wood sent Samuel Seng to America in 1914 as the first student from China to receive library training. He entered the New York Public Library School (now the School of Library Service at Columbia University). Thomas C. S. Hu followed in 1917. Both completed the course requirements and received their degrees at the same time from Columbia University.

Immediately upon the return of Samuel Seng, the Boone Library cooperated with the Lecture Department of the National Committee, Y. M. C. A., Shanghai to launch a series of speeches on the need for public libraries in China. Speakers covered fourteen cities throughout the country.

Miss Wood now began another effort to start a library school in China to train needed librarians. The idea was fully endorsed by Bishop Gilman, then President of the University, and in March, 1920, the Boone Library School opened. At its opening Boone College conferred the honorary degree of Master of Arts on Miss Wood.

The School was one of several departments in the Faculty of Arts and had six students in its first class. They became known as “The Happy Six” and graduated in 1922. Courses in library science covered three years with students entering the program in their sophomore year and taking additional subjects in other departments of the College. It was equivalent to the first year’s work in an accredited American library school.

In 1924 the Boone Library School became a part of Hua-chung (Central China) University but withdrew in 1930. Miss Wood managed to raise an endowment for the School which was later known as the Mary Elizabeth Wood Foundation, under control of a board in the United States. The School was absorbed in 1950 by the National Wuhan University.

By 1949 the Boone Library School had trained nearly 500 professional librarians who held library positions in various parts of China and played very important roles in modernizing library services there.

Remission of Boxer Indemnity Fund

Another important contribution Miss Wood made to China was her effort to secure the return to that country of the balance of the Boxer Indemnity Fund, amounting to over six million dollars. Dr. David Z. Y. Yui, one of Miss Wood's students and secretary of the National Committee of the Y. M. C. A. suggested that if the indemnity were remitted by the United States, a portion of it might be used to introduce a modern system of public libraries in China. Miss Wood left for Peking in the Winter of 1923⁶ to confer with Dr. Schurman, the American Minister to China, and other influential Chinese and Americans in the capitol.

A petition was drawn up and signed by 150 leading Chinese citizens, then sent to President Calvin Coolidge of the United States. Sixty-five American educators, missionaries, and Chinese businessmen sent another petition to the President to ask that a portion of the Indemnity Fund be used for libraries. The National Educational Association of China voted unanimously to endorse this plan, and certain high Chinese dignitaries who could not sign a petition because of their official positions wrote letters to the President Coolidge.

Miss Wood followed the petition to Washington in person and remained for five months talking to "82 senators and 420 congressmen."⁷ She convinced that "the Boxer Indemnity was wholly punitive and not payment of a debt, and should be turned over to the Chinese government to advance the steady

growing educational and welfare facilities.”⁸

A measure was introduced to the United States Senate on December 6, 1923 by Senator Henry Cabot Lodge from Massachusetts (Senate Joint Resolution 2). It was introduced to the House of Representatives on January 11, 1924 by Representative James M. Magee (House Joint Resolution 139) and introduced by Representative Stephen G. Portor on February 28 (House Joint Resolution 201).

On May 21, 1924, Congress approved the remission of payment (House Joint Resolution 248), and President Coolidge signed it into law immediately. Thus the whole balance of the Boxer Indemnity Fund amounting to \$6,137,552.90 was remitted to China to develop educational and other cultural activities.

The China Foundation for Education and Culture (known as the China Foundation) was established to supervise the Fund and was governed by a board consisting of ten eminent Chinese and five American educators. Because the Bill did not spell out in detail how funds were to be allocated, it was necessary for those interested in the promotion of libraries to request funding from the Board. So to secure testimony of the need, Miss Wood appealed to the American Library Association to send a delegate to China to make a library survey.

She attended the Forty-sixth Annual Conference of the Association held at Saratoga Spring, New York, June 30—July 5, 1924, where she presented a paper “Recent Library Development in China,” in the Second General Session on Tuesday evening July 1. Through her initiative Dr. Arthur E. Bostwick, librarian of St. Louis Public Library and former President of American Library Association, was sent to China as the representative of the Association. His tour, arranged by the Chinese Association for the Advancement of Education, lasted for about seven weeks, from April 26 to June 16, 1925. His preliminary report, along with the application for the fund was submitted on June 3, 1925 to the Directors of the China Foundation, which held its first meeting in Tientsin on June 5.

As a result China Foundation granted \$500,000 in gold for the establishment of a national library in Peking. The Chinese government provided a site for the new building in the western

part of the Winter Palace ground; agreed to pay half the expense of maintenance for ten years, and turned books over to the new library which had formerly belonged to the Imperial Palace but were under care of the Peking Library at that time. The library planned to build four branches in Peking.⁹

The China Foundation also decided to finance six other libraries in various parts of China to demonstrate modern library services. Their collections were to contain books in English and other languages as well as in Chinese. In recognition of Miss Wood's great services in library education the China Foundation also approved a grant of \$5,000 gold annually for a period of three years to Boone Library School for use mainly for scholarships and professorships.

The Library Section of the National Association for the Advancement of Education was the only known library organization in China at that time. It had been founded in 1921, and under its guidance and assistance provincial library associations started to grow in China and even some local associations were formed in various cities such as Shanghai and Peking. As result of Dr. Bostwick's visit, the Library Association of China was formed in Peking on June 2, 1925.

Whenever she was back in the United States Miss Wood never missed an opportunity to attend the annual conference of American Library Association. Twice she presented papers on library development in the General Sessions. In 1926 she again attended the ALA's Fiftieth Anniversary Conference at Philadelphia-Atlantic City, October 4-9. At this conference there were four delegates from China: Mr. P. W. Kuo representing the Chinese National Association for the Advancement of Education and Ministry of Education; Alfred K. Chiu representing China Library Association; John C. B. Kwei and Miss Wood.

Kuo presented his paper "The Evolution of the Chinese Library and Its Relation of Chinese Culture," at the Third General Session, Atlantic City on October 5. Chiu and Kwei presented their coauthored paper "Libraries in China." Miss Wood did not present a paper at this conference but was recognized at the Fourth General Session for her contribution

to the releasing of the Boxer Indemnity Fund by the Sixty-Eighth Congress.

In 1927 Miss Wood again spent several months in Washington to work towards the cancellation of "unequal treaties" with China. Through her efforts in behalf of the Chinese people the United States Congress overwhelmingly passed Representative Stephen G. Portor's resolution urging that the United States Government take immediate steps for the negotiation of a new equal and reciprocal treaty with the National Government of China.¹⁰

Miss Wood's remaining days were devoted to raising an endowment for the Boone Library School. Her friends in the United States helped her raise \$11,000 in gold for the school, which was later known as the Mary Elizabeth Wood Foundation. Miss Marion D. Ward later added another thousand gold dollars to the endowment, but it was Mrs. Frederick Cunningham of Boston who played the major role in making this project materialize.

While many of her admirers were planning an elaborate triple anniversary in honor of her service in China for thirty years, of her twenty years' work in building the Boone Library, and her ten year's effort in founding the Boone Library School, Miss Mary Elizabeth Wood died of a heart attack in her residence in Wuchang on May 1, 1931, at the age of 69. She was cremated in the Japanese Crematory in Hankow and her ashes returned for burial in the Batavia, N. Y. cemetery. A grand memorial service was held in Stokes Hall of the Boone Library, Wuchang, at 2 P. M. on Saturday, June 13, 1931. In all she had served the Chinese people for thirty-one years. She had been confined to bed for four months but during the first month she kept up her correspondence and directed library work from her bed.

In her youth Miss Wood had proved herself as a very capable person when she was given the responsibility of caring for her youngest brother Robert. She trained him with a strict hand and saw that he read the right books. Her sense of duty was revealed again when she first became a librarian. Thus her own time for reading and study decreased as she

devoted more time and energies to her work. This eventually effected a gradual change in her personality. This was recalled by her brother Robert:

“In her early years she had been full of life and joy and fun and was a much sought after and popular guest at dances and parties, picnics and sleigh-rides and was always the life of the party - being a bit of a wag and a ready wit. But later she outgrew all that and held herself aloof from old pals, much to their perplexity and disappointment. Her sense of duty gradually seemed to change her outlook upon life.”¹¹

Miss Wood was very concerned about other people, specifically the poor. She, therefore, tried to save money from her own spending to help needy people. Her clothes and other things were bought in church rummage sales in order to save money for the improvement of library services. While she was in Washington campaigning for the enactment of the Boxer Indemnity Bill she made a deep impression because of her old-fashioned dress, her understanding of people, her persistence and unselfishness. Once a bishop teased her, telling her not to wear the same old hat if she wanted to meet the President of the United States.

Miss Wood used her vacation time to obtain professional training in the United States. She enrolled at Pratt Institute as a special student during the first term of 1907.¹² Records at the School of Library Science, Simmons College, Boston, indicate that Miss Wood attended that school from 1918 to 1919.¹³ Before leaving for Washington to campaign for the enactment of the Boxer Indemnity Bill she took another special course in library work at Oxford University.¹⁴ In 1926, before the ALA's Fiftieth Anniversary Conference Miss Wood attended sessions of the School of politics at Williams College, Massachusetts. Although she did not read Chinese she learned to speak it. She also learned French.

In conclusion I quote Dr. C. T. Wang's statement about Miss Wood's contribution to the people of China:

“Many foreigners have come to China and many have gone. Few of them, however, have made such a record as to win the real heart of Chinese people. On the other hand, it is deeply regrettable that not a few of them have committed such blun-

ders as to discredit their own countries as well as to arouse the hatred of the Chinese people against them. Among all these foreigners who have rendered valuable services to the Chinese people, the service of Miss Wood appears to be the most unique.”¹⁵

Footnotes

1. Robert E. Wood, “Reflections on My Sister,” *Boone Library School Quarterly*, vol. 3, no. 3, September 1931, p. 6.
2. Archie T. L. Tsen, “Miss Wood, Our Beloved Teacher,” *Boone Library School Quarterly*, vol. 3, no. 3, September 1931, p. 4.
3. “China’s Library System Founder, Former Resident of Batavia City Died at Her Home in Wuchang.” *Batavia Daily News*. May 2, 1931, p. 1.
4. Samuel T. Y. Seng, “Miss Mary Elizabeth Wood: The Queen of the Modern Library Movement in China,” *Boone Library School Quarterly*, vol. 3, no. 3, September 1931, p. 8-9.
5. *Ibid.* p. 10-11.
6. Mary Elizabeth Wood, “Recent Library Development in China,” *ALA Bulletin*, vol. 18, 1924, p. 181.
7. *ALA Bulletin*, vol. 20, 1926, p. 182.
8. *Batavia Daily News*, *op. cit.* p. 2.
9. Arthur E. Bostwick, “Report of Arthur E. Bostwick’s Mission to China as ALA Delegate,” *ALA Bulletin*, vol. 20, 1926, p. 39.
10. C. T. Wang, “Miss Wood As China’s Friend,” *Boone Library School Quarterly*, vol. 3, no. 3, September 1931, p. 3.
11. Wood, *op. cit.* p. 6.
12. Miss Wood’s student record from the Graduate School of Library and Information Science, Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, New York, October 7, 1974.
13. Letter from S. Eunice Wenstrom, Administrative Assistant, School of Library Science, Simmons College and the writer, September 25 to October 9, 1974.
14. *Batavia Daily News*, *op. cit.* p. 2.
15. Wang, *op. cit.* p. 2.

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 6. *The Congressional Digest*. Microfilm ed. Washington, Congressional Digest Corporation, December 1923, p. 94.
 7. _____ . January 1924, p. 132.
 8. _____ . March 1924, p. 212.
 9. *Dictionary of American Biography*. New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936, vol. XX, p. 469-470.
 10. The Graduate School of Library and Information Science, Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, New York. Student record of Miss Mary Elizabeth Wood, Oct. 7, 1974.
 11. "Launching a Library School for China," *ALA Bulletin*, vol. 20, 1926, p. 557.
 12. "Mary E. Wood Dead: Librarian in China," *New York Times*, May 2, 1931, p. 19.
 13. School of Library Science, Simmons College. Personal correspondence between S. Eunice Wenstrom, Administrative Assistant and the writer. September 25 to October 9, 1974.
 14. U. S. Laws, Statutes, etc. *United States Statutes at Large*. Washington, Government Printing Office, 1925. vol. 43, part 1, p. 135.
 15. Ward, Marion DeConway. "Tribute to Miss Wood," *Library Journal*, June 1, 1931, p. 499.
 16. Wood, Mary E. "Library Work in a Chinese City," *ALA Bulletin*, May 1907, p. 84-7.
 17. _____ . "Recent Library Development in China" *ALA Bulletin*, vol. 18, 1924, p. 178-82.