

**'May God Guide Us at Every Step':
Episcopal Missionary Mary Elizabeth Wood and Her Call to Library Service in China**

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Introduction

Thank you all for the opportunity to participate in this session, and especially to Professor Cheng and the Library Association of China for your gracious hospitality. My name is Lauren Kata, and I have traveled to Beijing to be with you today from Austin, Texas, the American city that is known as the State of Texas Capital, the Live Music Capital of the World, and, perhaps less well known, home to The Archives of the Episcopal Church.

The Archives is the official repository for the records of the Episcopal Church, and its corporate body, the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society. At the Archives, I serve as the Collections Management Archivist. Representing our Director Mark Duffy and the Archives staff, it is a great honor to be invited to share information and history on a very important and special person.

I am here today to enhance the story of Mary Elizabeth Wood and her legacy as the Queen of Modern Libraries in China. Many have told her inspiring history and the important role she played in establishing modern libraries and modern librarianship in China. Today, we heard even more detail about her remarkable background and achievements in library science. Along with the many articles, reflections and biographies, her life and legacy will also be beautifully captured in the documentary film for which Professor Cheng has consulted. In assisting with his and the film crew's background research at The Archives, I have come to be intrigued by Ms. Wood, to desire to know more about her, and to admire her.

In talking about Mary Elizabeth Wood's call to library service, I hope to add more to the story in two ways. First, I'd like to share more about what her work meant in the context of Episcopal Christian missionary service. Like her brother Robert Wood, Mary Wood was an Episcopal missionary. Here are some questions I will attempt to answer: What did it mean to be a missionary in China, and what was missionary life like? What did it mean to Mary Wood to be a missionary? The second way I hope to add to the narrative is to discuss The Episcopal Church's

role in the establishment and origins of Boone Library and Boone Library School in Wuhan, and in Mary Elizabeth's history, in order to reconsider Boone Library School's road to independence. I think we all agree today that the decision to independently register Boone Library School in 1930 has had positive, lasting effects. But why did she do it? Was the conflict really between promoting Christianity and the ideals of the Library School? Or was it something else?

Mary Wood was instrumental in the establishment of Boone Library and Boone Library School, and in the spread of public libraries across China. Her role as an Episcopal missionary allowed her to pursue her passion for library work and carry that passion throughout China. Christianity and the Episcopal Church feature prominently in her story.

Baptized in 1863 at St. James Episcopal Church in Batavia, New York, Mary began and remained until her death as part of a vast Episcopal network. The vision to build modern libraries in China was hers; but it was the support of her Episcopal, Christian network that allowed her to fulfill her vision. To fully understand her history and legacy, and the history and legacy of Boone Library and Boone Library School, is to understand that Mary Elizabeth Wood lived and worked in China as a paid missionary of the Protestant Episcopal Church. Her role as a missionary and the library work she performed in China was not merely her means to an end. It was, to her, a religious calling as a Christian -- one that characterized the Episcopal Church ethic.

Protestant Episcopalians believe that they are called to use their talents, education, passion and faith to go out into the world to do God's work. That ethic is known as the "baptismal covenant" in the Episcopal Church, and it includes the promise to live in Christian Fellowship, serve Jesus Christ in all persons, and strive for justice and peace. This promise is something that Episcopal Christians experience at an early age from family and in religious education in their home parish. It is a promise that is renewed out loud at least weekly during worship service; a promise that Episcopalians live out in their everyday lives. For Mary, a woman raised as a Christian in the Episcopal Church, her library work was God's work, what she felt called to do, and an example of her living according to her "baptismal covenant."

Now, to say Mary Wood felt a religious "calling," and that her work in library service in China was a religious motivation, is not to paint a picture of a woman who was somehow struck – as if by lightning – with instructions from her God to go to China. The calling that we mean is a more subtle, and gradual, Christian calling; one that develops over time and in her case, strengthens over time. We see this experience happen in the stories of hundreds of missionaries, in hundreds of Episcopal leaders -- including, for example, her student and successor, Samuel Seng. Educated and employed in the Episcopal system in Boone College and the Boone community, he, too, felt his work was a Christian calling. Seng's belief was also nurtured by his participation in The Episcopal Church.

What is “The Episcopal Church?”

The Episcopal Church derives from the Church of England, and is essentially the Church of England transferred to America and its cultures. There are several Christian Protestant Denominations in the US, other Protestant groups in addition to The Episcopal Church in America, and those groups also sent missionaries to China.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, The Episcopal Church was a dominant religious entity. It was the religion of many influential people - from heads of universities, to entrepreneurs and bankers, to politicians and American Presidents. The Episcopal Church was known as a moderate, rational church that distanced itself from evangelical fervor and proselytizing. Other denominations (for example, the Baptist Church, the Presbyterian Church) had different emphases. Episcopalians emphasized education, learning, and suggesting others should discover God for themselves.

The Episcopal Church in China

China was The Episcopal Church’s second foreign mission abroad. In 1837, the Rev. William J. Boone of South Carolina arrived, and by 1845, established the American Church Mission at Shanghai. Education was their first endeavor, and a boys’ school founded in 1846 was followed by one for girls. Building local congregations and hospitals were additional areas of focus.

By 1899, when Robert and Mary Elizabeth were in China, the American Episcopal Church in China was divided into three districts: District of Shanghai, District of Hankow, and the District of Anking. Boone Compound was the Wuchang compound, across the Yangtze River in the District of Hankow. The compound included the Boone School, later Boone College and University, which had already begun providing classes in 1871.

Missionaries going abroad in the early 20th century were supported by the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society in New York - the Church’s corporate body, which operated in the brand new Episcopal building, the Church Missions House. Representatives at Church Missions House were the people who arranged for Mary Wood’s journeys both to and from China, including her journey out at the age of 38.

Boone Compound

As first a visitor and then staying on as a teacher, Mary Elizabeth Wood lived among the women and the men of the Episcopal Mission at the Boone Compound, and she easily fit into their

culture and society. This was her Church and her people. Her brother Robert Wood of course was there as well. But she also built relationships with everyone in the compound, and as part of the mission community, contributed to and relied on the community's resources and friendship.

The Archives includes a wonderful collection of oral history interviews of Episcopal missionaries who served in China, in which many share what life was like, including in Wuchang.

For example, Mrs. Clara Bergamini, the wife of architect John Bergamini who designed many of the buildings constructed for the Mission, described life on Boone Compound as “just like being in a big friendly family. “At noon we always had prayers at the college chapel,” she explained. “And everybody no matter what you were doing you went out for prayers at noon at the Chapel. And it was just a very friendly environment.” Mrs. Bergamini also spoke fondly of Mary Elizabeth Wood. “There was Miss Wood, who was a wonderful person. She was in charge of the library. She was a missionary in charge of the library and her brother was a priest there, Father Wood. He was a very wonderful person. He had a church in Wuchang...”

After living and working in the Boone Compound for seven years, when Mary Wood returned to New York she applied to become, officially, an Episcopal lay missionary in China.

Mary Elizabeth Wood, Episcopal Missionary

Her application was accepted, she returned to Boone Compound, and -- as we know the story -- she went on to spend the remaining years of her life dedicated to promoting public libraries in China. She did this through leading the effort to establish Boone Library, developing and growing its collection and bringing the library “out into the field” so that Chinese people, not just Boone students, could benefit. Her work expanded to include training of library professionals abroad, and then significantly, the establishment of library courses at Boone College. Her leadership role in the successful campaign to secure funding from the Boxer Rebellion Indemnity Fund was also a remarkable achievement that led to the establishment of a National Library in China, and, grant funding for Boone Library School. Finally, in spite of declining health, she battled for the interests of professional librarianship and the credibility of Boone Library School by registering the school as an independent institution. All of this, to Mary Wood, was missionary work meant to spread Christianity out into the world.

Along her journey, Mary Wood expressed her drive in terms of fulfilling her call to serve. In a 1917 letter to her friend Bishop Lloyd at the Church Missions House, she declared: “The task seems a great one, and if we are called to do it, may God guide us at every step!”

She wrote to her Episcopal friends about her work with joy and enthusiasm.

In another 1923 letter to Church Missions House, she described the beginnings of her work to lobby for the Indemnity Fund: “with this mission, I feel the call, as I felt it in January 1907, when I began the work for Boone Library.” She continued in that same letter asking for wider support for the campaign, and exulted in what she saw as the outcome. “Just think what it is going to mean in China to put into the hands of the Chinese the best books...Think of what a power it can be in helping to spread Christianity!”

Similarly, in another letter acknowledging the generosity of her financial supporters, she wrote: “I feel that I have a call to do this work and that it is part of God’s plan for China.”

Mary regularly sent updates and reports to her Episcopal supporters in the US. “Everything we have ever done in library development for China had come slowly and after much struggle,” she wrote to a friend in July of 1924. “But God had blessed every step so far and we believed he would bless this one.”

Women of the Church

We have many examples in the Archives of men and women who were called to missionary work in China. Women of the Church played a particularly important role inside and outside the mission compound, as individuals, and organized as auxiliary women’s associations.

One of the most important and notable associations in Episcopal Church history is the United Thank Offering, or the UTO. The UTO is a special fund-raising initiative, originally organized to support missionary work. From its beginnings in 1889, the UTO demonstrates the influence of dedicated Episcopal women who felt the layperson’s call to serve others.

Over time, The Episcopal Church increasingly relied upon the financial support provided by the UTO to fund missionary work not adequately addressed in the Church’s programmatic budget. Mary Wood’s effective fundraising skills were certainly in the tradition of the UTO and Women of the Church.

Inside the mission compounds, women were just as strong an influence and presence.

Throughout the mission newsletters and correspondence are references to the service and work of the women. In Hankow, for example, women were organized as the “women’s missionary service league.” This league’s work focused on relief for the poor around Hankow and Wuchang, and raising funds for that cause. In one year, for example, 1926, this league raised \$3000 for the Shensi Mission. Women of Boone Compound were missionaries, or, spouses or family members of the male missionaries. They, too, participated in social service activities, and were relied upon

by their mission family to keep the domestic sphere going, and when they were away, their absence was keenly felt. You see this both in mission newsletters, and Mary Wood's letters.

Here is a lighthearted example of this feeling, as well as an example of the humorous side of Mary Elizabeth's brother, Robert Wood, and their close relationship. To a letter she wrote to a friend in the US, he added as an addendum his view on the matter of her "fashion." He wrote:

"It's no use arguing with Jiě jie on the subject of fashions, so long as she holds to her fixed idea that 'men don't notice.' When the 'wives' come back, she promises to adapt her styles to more modern modes. In the meantime, Yuen Tsai-Fung, the old stand-by tailor, is kept busy on the old clothes making them over."

Both Mary Elizabeth and Robert Wood were admired and loved by their fellow missionaries. In a few of the oral history interviews, other Episcopal missionaries spoke fondly of the Woods, and spoke of Robert Wood as a great man. Bishop Ervine Swift, who was sent to serve in China as an Episcopal missionary priest from 1938-1941, had special regard for Father Wood, who was his confessor. Here is what he shared:

"I chose Hankow because of Father Wood. I think he was a great and beloved elderly priest...What made him great was that he really loved the Chinese and they knew this. On the ferry boat, in the days when we didn't have a bridge...he was called 'Wei Chao-foo (Wèi jiàofù?), one of the few missionary priests who used the title "Father," in Chinese. Everybody loved him, 'There goes Wei Chao-foo,' and he knew it. For days he never saw a foreigner. He lived in the parish house of his church and ate Chinese food and spoke nothing but Chinese...There was never any attempt to maintain his American identity. His great disappointment was never to get back. He wanted so desperately to go back and die in China."

Huachung (Central China) University and Boone Library School

In 1924, events at the Boone Compound in Wuchang resulted in a new institution - Huachung University. Huachung University was the result of a cooperation among the many Protestant missions in China, including the American Episcopal mission, to come together and operate one Christian institution of higher education, rather than a scattering of many. It was a combining and centralizing of resources, which resulted in a new administration.

Boone College remained, but the College, as well as the Library and the Library School, were now reorganized as departments of Huachung University. This arrangement began in 1924, with a brief period of shutdown from 1926-1929 (although the Library School still continued to provide courses under its own name).

During this same period, Mary Wood arranged for the special 1925 tour of Dr. Arthur Bostwick, representative of the American Library Association (and incidentally, an Episcopalian). As a result of his report to The China Foundation for Education and Culture (the group who administered distribution of the Boxer Indemnity Fund), and Mary Wood's lobbying efforts, the Boone Library School was awarded \$10,000 a year for three years. The administration of the funds for Boone Library School was handled in the United States by what Mary referred to in letters as the "China Library Committee," an acting committee overseeing the Indemnity Fund, and, her campaign to match the grant with additional funding. This committee was comprised of important names in the political, religious, and financial spheres, many of whom were Episcopalians. Their names appeared in official fundraising circulars as backers of the Boone Library School plan.

As Boone Library School was on the road to large-scale improvements with its major fundraising campaign, and Library School courses continued to be popular, there were also many growing pains - particularly with this new affiliation with Huachung University. However, these pains were not about whether the Library School had a Christian focus, as far as our reading of the reports show. Mary Wood was always adamant that Boone would remain as Christian as ever. The conflict was based on disagreements over academic standards, which were severe enough to drive Mary Wood to interpret Huachung administrators as outright prejudiced against Boone Library School faculty and students.

Disagreements were over whether Library School instructors were permitted to attend faculty meetings; over the number of students permitted to enroll; and over the conferring of degrees to two female students who had not completed their physical education requirements. All of this proved unacceptable to Mary Wood, who defended the Library School's integrity and credibility until the end.

Friends and supporters in Boone Compound recognized the "Triple Anniversary" in 1930: the tenth anniversary of Boone Library School, the twentieth anniversary of Boone Library, and the thirtieth anniversary of Mary Elizabeth Wood's arrival in China. Writing from Shanghai, at American Church Mission headquarters, in a letter dated July 14, 1930, Mary Wood acknowledged the Triple Anniversary, and announced her decision regarding Boone Library School's independence. She cited the new, layered bureaucracy of Huachung University as the primary reason: "We have just taken a most important step in the Boone Library School," she wrote. "Formerly we were a department of Boone University, when it was Boone alone. This was most satisfactory. Now there are five 'Units' that make up the Central China College...There are representatives from each of these colleges, that make up the Board of Trustees, the Senate and Faculty. All of these bodies are very cumbersome. Only a few of the members understand the

aims and ideals of the Boone Library School. When the Board learned we were to take in two classes for library training, they gave us a choice...we did not hesitate.”

Immediately following the decision, they found a hostel closeby where they would be able to house the enrolled students. Funding for the hostel, which was purchased for \$2500 gold, was provided by her library supporters back in the US - Episcopal supporters - including her own diocese of Western New York. Female students resided in the Y.W.C.A. Hostel nearby. Mary Wood would continue to live in her cottage inside Boone Compound.

Once independent, Mary Wood assured her friends and the officers at Church Missions House in New York that the Library School would remain a Christian institution. “I have written Dr. Wood that friends need not fear for the religious atmosphere in the two Hostels; for Mr. Samuel Seng, our Director, is one of the most earnest Christians I have ever met in China.” A few months later, she sent a similar assurance.

In an oral history interview, Episcopal missionary John Coe, a teacher for Boone College and later Huachung University, discusses the internal conflict. According to Coe, it was a showdown over “academic standards.”:

“Up 'til June 1930,” explained Coe, “the Boone Library School was really a part of the university, and a part of Huachung...There was a problem of standards, and the kind of students we had and so on. And in 1930, it finally came to a show-down...between Mary Elizabeth Wood and the Huachung College administration. But she was running it and wished to determine the standards and rules for the students in the Library School.”

Mary Wood wrote to Church Missions House a few months after the decision to register independent and further explained the resistance from Huachung administrators. Interestingly, it appeared to be a show of prejudice against library science students. Students came from all over China to take the library courses - at least six different cities - and that was presented as a problem by the Huachung administrators. Another objection made against library students was that they would be of a different “type” from the students in the University. Mary explained that she and the faculty “were unable to interpret the meaning of this; for certainly students wishing to take up library work as a profession would be lovers of books, and that ought to be in itself a refining influence and not a harmful one.”

When Boone Library School became independent, and registered separately with the Chinese government in 1930, it did not cease to be a Christian institution, or lose its Episcopal Church network support. A few months following the split, Mary Wood again emphasized the Library School’s Christian standing.

“It will be just as if we had remained a department,” she declared. “How sad our friends at home would feel if they thought of the Boone Library School becoming just a secular school. This will never be.”

At the end of 1930, in poor health and knowing she was frail, Mary wrote a will that outlined both the history and future of Boone Library School, and arranged for her brother Robert to send it to the (Episcopal) Library Committee Trustees in the US. “I hereby make the following solemn request regarding the Boone Library in Wuchang, in Diocese of Hankow,” she wrote. “That the said Library always remain a Library ministering to all, and never limited to that of a mere College Library.” She emphasized the need for librarianship to serve all of China, and not just the students at Boone.

“It was the idea of opportunities for wider service that brought the generous contributions from the Church at home,” she wrote. “The idea, too, of a Library School, the pioneer one -- and the only one for China.”

In Memoriam

Mary Elizabeth Wood passed away on May 1, 1931, in her small cottage on Boone compound, exhibiting a “peaceful countenance and restful form, with flowers in one hand and a Bible in the other.”

The Episcopal Hankow newsletter included many reflections and memorials from members of the District and fellow missionaries. Of note was a tribute written by Bishop Logan Roots, the head of the Hankow District when Mary Wood first arrived. “We missionaries tend to think more of what we can give than of what we receive; yet it is probably true that what we receive is at least as valuable as anything we give.” In sharing what he believed she brought to the Mission, he continued his tribute by acknowledging her close relationship with her brother. “One of the happiest and most satisfactory pieces of good work during the very recent past was the weekly meeting of a social and religious character conducted at her home by the two of them especially for students of the Library School.”

Samuel Seng gave a long tribute as well to “our beloved Teacher and Director,” beginning with a remembrance of when she first arrived to Boone Compound.

“She introduced us outside of class periods to many of the best things of the West, to wit, tea parties, Christmas exchange of greetings, playing of wholesome games, rummage sales for raising funds for poor relief and other purposes; book auctions to increase book circulation, study clubs, reading of passages from the classics...public educational movie shows and musical concerts...and so on.”

Admiring her achievements, Seng reflected on how she achieved all that she did. “We know just

this much. She prayed a great deal every day. She asked God for help when she felt weak and herself unequal to the task set. Whatever joy or grief she had, she let God know of it. She craved God's counsel before launching any big plans."

Her good friend, Anne Elizabeth Byerly, also grieved her passing:

"She was my friend for half a lifetime, a noble hearted woman, blending in all her life the truly human, blessed with a clear vision of her calling, a courage to overcome circumstance, a will to resist failure, no task too great, no vision too exalted.

"Faithful and steadfast in her consecration to duty. Serving generously with all her great powers, winning the love of those for whom she laboured [sic] and gave her best."

Epilogue

After 1931, although funding from the Mary Wood Foundation supported tuition and faculty for Boone Library School, its culture and finances were still very much entangled with the Episcopal Mission in Hankow and the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society in New York. Samuel Seng, who took over the Library school per Mary Wood's will, had his salary paid by the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society, and students continued to receive their practical training using the Library of Huachung University.

The 1930s saw a major financial depression in the United States, which devastated many families and left many people out of work. Increasingly, funding for Missions in China became more difficult, even from longtime supporters of the Boone Library School. It was no longer feasible for Samuel Seng and the Library School to fundraise for continued support. Although the Bishops and officers in New York continued to support Boone Library School's existence and its public cause, his and other University salaries were further and further cut, to the point that the Bishop of Hankow wondered that he didn't leave Boone Library School to take a better and more prestigious position in the north. The Bishop explained in a letter to the Mary Wood Foundation Samuel Seng's response:

"I have just had a heart-to-heart talk with Mr. Seng, and he stated to me that he could not face the prospect of working in a non-Christian institution...that he would rather stay with us than undertake a larger prospect in the north."

Perhaps, like Mary Wood, Samuel Seng also felt a calling. Following her example, he chose to stay at Boone with little or no salary in order to remain in an institution that allowed him to live and work as a Christian, where he could best serve those who needed him. He did stay at Boone Library School, through its many transitions during the Sino-Japanese War, and when it was

absorbed by the National Wuhan University. Both the “Father” and “Mother” of modern libraries in China devoted their careers and lives to the call to do God’s work.

At the age of 38 Mary Elizabeth Wood arrived in China, welcomed by her brother and the missionary community. The time she spent at the Boone Compound as a teacher and librarian in the first seven years nurtured in her a call to live out her Christian promise and do God’s work in China as an Episcopal missionary. That work included strengthening ties between the American and Chinese people, fostering an educational and cultural exchange that continues today.

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