

# Falling in Love with the White Snake: On Woodbridge's Rewriting of the Legend

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*This essay examines American missionary Samuel I. Woodbridge's 1896 rendition of the White Snake legend, *The Mystery of the White Snake*, in the context of his missionary and diplomatic endeavors. It argues for a close reading of the English text as a contribution to the White Snake repertoire, both in its literary qualities and in its articulation of the idea and practice of love and empathy. Woodbridge's intention of using the White Snake text to reveal the danger of the Chinese popular mind and to critique the Buddhist doctrine of transmigration and its outdated practice of "animal worship," however, backfired. He was seduced by the White Snake legend he had set out to criticize and was able to better understand the Chinese popular mind he had hoped to reform, through powerfully resilient popular legends such as the White Snake.*

**Keywords:** Samuel I. Woodbridge, *The Mystery of the White Snake*, American missionary activities in China, Chinese popular mind

The status of the Chinese popular mind in its abnormal cravings, may be compared with the physical condition of a fever patient. Unable, through ignorance, to extend the operations of thought further than the borders of the Inner Land and requiring something far beyond the resources of China to satisfy the natural and normal desire, it has peopled the earth, the air, and the sea with all sorts of ghosts, hobgoblins, fairies and dragons. For this lamentable fact, the Buddhist doctrine of transmigration is largely responsible. Certain it is, that the people think that animals and reptiles were once men, and men were once animals and reptiles. Such being the case, it is no wonder that the ordinary and commonplace occurrences on this planet seem tame and insipid when put alongside the thrilling adventures of their imaginary heroes (Woodbridge, *White Snake* 410).

So opens Samuel I. Woodbridge's (1856-1926) introduction to his 1896 English rendition of the Chinese White Snake legend, titled *The Mystery of the White Snake*. Woodbridge regarded the White Snake legend as a key to deciphering what he saw as the feverish "Chinese popular mind." Regardless of whether he had been directly influenced by French psychologist Gustave Le Bon's (1895) theories on crowds and the popular mind, Woodbridge used scientific language,

especially medical and psychological terminology, to diagnose the problems of the “Chinese popular mind” and thus find their root causes. Curiously, his scientific, medical, and psychological inquiries into the “Inner Land” of the Chinese physical and mental landscapes convinced him of the primary role of “the Buddhist doctrine of transmigration” in Chinese popular beliefs. Wielding the weapons of the latest scientific thinking, Woodbridge found such a Chinese mentality abnormal and lamentable, and he earnestly sought for its salvation. Such an attempt at “saving Chinese souls,” however, eventually engendered his own conversion into a lover of the White Snake and the mysterious world of Chinese popular legends.

Woodbridge’s preface to his translation, dissecting the Chinese legend and the Chinese popular mind from the perspective of the modern—and in this case, Western—Other, provides an intriguing starting point for exploring the legend’s reinvention in English, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and other languages and cultural traditions from the late nineteenth century to the present day. An American missionary active in China in the late nineteenth century, Woodbridge’s rendition of the Chinese legend was serialized in the pages of *The North-China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette* between September 4 and October 16, 1896. This was an English-language newspaper and the official publication of the British Supreme Court for China and Japan and the British Consulate in Shanghai. The serialized chapters were then collected and printed at the office of *The North-China Herald* in Shanghai later the same year, as a slim thirty-four-page pamphlet selling at fifty cents per copy,<sup>1</sup> at the time a significant but still affordable price tag for the opportunity to read a popular Chinese legend in English. In the same introduction, Woodbridge went on to offer his detailed diagnosis of what he saw as the problem with the Chinese popular mind and its possible cure:

The *nil admirer* attitude of the Chinese, that is apparent even to the most casual observer, may be partly accounted for by the fact that in every department of thought and action their traditions contain the deeds of demigods more exceedingly wonderful than any actual sublunary character ever produced. . . . In order to render the native intellect capable of receiving and assimilating true knowledge, the fever above mentioned must first be reduced. We believe that the plain Gospel of Jesus Christ, with its long train of beneficent effects upon the world and mankind, will clarify the mind of the Chinese, as well as accomplish the farther reaching and more enduring result of saving their souls (“The Mystery of the White Snake,” 410).

Looking back from a modern, secular perspective, we can certainly discredit Woodbridge’s proposal for “saving Chinese souls” by observing its propagandizing nature. Indeed, his propagation of Christianity had as its target what he perceived as the most influential religion in China at the time, Buddhism. Examined from a secular viewpoint, which became increasingly influential in China after the May Fourth movement of the early twentieth century,<sup>2</sup> the objectivity of Woodbridge’s perspective certainly becomes suspect. Indeed, he had been

serving as a missionary of the Presbyterian Church of the United States in China for well over a decade by the time he published this introduction in 1896.

However, such a criticism of Woodbridge's "religious propaganda" is colored by an unjustified presentism, which I would like to avoid in this study. Instead, I would like to reconsider Woodbridge in his historical context and examine what he identified as a decisive influence on the Chinese popular mind, "the Buddhist doctrine of transmigration," in more detail. As the popular legend has it, the White Snake's power lies in its ability to metamorphose into human form. Such a belief in this kind of transformation from animal to human is as old as Chinese culture itself, as demonstrated in *The Animal and the Daemon in Early China* (Sterckx, 2002). So, it is indeed quite a stretch to attribute such beliefs to Buddhism, a later import from India (during the Han period, 206 BCE–220 CE). In fact, even in Buddhist belief, once you are reborn in a certain form, you cannot change it as long as you live—a rather inflexible sort of transmigration, where the boundary between human and nonhuman still holds, at least during one's lifetime. This fixed form for life is vividly expressed in contemporary Chinese writer and Nobel Laureate Mo Yan's novel *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out* (*Shengsi pilao* 生死疲勞), in which the male protagonist is reborn as a donkey, an ox, a pig, a dog, and a monkey, before finally being born again as a human.<sup>3</sup>

In Woodbridge's diagnosis, "the thrilling adventures of their imaginary heroes" and the "exceedingly wonderful" demigods were detrimental to the Chinese popular mind and hindered the capacity of the Chinese to receive and assimilate "true knowledge." On the front page of his pamphlet (*White Snake*), Woodbridge included the Chinese translation of Romans 1:23, "不崇永生上帝之榮反拜速朽世人禽獸昆蟲之像," which, in the English Revised Version of the Bible popular in the 1880s, appeared as "[they] changed the glory of the incorruptible God for the likeness of an image of corruptible man, and of birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things." Woodbridge likely took the Chinese translation of Romans 1:23 from Joseph Edkins's *Correcting the Mistakes in Buddhism* (*Shijiao zhengmiu* 釋教正謬) (4). Using the legend of White Snake as a prime example, Woodbridge framed his translation of it as an endeavor to critique Buddhism and animal worship in order to foreground a possible shortcoming in the Chinese popular mind and to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

### Inspirations from Kentucky

Although framed as means to promote Christianity and critique Buddhism, Woodbridge's rendition of the White Snake legend nonetheless presents an intriguing early representation of the Chinese legend in the English language that is both accessible for popular consumption and worthy of critical engagement. My undergraduate students at the University of Kentucky provided some of the early inspirations for my own thinking, as quite a few of them readily identify with Woodbridge, who, like them, grew up Christian in Kentucky. One of the central

questions they posed is whether—if the reader cannot categorize the White Snake as a beast or a human—Woodbridge’s original intent in telling this story was successful? One of the students, a girl of mixed racial background who was born and raised in Northern Kentucky, considered Woodbridge’s portrayal of the White Snake extremely “ambiguous.” For her, the persona that Woodbridge had wanted to build up, the enchantress who bewitches, does not provide room for human love or value. However, throughout the story she is given surprisingly humane qualities. For instance, Woodbridge tells the reader that she “loved devotedly” (*White Snake* 10). Such personification adds complexity to the reader’s perception of the White Snake, who is both demon and human, and who simultaneously possesses the power to love and empathize while being a “brute creation,” as Woodbridge insisted early on in his narrative (2).

Another question raised by my Kentucky students has to do with Woodbridge’s choice of names for the characters. Having read English translations of many other (often later) Chinese versions, the radically Westernized names for some of the leading characters, such as “Albia” (for the White Snake) and “Flora” (for the Green Snake) posed a challenge to my students. One student worried whether this would undermine “the longstanding cultural value of the legend.” Another responded by highlighting the “Westernized and mysterious mood” fostered by these names and observed that the name “Albia” conveyed “a magical aura” that seemed appropriate for the White Snake character, while the name “Flora” suggested a close relationship with nature and wildness and thus corresponded with Green Snake’s somewhat “beastlike” persona. The students’ final question, however, has to do with Woodbridge’s radical shift of purpose from earlier Chinese versions, from cautioning its audience to “beware of desire” to “spreading the Gospel.” One student concluded, “This is a first-hand example of the plasticity of folklore and how interpretations can alter the storyline just a little bit to elicit new ideas. For me, this provides more evidence that the storyteller has no control over the story, and it is in fact the readers that make the story meaningful and unique” (“Woodbridge Reading Response”).

### **Turn of the Twentieth Century Anglophone Rewritings**

Accounts by American missionaries and diplomats, including Samuel I. Woodbridge’s aforementioned *Mystery of the White Snake* and Frederick D. Cloud’s (fl. early 20<sup>th</sup> c.) *Hangchow, the “City of Heaven”* (1906), served both as guides for tourists and as cultural primers on China for English readers at the time. Their perspectives on the White Snake legend accentuated the conflict between animal worship and the worship of God and framed the White Snake legend as a folk remnant of primitive animism, awaiting religious and modernist salvation. The correlation between Christian teaching and modern enlightenment may seem at odds to many in today’s increasingly secular world, but Woodridge’s and Cloud’s generation of Western missionaries, diplomats, businessmen, and travelers saw Christianity and Western culture, including science and technology, as one indivisible whole.

More importantly, Woodbridge and Cloud afforded the White Snake legend its immortality in the English language through their extensive and often loving engagements with the Chinese material, strengthened by their lived experience in Zhenjiang, Hangzhou, and Suzhou—cities central to the White Snake narratives. Although the spread of Woodbridge’s and Cloud’s renditions of the White Snake legends may have been limited to English-reading communities in China, they did publish and circulate their writings through prominent channels closely connected with both the missionary and the diplomatic circles. As a result, and sometimes unwittingly, they further popularized the White Snake legends in the English-reading world at large and contributed to their changing iconographies at the turn of the twentieth century. In the following section, I will provide a preliminary analysis of Woodbridge’s renditions of the White Snake legend and will reserve my analysis of Cloud’s rewriting for a separate study.

### *The Mystery of the White Snake*

To make the Chinese White Snake legend more relatable to readers of English and to suggest meaningful distinctions between the human male protagonist and the snake women, Woodbridge names his characters in evocative ways. As my students pointed out, the White Snake is given a Latin name, “Albia,” while her human husband is referred to only as “Hanwin” (漢文 Hanwen), using his courtesy name in Chinese without even mentioning his family name Xu (許). Hanwen’s married sister and her husband, two minor human characters, are both given fully Westernized names, and first names only, “Grace” and “Leigh” respectively. Hanwen is the only character in Woodbridge’s rendition whose Chinese name is preserved. Woodbridge describes Hanwen as “very handsome” at the beginning of the narrative and remarks that “he had beautiful eyes, and was graceful in body, and of a happy, cheerful disposition” (“White Snake” 410). Moreover, Woodbridge constantly emphasizes Hanwen’s “beauty” throughout the narrative in an effort to justify other characters’ emotional attachment to him. In contrast, the White Snake is introduced as a “brute creation,” who, having “spent eighteen hundred years in mediation, seeking to attain perfection,” would never be able to reach that state (410). Later in the story, Woodbridge introduces a Daoist priest, Manetho of Mow Mountain (Maoshan daoshi 茅山道士), as a noted exorcist who ends up being overpowered by Albia. Woodbridge’s naming the Daoist priest Manetho invites an association with Manetho the ancient Egyptian priest (Dillery) and lends a mythical quality to this minor character who is mainly used to buttress the display of Albia’s supernatural powers. Woodbridge’s verdict on the legend, at least at the beginning of chapter 1, echoes the premise he lays out in the introduction. He sees the legend as demonstrating the “feverish” state of the Chinese popular mind and the need for a cure. And that cure, Woodbridge announces in the first installment of his rendition of the White Snake legend, published on September 4, 1896, was the plain teaching of Jesus Christ.

It is difficult to determine exactly which versions of the legend Woodbridge may have based his rendition upon, as what we now call the “standard” version, Feng Menglong’s (馮夢

龍, 1574-1646) seventeenth-century vernacular tale (ch. 28), was hardly known in the late nineteenth century, while the stories told in string ballads (*tanci* 彈詞), precious scrolls (*baojuan* 寶卷), and other genres were quite different from what we consider the standard today. However, it is conceivable that Woodbridge based his rendition on a number of different sources, including stories told to him locally in Zhenjiang, where he had been serving as a missionary of the US Presbyterian Church since 1882, and where the climactic flood scene in the White Snake legend supposedly took place.

It is very likely that Woodbridge may have based his version on the first Western-language translation of the White Snake legend, Stanislas Julien's 1834 rendition in French, *Blanche et Bleue, ou Les deux couleuvres-fées; roman chinois*, itself a rendition of the 1806 Chinese version of the legend, *The Strange Tale of the White Snake* (*Leifengta qizhuan* 雷峰塔奇傳), attributed to a certain Yushan zhuren (玉山主人).<sup>4</sup> As the French version had already been introduced in the English-speaking world in the form of a summary later in 1834,<sup>5</sup> and an English rendition based on the same Chinese source text was serialized in full in 1864,<sup>6</sup> this cluster of texts, ranging from Chinese, French, and English and published between 1806 and 1888—the last being Wong Chin Foo's (王清福, 1847-1898) short story "Poh Yui Ko, The Serpent-Princess" published in *The Cosmopolitan* in 1888—were some of the most likely candidates to have influenced Woodbridge's 1896 English rendition, either directly or indirectly.

The nineteenth-century string ballads version *The Complete Illustrated Righteous Snake* (*Xiuxiang yiyao quanzhuan* 繡像義妖全傳) by Chen Yuqian (陳遇乾, fl. early 19<sup>th</sup> c.) may also have had some influence. It was first printed in 1809 and became popular through numerous performances and reprints throughout the nineteenth century (Chen 1809). It is also likely that Woodbridge may have known the version of the legend collected in *Beautiful Tales of the West Lake* (*Xihu jiahua* 西湖佳話, 1673), as the Feng Menglong version from a few decades earlier seems to have dropped out of circulation by the end of the seventeenth century. Moreover, it is often understood that missionaries rarely, if ever, read string ballads in print form, as these were very long and often very poorly printed, while a Buddhist precious scroll version would much more likely catch the eye of a missionary owing to its better-quality prints. It is still more likely, however, that Woodbridge may have based his version on the first Western-language translation of the White Snake legend, Julien's nineteenth-century fictional rendition in French, as it was likely more influential at Woodbridge's time and more accessible to him, along with the possible Chinese sources.

Regardless of his actual sources, Woodbridge's intimate touch in portraying his male protagonist Hanwen is rather different from both Feng Menglong's focus on the "lust, caution" morality tale in the vernacular story and Chen Yuqian's focus on the righteous White Snake in the string ballads version. Woodbridge makes important editorial choices in his English rendition and highlights the emotional intimacies of his protagonists, especially Hanwen. Accentuating the male perspective, he first follows Hanwen in Hangzhou where he begins learning the trade of a pharmacist at an apothecary's shop. Woodbridge then moves on to the Cavern of the Pure Wind

in Sichuan to introduce the White Snake. He introduces her as a creature of deception, who lied to the God of the North Star and swore, “If I am not speaking the truth, let the Thunder Peak Tower crush my body” (*White Snake* 3), thereby planting the fatal seed of her future entrapment. Woodbridge then introduces the Green Snake, who fights the White Snake at their first encounter and loses miserably. This is also how Woodbridge shows the White Snake as possessing “a superhuman power over nature and man” (4).

Woodbridge continues to emphasize Hanwen’s good looks, his “thoughts of love” in the springtime, and, most importantly, his “love at first sight.” On seeing the beautiful White Snake by the West Lake: “the young man’s heart beat rapidly,” and he “stood rooted to the spot,” “completely bewitched” (5). After lending his umbrella to Albia and Flora in the rain, Hanwen goes to their residence to claim it and is entertained with food and drink. Woodbridge has him declare his passion toward Albia first; she promises to be his wife afterwards—possibly the only time in any White Snake rendition that the human male takes the lead in confessing his love. Our tour of the male psyche continues as Woodbridge includes an account of the snake woman’s theft of silver, which causes the young man’s exile to Suzhou, echoing plot developments in earlier Chinese versions of the story. Here Woodbridge brings the human sensibility of his snake-woman protagonist Albia to the forefront, reassuring readers that she longs for Hanwen, “whom she now loved devotedly” (10).

In one of the pivotal scenes in the legend, Woodbridge renders Albia’s climactic transformation in terms that are exceedingly graphic, even by today’s standards: “Oh, horror! A large snake with a head like a bushel, and eyes flushing fire discovered up in the bed. Slowly uncoiling itself, with fangs gleaming, and mouth dripping blood, it moved towards him, hissing as it came!” (15).<sup>7</sup> After transforming to her original snake form by drinking medicated wine, and scaring her husband literally to death, Albia risks her life to steal a precious herb that will restore him. Fated to be the mother of the God of Literature and to be crushed under Thunder Peak Pagoda for her lie to the God of the North Star—according to the Goddess of Mercy (Guanyin 觀音)—she is given the herb to save the father of her future son. Intriguingly, Woodbridge grants full humanity to Albia right after this scene, as he has her suddenly appearing to be dead after being attacked on her homeward journey, no different from any mortal. Albia has to be revived, and upon arriving home, revives her husband and regains his “love and trust” by using a handkerchief to produce the magical illusion of a dead White Snake (17).

In humanizing the demonic White Snake and even granting her divinity, Woodbridge goes as far as having Albia appear as the Goddess of Mercy to direct the local Prefect to her husband so Hanwen can cure the Prefect’s wife and gain business and good reputation.<sup>8</sup> When Albia finds out that Hanwen has again been arrested for the goods she had stolen, we learn that “her heart was burdened with grief for she loved him tenderly” (20). Woodbridge then has Albia cross-dress as “a finely dressed young man,” with Flora as “a servant,” delivering money to Hanwen’s brother-in-law in Hangzhou before following him to the city of his exile, Zhenjiang.<sup>9</sup> Albia and Hanwen are reunited in Zhenjiang and live happily together until Fahai (法海), a Buddhist abbot with the power to recognize and exorcise demons and spirits, meets Hanwen and

advises him to leave his snake wife: “The White Snake wields a wonderful power, and will exert it to the utmost to bewitch you and bring you back, because she loves you devotedly, and, were she not of the brute creation, would be a model wife” (24). Here Woodbridge really seems to have had a problem reconciling Albia’s identities as both a bewitching snake spirit and a possible “model wife” full of humanity, especially on the question of her love for Hanwen. He continues to buttress her humanity through her confession of devotion to Hanwen: “I did evil only that good might come to him” (24).

Even after Albia and Flora flood Golden Island (Golden Mountain Monastery) and rampage through Zhenjiang city to reclaim Hanwen, Hanwen, on meeting Albia again in Hangzhou, cannot fulfill his promise to become a monk because “the love he had always cherished for his wife, the natural feeling for her distress, and the many proofs of her devotion to him” hold him back (27). The couple settle in Hangzhou with the help of Leigh and Grace, where Albia assumes full human vulnerability when the vengeful Manetho sends his pupil, the “centipede ghost,” to harm her: “When she looked up, just before her, stretched along his full length, crouched the venomous insect, his fangs all showing ready to strike. Albia screamed in terror and fell swooning to the ground” (28). Here Woodbridge has deprived Albia of all her supernatural power and made her a fragile wife. Albia’s full humanity is later confirmed when she gives birth to a perfect human boy, “Dream Dragon” (Mengjiao 夢蛟). Intriguingly, Woodbridge has Albia confess her identity to all present when she is eventually captured by Fahai’s bowl: “I must tell you now that I am the White Snake of Pure Winds Cavern. In a former life my husband rescued me from a beggar who was about to kill me, and I have tried to recompense him as well as I could. All my actions towards you, dear husband, have been prompted by love” (29). In the end, Woodbridge manages to maintain the “happy ending” already popularized in his sources, where there is no villain: Fahai fulfills Buddha’s order and sets the White Snake free upon her son’s attaining the highest rank in the imperial examination; as a result, Hanwen and the White Snake both reach perfection and ascend to heaven.

### **Falling in Love with the White Snake, Finding the Mainspring of Chinese Popular Thought**

Woodbridge’s evident love for the Chinese legend and his intimate portrayals of its loving, impulsive, and devoted young protagonists, be they a human man or a snake woman, seems to have been at odds with his pronounced purpose of critiquing the animal worship of the Chinese popular mind “polluted” by Buddhism. In fact, Woodbridge’s rendition appears to have absorbed a significant portion of the popular stage performance and storytelling versions of the day, which he might have enjoyed in the tea houses and other performance venues while he lived in Zhenjiang, and later in Shanghai, where he relocated after 1902. This is notable, since the general perception of missionaries at the time was that they were not inclined to go to local performances even after residing in China for an extended period.<sup>10</sup> In this regard, Woodbridge



may indeed be an exception, although we cannot be certain about his participation in popular storytelling culture in China, as there is no concrete evidence showing him attending stage and musical performances.

Quite remarkably, within such an imaginary world filled with ghosts and goblins, Woodbridge did manage to bestow love and devotion, as well as psychological depth, on humans and nonhumans alike, making his text a new and rather successful English addition to the “feverish” world created by the Chinese popular mind, the world he set out to condemn and redeem. However, for Woodbridge love was not feverish, because it was based on human emotions and modern sensibilities. Having revamped a “superstitious” legend into a modern love story, Woodbridge could be considered as having brought the Chinese legend into the orbit of romantic English literature. Such a framework of finding indigenous traditions as lacking and considering Westernization as bringing “true” versions of modern practices into them can also be seen in Lynn Pan’s *When True Love Came to China*.<sup>11</sup> It is important to connect Woodbridge’s representation of the White Snake legend as a love story with the romantic tradition’s appropriation of the Chinese legend. The link between this form of Westernization and Woodbridge’s chief purpose, Christianization, needs to be spelled out. His express purpose of spreading Christianity, as we will see, sometimes was not best served as he entered more deeply into the role of a participant observer of the Chinese popular mind he set out to reform.

In 1895, one year before the publication of *The Mystery of the White Snake*, Woodbridge had already published his translation of another Chinese legend, *The Golden-Horned Dragon King* (*Jinjiao longwang* 金角龍王), also at the *North-China Herald* office in Shanghai. The front page of the sixteen-page pamphlet bears the Chinese epigraph “敬鬼神遠之,” attributed to Confucius in the *Analects*, and translated by James Legge as “while respecting spiritual beings, to keep aloof from them” (55). James Legge’s translation had been published from the early 1860s onwards, and was reprinted in the early 1890s, just prior to Woodbridge’s translating Chinese legends filled with “spiritual beings.”

However, in his translator’s preface immediately following this cover page, Woodbridge alerts his readers that it would be a mistake to suppose that the classics (such as those translated by Legge) “form the mainspring of Chinese popular thought and action” (Woodbridge, *Dragon King*, 1). Arguing for the central importance of the imaginary realm in Chinese life, Woodbridge reminds his readers that “the people believe a story like this (the Dragon King) as thoroughly as we do the history of George Washington,” and that “while comparatively few people study Confucius, all classes, men and women, old and young, rich and poor, eagerly devour and digest stories like the ‘Golden-Horned Dragon King’” (1). It is revealing to consider this earlier volume in the context of *The Mystery of the White Snake*, and how Woodbridge ended up forgetting the teachings he quoted from the Bible and the *Analects* on the front pages of both books, becoming hopelessly seduced by the power of popular spirituality in Chinese life, time and again.

### **Translation as Participant Observation, and the Use of the White Snake**

Only a few years later, in 1900, Woodbridge wrote in a prefatory note to another of his translations from Chinese, *China's Only Hope*, a rendition of Zhang Zhidong's (張之洞, 1837-1909) *An Exhortation to Learning* (*Quan xue pian* 勸學篇), that his own translation was wrought "with a free hand," as he believed "that a strict adherence to mere words is slavish, and that the spirit and genius of translation consists in conveying the thought of one language into another by the shortest and quickest route" ("Translator's Note" 8). This statement offers insight into Woodbridge's unique engagement with the Chinese originals. It might seem a big leap from the retelling of the Dragon King and the White Snake legends to a translation of treatises on the future of China sanctioned by its emperor at the time (Chang). However, I would argue that both texts served Woodbridge well in providing important platforms for his attempts to "cure" the Chinese popular mind of the effects of Buddhism, and to explore the possibility that Christianity could provide the solution for the problems that China was facing. Zhang Zhidong's position of encouraging foreign learning while maintaining Confucian teachings, in particular, proved to be of special interest to missionaries such as Woodbridge and Griffith John.<sup>12</sup>

Woodbridge was eventually commissioned to write *Fifty Years in China* (1918), a book of church history to be used as a textbook on the China mission (1867-1917) of the Presbyterian Church in the United States. In the section on "superstition," he wrote, "the Chinese firmly believe that there are demons in the air, demons on land, in the earth, in the water — *"in all things too superstitious."* The clog to all progress in China consists in what the people call *fengshui*, literally *wind and water*" (*Fifty Years in China* 41). Readers of Woodbridge's rendition of the White Snake legend knew what he was referring to when he emphasized the impact of "superstition" on the Chinese popular mind: "the outcome of all this is the deep impression on the minds of the deluded people of the terrible power possessed by revengeful demons and ghosts," and "no foreigner even now can fathom the depth of these devilish beliefs, and strange as it may seem, the revolution which has opened the way for the Gospel in such a marvelous way has done little to break the chains of superstition that have bound the common people for such a long period" (41-42).

Due to the anticipated large female readership of the projected textbook and the need to address women's issues in mission work, Woodbridge included a whole chapter titled "Woman's Work for Women," and specifically mentioned "the marvelous transmigrations of the 'White Snake'" as an example of the "lesser literature" preferred by Chinese women (166). Although, in the context of church history, Woodbridge was obliged to frame the legend of the White Snake as a negative example of "disastrous consequences" to the Chinese imagination (166), one has to recognize the weight he bestowed upon the legend and the serious attention he gave to it in what became the official history of the US Presbyterian mission in China.

The case of *Hangchow, the "City of Heaven,"* which includes another full rendition of the White Snake legend, is similar. Written by the American diplomat Frederick D. Cloud, who served as the Vice-Consul at the American Consulate when the book was published in 1906, the legend emerged as a central thread connecting captivating accounts of Hangzhou's history and

geography, reports on local Christian missionary activities, and other forms of “reliable and practical knowledge” (73-102). Cloud’s book was published by the Presbyterian mission press in Shanghai. Although not all diplomats looked kindly on the activities of missionaries at the time, Cloud’s case does suggest possible, perhaps even intimate, connections between the diplomats and the missionaries. It is intriguing to consider how much weight the American diplomat, closely connected to the Presbyterian mission, gave to retelling the White Snake legend in a book on the Chinese city, Hangzhou. Two years later, Cloud was already listed as the American Vice-Consul-General of Shanghai, a substantial promotion (Cloud, *Digest*). For both Woodbridge and Cloud, the legend of the White Snake served an important function in their missionary and diplomatic careers, which were themselves closely intertwined. The legend formed and informed their understanding of what they came to see as fundamental to the nature of the Chinese popular mind, especially its reliance on the Buddhist doctrine of transmigration and metamorphosis to form an intimate connection between the human and the nonhuman.

### Concluding Remarks

The case of Woodbridge and Cloud demonstrates the centrality of the White Snake legend in missionary and diplomatic discourse at the turn of the twentieth century. Did the American observers overstate the case? Did the voices and opinions that appeared in China’s Anglophone press at the time truly capture the spirit of the Chinese popular mind, which they so desperately sought to understand and remold? I deal with these questions in a separate study on the retelling of the White Snake legend in the Chinese press around the turn of the twentieth century, using rich accounts regarding the White Snake in *Shenbao* (申報 “Shanghai News”) as my main case study. From technological breakthroughs to shifting gender-related performance paradigms, from the gender politics of the legends to the social debates triggered by the White Snake narratives, these accounts supply the cultural context for Woodbridge’s and Cloud’s taking the White Snake legends so seriously and bringing them into the Anglophone world at a time contemporary to a Chinese popular obsession with the snake women. As an industry and a vibrant cultural phenomenon deeply connected to Chinese people’s everyday life, the White Snake legends were not merely problems that the American missionaries and diplomats needed to solve as they attempted to treat the “feverish Chinese popular mind” and “save Chinese souls.” Rather, they animated new possibilities of being human in China’s many transitional paths from an imperial dynasty to a modern republic, through deep engagements with the new media scenes at the time, in various print forms, via radio airwaves, onstage, and on the silver screen.

There are issues that deserve further attention as we pursue this line of inquiry, especially concerning the ways in which the White Snake legends were re-envisioned, revised, re-formed, retold, and reinterpreted to suit a variety of points of view and purposes while challenging others, both sociocultural and political, in the Chinese-speaking world, across East Asian and Southeast Asian countries and regions, and elsewhere. The resilience and resonance of legends that can

continually become relevant again and again and the complicated relationship between the “traditional” and the “modern” that runs throughout these narratives, deserve further scrutiny. Suffice it here to say that falling in love with the White Snake legend facilitated the American observers in their understanding of the power and resilience of the legendary in shaping the Chinese popular mind at a transformative time for both the observer and the observed.

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Since this article’s original publication by *Literature and Modern China* in 2019, the content of the article has been included in Luo Liang’s monograph, *The Global White Snake*.

### Endnotes

1. According to a contemporary account, the Chinese *yuan* was introduced at par with the Mexican *peso* and was divided into 100 cents. See “Currency of China,” *The Banking Law Journal*, vol. 15, 1898, p. 150; also see Ulrich Theobald, “Qing Period Money,” April 13, 2016, <http://www.chinaknowledge.de/History/Terms/cash-qing.html>, accessed June 8, 2018.

2. The May Fourth New Culture Movement from the mid-1910s to the mid-1920s ushered in a secular, scientific, democratic, and romantic tradition in modern Chinese cultural history during Woodbridge’s residency in China. For more on the May Fourth movement, see Chow, L. Lee, Lin, and Doležlová-Velingerová and Sanders.

3. Mo Yan also opened up his novel to the impermanence of self even within a lifetime and emphasized the novel’s antiauthoritarian function. See Huang, “A Buddhist Perspective,” 224 and Lee, *The Stranger and the Chinese Moral Imagination*, 99-100.

4. “Avertissement,” in Julien, *Blanche et Bleue, ou Les deux couleuvres-fées; roman chinois*, xi-xii. Julien cited a Chinese version from 1807 and credited it to “*Iu-chân-tchu-jîn*.”

5. “White and Blue; or the Serpent Fairies,” in *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, 307, and 315-321.

6. H. C., “Lüi-fung Tă, ‘Thunder-Peak Pagoda,’ or ‘The Story of Han-wăn and the White Serpent,’” in *The Chinese and Japanese Repository of Facts and Events in Science, History, and Art, Relating to Eastern Asia*, Vol. 1, 357-365, 401-410, 429-435, 461-468, 503-513; Vol. 2, 11-19, 89-97.

7. Woodbridge may be influenced by Ovid or Virgil here.

8. Both the White Snake and the female Guanyin in the Chinese tradition may well have derived from snake cults in the Jiangnan region during the Tang Dynasty (Chün-fang Yü).

9. Woodbridge had resided in Zhenjiang for well over a decade by the time of his writing in 1896.

10. As portrayed in Pearl Buck’s biography of her father, who also served as a missionary in Zhenjiang at the time and knew Woodbridge personally (Buck, 66).

11. Haiyan Lee, in her review of Pan’s book, cautions against such divisions between China and the West, traditional love and modern true love, and urges scholars to engage with the

growing and truly multidisciplinary scholarship on emotion, “to situate love in a larger affective terrain and map out its relationship to other emotions, attachments, loyalties, values, and ideals.” (H. Lee).

12. Griffith John, having retranslated the Bible into Chinese, wrote an introduction to *China's Only Hope*, since Zhang's promotion of Western learning as a means of strengthening the Chinese “body politic” and its insistence on “religious toleration,” though it stopped short of openly promoting Christianity, still fitted well with the larger missionary goals in China at the time.

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