

Discovering the Story of Missionaries in China Through Scrapbooks & Letters

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Hazel Littlefield Smith papers, Box 1, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.
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Archival research yields a view of private life that can sharpen the focus of more general, overall perceptions of history. One good example of the way archives can do this lies in the close examination of the personal papers of the Dennis Smith-Hazel Littlefield family, deposited in the Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan. The Smiths lived in Peking and worked at the Methodist Mission Hospital from 1915-1928. They faithfully wrote letters home and made scrapbooks of photos recording their life and work as missionaries. One of these shows many Chinese patients with serious eye diseases such as tumors Dr. Smith (an eye surgeon) surgically rectified. One important service was the

correction strabismus (cross-eyed or wall-eyed), a condition that hampered the marriage eligibility of girls, which in Chinese society at the time would leave women without homes or any type of support. Although much has been written over the years about the massive commitment made in China by American religious missionary societies, the first-hand accounts of this missionary family provide an immediacy and poignancy that the histories of the "big picture" cannot possibly convey. By combining research in several different media, one can discover and construe a narrative that in this case constitutes a powerful memoir of missionaries working in alien social and political circumstances.