

Discovering the Story of Missionaries in China through Scrapbooks and Letters

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Abstract: 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. Dr. Dennis and Hazel Littlefield Smith lived in Beijing 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 that Dr. Smith (an eye surgeon) surgically rectified. One important service was the correction of 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.

About the author:

Pat Buckler is a faculty member in the Department of English at Indiana University Northwest. She holds a Ph.D. in Rhetoric and Composition from the University of Louisville, and she is Professor Emerita of English at Purdue University, where she served in the English Department at Purdue University North Central for twenty years. She has written a number of articles about scrapbooks and co-edited *The Scrapbook in American Life* (Temple UP 2006) with Susan Tucker and Katherine Ott. Her other main research interests are composition pedagogy and detective fiction.