

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 Smith family, deposited in the Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan. Dr. Dennis and Hazel Littlefield Smith lived in Peking [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 scrapbooks 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 have left women without homes or any type of support. Dr. Smith also corresponded with the Methodist Board of Foreign Missions. About 250 pages exist in The General Commission on Archives and History of The United Methodist Church.

Although much has been written over the years about the massive commitment made to 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 totally convey. By combining research in several different media, one can discover and compose a narrative that in this case constitutes a powerful memoir of missionaries working in alien social and political circumstances.

Introduction

Archives contain valuable images and texts that, when interpreted, offer fresh and original insights into many personal lives and cultural situations. They provide opportunities to discover and present narratives that exist as seemingly unconnected fragments of people’s life records. 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 Smith family, deposited in the Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan. Both graduates of the University of Michigan, the Smiths joined the team of missionaries stationed at the Methodist Mission Hospital in Peking [Beijing] from 1915–1928. Besides the hospital, the Methodist establishment there included a school, college, nursing school, medical school, and seminary. Dr. Dennis Smith was an eye surgeon who not only practiced in the hospital’s eye clinic, but also trained native physicians in his field. Throughout their stay, the Smiths faithfully wrote letters home and made scrapbooks of photos recording their lives and work. The scrapbooks show both professional and personal events, including photos of the clinic and hospital facilities, members of the mission staff and their families, and the Chinese students, doctors, and nurses who worked with them. One scrapbook shows many Chinese patients with serious eye diseases, such as tumors, that Dr. Smith surgically rectified. Dr. Smith’s letters to family and friends in Michigan are chatty, informative, and unfailingly cheerful, even when he is facing the dissolution of his Chinese home and medical practice, and the destruction of numerous other Christian missions during the civil wars. He and his wife, Hazel, kept meticulous records of their work, and reading their many letters fills in details of events chronicled in the scrapbooks.

Although much has been written in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries about the massive commitment made to 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 totally convey. Examining and interpreting these items as a whole, one can discover and compose a narrative that constitutes a powerful memoir of American Protestant missionaries working in alien social and political circumstances.

Letters and scrapbooks taken together form an interconnected web of meaning in which each strand resonates with the other strands to weave a complete story together. The discrete parts tell a bit of the tale, but the parts taken altogether communicate a whole message. This relationship among texts is the basis of the theory of *intertextuality*¹, a concept that originated in the late twentieth century among post-structuralist theorists in semiotics, linguistics, cultural studies, and literature. Julia Kristeva is credited with coining the term, but other theorists have expanded and modified it.

Daniel Chandler defines it: “Intertextuality refers to the various links in form and content which bind a text to other texts. Each text exists in relation to others. Although the debts of a text to other texts are seldom acknowledged, texts owe more to other texts than to their own makers. Texts provide contexts such as genre within which other texts may be created and interpreted.”

Each item signifies a meaning that is derived from other texts or artifacts. Understanding, then, depends on the relationship between a text and all other texts it references, so that rather than seeing a single text, the reader looks at the whole, or the “intertext.” (Allen 2000). Furthermore, intertexts are not necessarily literary, but include all signifying practices ranging from historical documents to, for instance, table settings. In other words, reading the letters and scrapbooks together yields a more complete story than reading any single one of them alone. And each person who reads them will discover a different narrative.

In the light of this definition, it is easy to see the scrapbook as intertext, since it literally weaves together threads of already written and already read texts, images, and artifacts. The scrapbook is the ideal object for intertextual investigation because its obvious connection with other texts is visible upon its pages. The creator of a scrapbook acts upon other texts by combining them to represent something new, concretely carrying out the pattern of reading intertextually with paper and scissors and glue. The significance of any scrapbook resonates beyond the immediate circumstances of its composition, because the manner in which a scrapbook takes meaning from other texts makes it more than a simple artifact. Furthermore, once the new text is formed, it becomes available for fresh readers to bring their own “other” texts to infuse it with new meanings. The richness of the interpretation expands when outside documents such as letters are woven into this web.

While intertextual theory provides a basis for interpreting the meaning of manuscripts and artifacts, the value of such a process depends on the significance of the insights it yields. Researchers have long studied the private papers of prominent individuals to probe the reasoning behind their important decisions and significant actions, but until the last few decades, scholars have viewed as irrelevant the personal documents of ordinary people. More recently, however, scholars have begun examining the papers of everyday individuals for the valuable knowledge and insights they provide into the mundane lives of past times. As L. Rebecca Johnson Melvin puts it, insightful readers find “literary merit, psychological insight, aesthetic qualities, and historical evidence” in such commonplace and previously overlooked sources. Furthermore, she writes:

These materials include self-consciously created autobiographies or memoirs in which individuals explore life meaning or historical context, as well as private diaries and journals in which authors unintentionally bestow rich personal texture to the fabric of history. Scrapbooks and other artistic self works also reward the researcher with evidence of creative self-expression. Diaries, journals, personal scrapbooks, travel narratives, autobiographies, memoirs, and reminiscences convey the personal

¹ The interdependent ways in which texts stand in relation to one another (as well as to the culture at large) to produce meaning.

experiences of ordinary men, women, and children who did not merit even a footnote in the official chronicles of history. Broadly called “life writing,” these works help document much that previously was concealed from the standard record of human experience. (Melvin 2010)

For years, people have used scrapbooks, albums, and other “self books” to find the past in the present and to shape the future. The self book fosters personal expression while locating the self within a cultural context, while the scrapbook functions as a self book whose meanings are created through its connection with other texts. Looking closely at a collection of texts and artifacts, such as can be found in all archives, researchers can read not only what is on the page or in the book or the box, but also envision the web of meanings that connects the texts at hand with other texts. In the case presented here, scrapbooks kept by the Smiths in China are further connected with outside texts, e.g., letters, which create a discourse within the collections. The letters work as supplements and commentaries on the albums they kept. Together the scrapbooks (mainly photo albums), and letters create an extremely rich matrix of words, images, symbols, and ideas to read for information on the family’s experiences.

In this way, we can examine the materials of Hazel Littlefield Smith, preserved at the Bentley Historical Library in Ann Arbor, and tell the story of the life of Smith family members when they were posted as missionaries in China in the early part of the twentieth century.

Methodology

Intertextuality provides a suitable theoretical framework in which to place an interpretation of archival documents such as scrapbooks, letters, other texts, and artifacts, because it supports the probing of varied texts in terms of their interconnected meanings. But it is essential to remember that the message, not the method, is vital. Seeing a collection of family documents as intertexts is the key to understanding not only individuals, but also the culture in which they lived and its underlying values. My study, then, consists of taking all the China related documents from the Hazel Littlefield Smith Papers and examining them through the lens of intertextuality in order to grasp some small portion of who the Smiths were, what they experienced, and how they experienced it.

Eminent post-structuralist critic Roland Barthes suggests that exploring a document or documents intertextually yields three layers of meaning: “the linguistic message, the denoted message, and the connoted message.” (Barthes 1985, 26) He further broadens the definition of *text* to include images (or the imitative arts), whether paintings, photographs, drawings, movies, or theater performances. Images represent only the surface level of reality, he says, and at that level they lack a code. However, all these images simultaneously convey a second, coded meaning, created through the “treatment” or “style” of the image. This sign (or signifier)² indicates a “‘culture’ of the society receiving the message.” This cultural code can be found, according to Barthes, in all common imitative arts, and is most likely made up of either “a universal symbolic or a period rhetoric,”—in other words, “by a stock of stereotypes.” In many instances a third level of meaning is added by the knowledge the reader brings to the picture. Even press

² “Ferdinand de Saussure posited *sign* as being made up of the matched pair of signifier and signified. The signifier is the pointing finger, the word, the sound-image. Yet a word is simply a jumble of letters; the pointing finger is not the star: it is only in the interpretation of the signifier that meaning is created. “The *signified* is the concept, the meaning, the thing indicated by the signifier. It need not be a ‘real object’ but is some referent to which the signifier refers. The thing signified is created in the perceiver and is internal to them. Whilst we share concepts, we do so via signifiers.” (Chandler)

- **Signifier:** any material thing that signifies, e.g., words on a page, a facial expression, an image.
- **Signified:** the concept that a signifier refers to. Together, the signifier and signified make up the
- **Sign:** the smallest unit of meaning. Anything that can be used to communicate (or to tell a lie).

photographs, which profess to be direct representations of reality, are read in the context of a traditional stock of signs. (Barthes 1985, 6)

Imagine a simple photo placed inside a scrapbook—it carries with it the stock signs of its culture, and then adds new signifiers when it is placed in its new context. In other words, it immediately creates an intertext that refers to the culture outside the scrapbook, the connotations placed on it by the scrapbook creator, and the other items it joins inside the volume. Sometimes the scrapbook maker will add text to the image, opening up a new and separate field of signification. This alignment changes the dynamics of both the image and the word. The image can be analyzed by itself, and then in interaction with its words—image plus text = new signifiers.

Barthes indicates that the *linguistic message* is found on the literal language level. In the case of a caption, for instance, the linguistic message identifies the parts of the view and the view itself. It anchors the meaning of the image and guides the viewer to the right meaning of the object. However, on the symbolic level, the message channels the viewer's interpretation of the image. In other words, it indicates to the viewer how to interpret the symbolic meaning of the image, thus limiting the range of possibilities. A second and less common function of the linguistic message is to act as a complement to the image as in a cartoon or a comic strip. This "relaying" function combines the image with the words to create a unity on a higher level—a story, anecdote, etc. (Barthes 1985, 28–29)

The *denoted message* appears when separating the words from the image allows the image to be considered in its "pure" state—not influenced by the text. Barthes considers the photographic image separately from the drawing. While the photograph presents a one-to-one correspondence with reality—a message uncomplicated by cultural signs—the drawing selects which parts of reality to include or *exclude*, and how to portray them. Thus the drawing's denoted message already contains connotation, relating the culture of the artist to the culture of the viewer. The photograph's denoted message is simpler in that it relates nature to culture. (Barthes 1985, 32–33)

The *connoted message* is based on the system of signifiers in the image that is normally drawn from a pre-existing cultural code. Yet the connotation will vary with each different reading by each individual. Every person has his or her own lexicon of signs—actually we all have a multitude of such lexicons. Taken together, this plurality of sign systems forms the individual's idiolect. So, just as we all have our own way of using language (our verbal idiolect), we all have our own way of interpreting images, our lexicon of symbols, forming our image dialect. Thus, according to Barthes, no one can draw up a typology of individual idiolects. "The language of the image is not merely the entirety of utterances emitted, it is also the entirety of utterances received; such language must include the 'surprises' of meaning." (Barthes 1985, 36)

Now, how do these theories apply to the reading of words and images and artifacts found in scrapbooks? The scrapbook signifiers show the aesthetics of the culture in which the scrapbook is created, using a traditional stock of contemporaneous signs—in other words, it uses the period's standard typology. It also represents the current fashion of scrapbook culture. Simultaneously on another level, the individual who places the image within the scrapbook has already assigned it a symbolic or connoted meaning, derived from his or her own individual lexicon of signs. The signifier, then, refers to elements of external culture, the scrapbook culture itself, the scrapbook itself, and most directly, to the scrapbook maker's own knowledge and interpretation or idiolect. Further, each person who sees the images brings a different set of ideas and knowledge that contributes to that individual meaning. And, the same person will read the same image or set of images differently at different moments. (Barthes 1985, 35–36)

Most scrapbook-makers and readers would probably not be interested in these theories, since their abstract nature would likely dampen the joy most people get from making and reading scrapbooks.

Therefore, in order to present my fourth key point, I am going to turn to another of Barthes's works, *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973). This is where the fun comes into the theory. Scrapbook-makers and readers actively interpret text because no set of hard and fast rules interferes with the free range of their interpretations. Unlike literature, for example, no professor or critic tries to tell them what scrapbooks in general must mean, or what a particular scrapbook must mean. Perhaps this explains why each scrapbook is unique—text, image, and intertextual interpretations remain pretty much up to the scrapbook's creator.

Barthes describes authorship as the act of compiling or arranging already existing possibilities of the language system. The consequence of this concept is to deny the word or the text or even the image any degree of stability. Instead, with each successive reading, other language/symbolic systems create a variety of meanings, each of which will be altered with every new reading. Intertextuality functions by continually bringing other meanings or other signifieds into play, rupturing or destabilizing meaning. The presence of the other interpretations undermines or resists the surface logic of the statement or utterance. Here I believe is where the idea of the scrapbook interfaces with intertextuality—by clipping and selecting texts, images, and artifacts, taking them out of their original context, the scrapbook creator introduces linguistic elements of “uncertainty, indeterminacy, incommunicability, subjectivity, desire, pleasure and play” (Allen Intro 3) into the original symbolic system. Such language, Kristeva claims, is “socially disruptive, revolutionary even.” (45 Allen)

What's amazing about scrapbooks is that for centuries they have been overtly converting one symbolic system into another by rupturing, or cutting a hole in, established meaning. Each scrapbook item has been removed from its original system of signs and put together with other similarly dislocated items to forge a new language, or new system of signifiers with new signifieds. To return to my beginning, a new web or weaving is made from the multiplicity of threads, creating this constant intertextual transformation of texts.

Results

Working with images and text from a single scrapbook, a spiral bound volume of 35 pages titled, “A Few Chinese Patients Dr. Dennis V. Smith Ophthalmologist Peking 1915–1928,” (Box 3 Albums/Photos), one can find the story of daily life and special occasions in the hospital. On six pages, ten photos taken in Peking show the hospital, doctors, nurses, staff, and students; patients with eye diseases such as tumors (neuro fibromas); facilities at the eye clinic including the waiting room, the lens grinding operators and the shop where glasses were made; a group of Michigan Alumni, including male and female, American and Chinese individuals. The photo pages themselves include texts in English as well as Chinese, a language that the Smiths could read since they devoted hours every day to learning the language.

A double page from this notebook (Figure 1) reads “Methodist Mission Hospital Peking, China, 1923.” The photo above this inscription shows a stream of individuals, who appear to be Chinese, flowing into an arched entryway, while a man in a military or police uniform stands (guard?) in the right foreground. The photo below that is labeled “Chinese Doctors and Interns American Nurse Miss Vandenberg Dr. Dennis V. Smith (hands folded) Ophthalmologist Dr. Bruce Jarvis (black bow tie).” One might infer that in the mind of the inscriber (thus the album-keeper), only the three Americans were important enough to identify by name. The people in the upper photo are anonymous since most have their backs to the lens; in the lower photo, although most of the Chinese pictured wear medical garb, and the others wear uniforms of some kind, their names are not given. The group in the lower photo displays a large banner in Chinese, but its meaning in English is not recorded, nor is there a translation of some Chinese script on a scrap of paper glued onto the upper page.



Figure 1. “Methodist Mission Hospital Peking, China, 1923.” from scrapbook “A Few Chinese Patients Dr. Dennis V. Smith Ophthalmologist Peking 1915–1928” (Box 3 Albums/Photos).

Depending on the reader, these two pages might be portraying people and events already well known to both the compiler and the reader; the projected audience might be people “back home” who would only be interested in the Americans; or, a reader unfamiliar with the groups shown (for example a scholar looking at this volume eighty-five years later) might conclude that the author of these pages considers the Asians here are inferior and not worth naming. A reader looking at nothing but the two album pages could decide all or any of the above about the author. These conclusions could be drawn because there is so little context on two pages. However, more context is available in the rest of the volume. The other pages of the same scrapbook pictured here add to the story. Three photos on a different page show a Chinese woman, twice with a large and deforming tumor over her left eye, and in the third photo with the tumor and eye missing. The text here reads, “Neuro-fibroma of orbit. Would probably have killed her in a year or so. Complete Exenteration of orbit for removal of neuro-fibroma” (Figure 2). As the reader, I can conclude that Dr. Smith is the healer although he is not mentioned as the surgeon specifically.

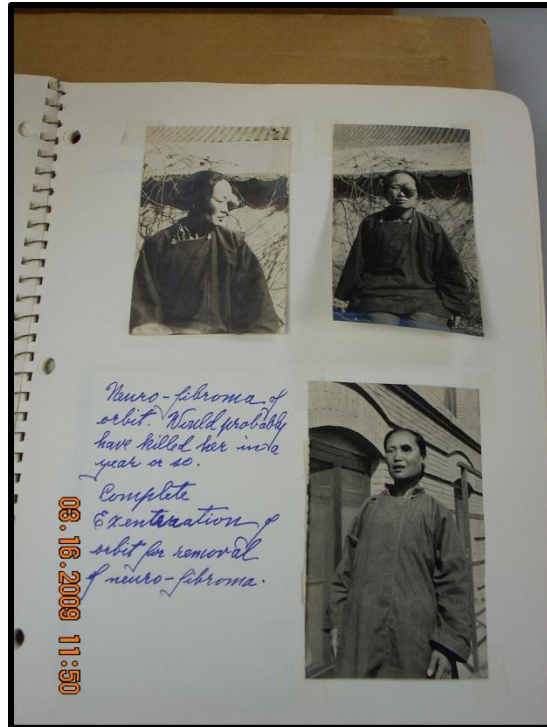


Figure 2. “Neuro-fibroma of orbit. Would probably have killed her in a year or so. Complete Exenteration of orbit for removal of neuro-fibroma” from scrapbook “A Few Chinese Patients Dr. Dennis V. Smith Ophthalmologist Peking 1915–1928” (Box 3 Albums/Photos).

The third set of pages from this volume portrays more scenes from the hospital, its staff and facilities (Figure 3). On the top of the left hand page, a photo of 21 Chinese men garbed in white and one woman in a nurse’s cap is labeled “Nurses and Mrs. Louis (American).” Below that a photo on the same page is a picture of people seated in a waiting area, captioned “Waiting Room.” The facing page has two photos that display the exterior and interior of the lens grinding shop and the men who work there. They are all natives. The equipment was probably familiar to any spectacle maker of the period. All these images support Dr. Smith’s argument (found in his letters and other texts) that the best way to help the Chinese is to educate and train them to care for their own people. As the reader who has seen all the scrapbooks from this collection and read all the letters, I know that Dr. Smith’s commitment to this work was deep and that he seems to have been a caring physician and man. Whether he kept this scrapbook for his own memories, or to show people back home, or for his descendants some day in the future, I can’t know for sure, but as the reader of his text, I think probably all three audiences were in play (that is, if I’m right in thinking he is the author). example, from the letters I learned that Dr. Smith traveled occasionally to professional gatherings in Europe and America where he spoke about his work. Some text in a typescript from such a lecture shows his compassion for his patients:

Nearly every summer I have some students come to have their strabismus, or “cross eyes” corrected. This past month I have had three young women come for that operation, one of them being the daughter of a senator from Honan. On several occasions I have had young women who were approaching the marriageable age come for the correction of the deformity of their eyes and I am glad to say that I know of two instances where the operation not only straightened the eyes, but also led to a happy marriage.

Dr. Smith’s letters home (typed by Hazel, he brags) are chatty, informative, and unfailingly cheerful, even when he is facing the dissolution of his home and practice and the destruction of numerous other

Christian missions during the civil wars. He kept meticulous records of their work, and reading his many letters fills in details of events chronicled in the scrapbooks. In addition to the Smiths' deep commitment to their missionary work, they valued their connections with family in the United States, and also communicated with several churches in Michigan that supported their mission.

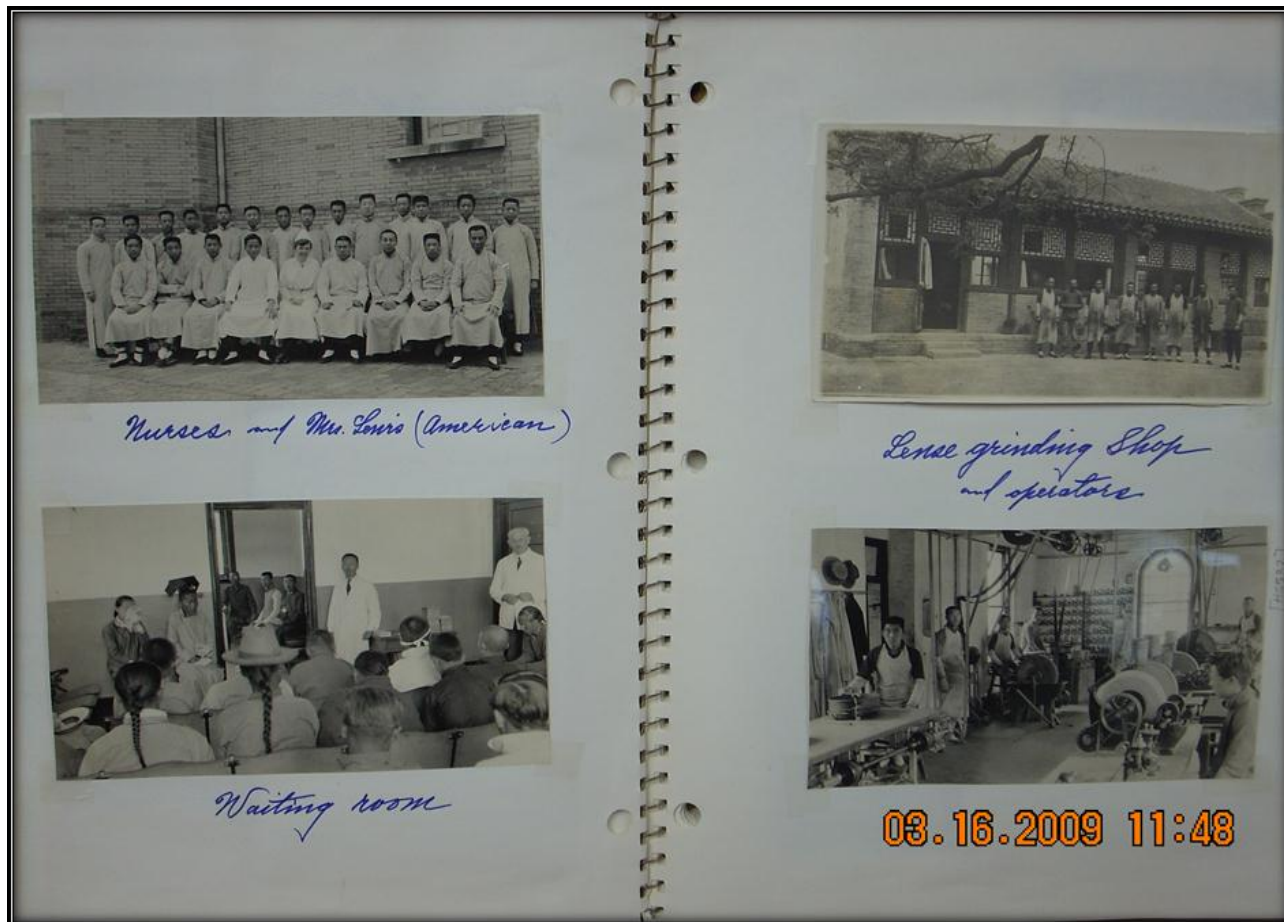


Figure 3. “Nurses and Mrs. Louis (American)” (upper left), “Waiting Room” (lower left), and photos of lens grinding shop and operators (right) from scrapbook “A Few Chinese Patients Dr. Dennis V. Smith Ophthalmologist Peking 1915–1928” (Box 3 Albums/Photos).

Among numerous letters in the collection, there is one dated “Peking, April 7th, 1918,” that typifies the usual letter home (Figure 4). It begins “Dear Ones All” and proceeds with some pleasant words about how busy the doctor has been after returning from a holiday in Tsing Hua. He mentions how grateful he and his wife, Hazel, are for letters received from home, and hopes that his own correspondence will not be too seriously delayed crossing the globe. He usually describes the weather and the season, and in this letter he mentions a Chinese holiday, “Ching Ming,” a day when family graves are tended. In another paragraph he goes into the work at the hospital, and also makes some comments on the public health conditions in the country, mentioning a colleague, Dr. Yao, who has to go out on “Plague inspection work for the government.” The letter includes a warm invitation, “You folk had better plan to come out and spend next winter with us” since the winters in China are so much milder than those in Michigan.

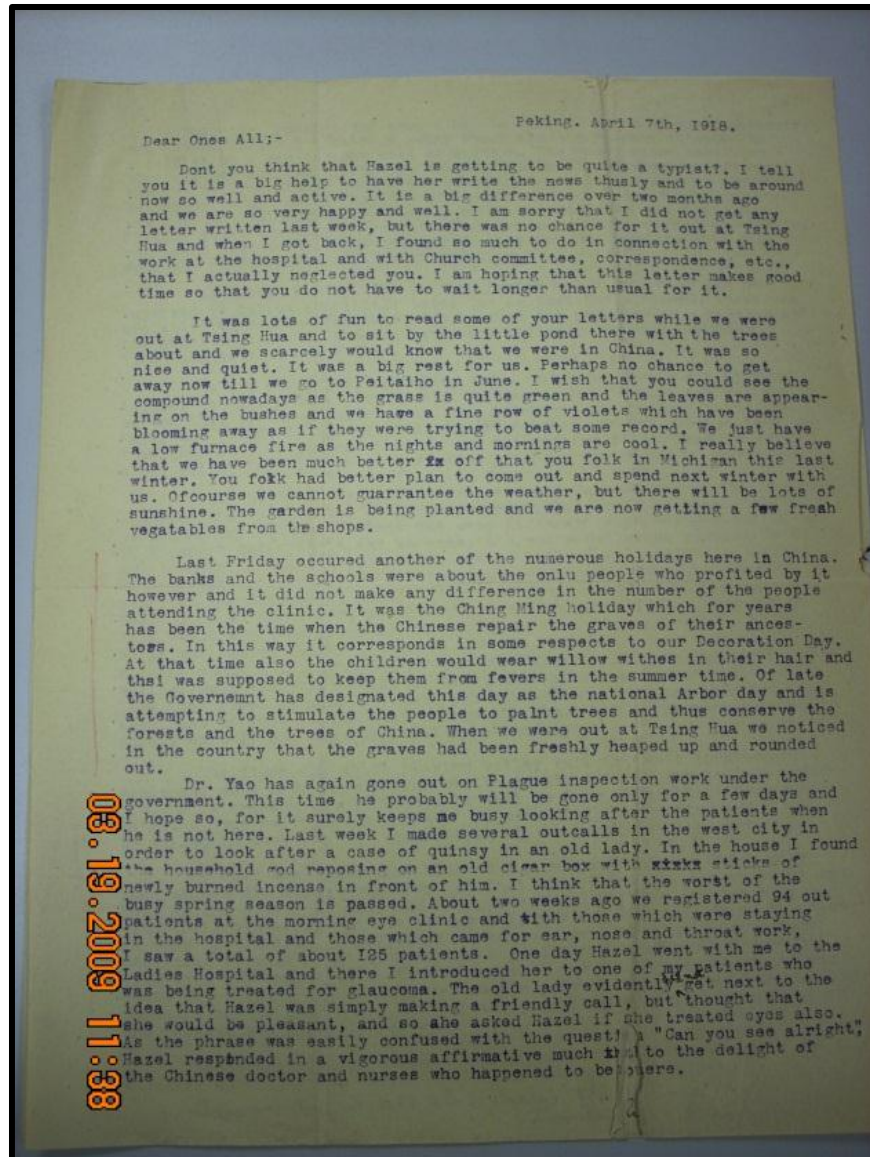


Figure 4. "Peking, April 7th, 1918," letter from Hazel Littlefield Smith papers, Bentley Historical Library.

Sure enough, a page of photos from a different scrapbook (Figure 5), captioned in a different hand (probably Hazel's), records two such visits. The top heading reads "IN Peking" and underneath it is a photo of a girl and woman under a blossoming tree in the foreground, and in the background two gentlemen. Under this photo is the caption "Acting as Hostess and Guide to Sir Wilfred Grenfell." An arrow is drawn from the name toward one of the gentlemen. This seems to be one single anecdote. Below is a separate grouping of four photos, labeled "Modes of travel in China." The top left is labeled "Camels brought our coal," and it shows some camels with bundles and people on their backs; the top right shows Chinese men carrying a sedan chair with a woman installed in it, labeled "Sedan chair at Peitaho"; lower left shows a horse and rider labeled "Polo Pony"; and the lower right photo shows a horse and wagon with three Caucasians clustered inside and a Chinese man holding the horse: "Peking Cart with father & Mother." The author of this page obviously enjoyed humorously posting a record of the mixed modes of transportation in China. Friends in the States would most likely find these foreign modes of travel amusing.



Figure 5. Scrapbook page recording visit to Peking and modes of transportation, Hazel Littlefield Smith papers, Bentley Historical Library.

When the Smiths settled in China, they planned to spend their lives there doing their missionary work, but they were forced to leave by the Nationalist uprising in the mid-twenties. A letter started by hand on Dec. 16, 1925, and continued by typing on December 25, compares starkly with the upbeat and hopeful tone of

the earlier correspondence (Figure 6). Dr. Smith writes about the civil war in terms of the wounded soldiers he and his colleagues are treating in an army camp outside the city. He reports on the “Anti-Christian” propaganda movement that promotes destruction of all Christian institutions, including the YMCA and the mission schools. All the letters throughout this period discuss the problems with keeping native staff, getting enough financial support, housing the missionaries who have fled from persecution in China’s interior, and eventually making arrangements for the Smith family to return to the States. He writes about the rebel factions and sorrowfully mentions the death of the Christian leader Sun Yat-sen. Amazingly, Dr. Smith seems to persist in believing that things will turn around right up until his own forced departure.

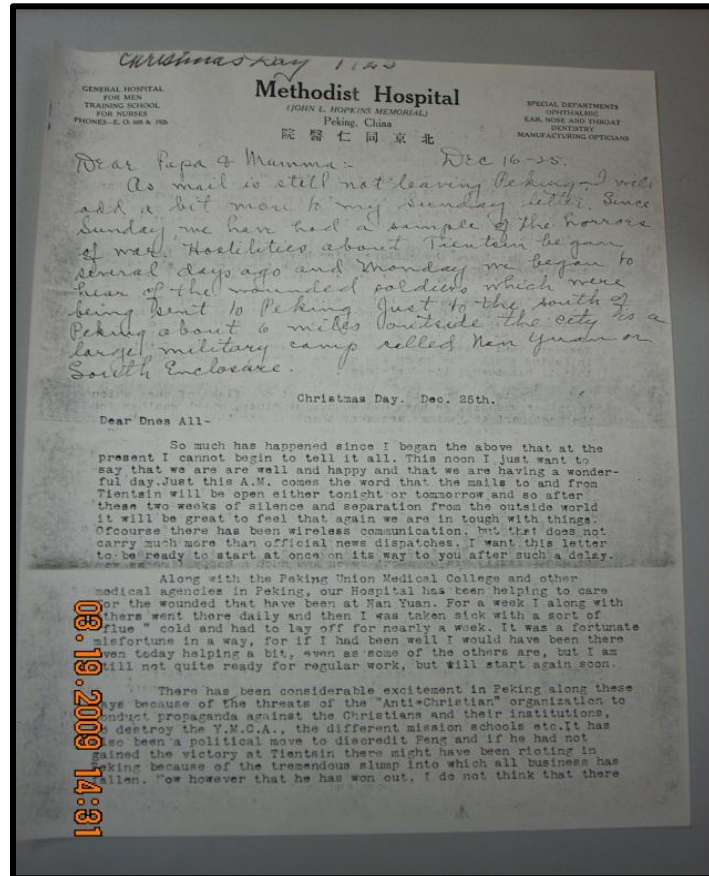


Figure 6. Letter, December 1925, from Hazel Littlefield Smith papers, Bentley Historical Library.

The final visual image I want to share is a group photo of 20 people, labeled “Littlefield 1913 U of M Alumni Peking 1925.” (Figure 7) This photo demonstrates clearly the importance of the Smiths’ connections with the university back in Michigan for the mission as well as for themselves. Fourteen of the men in this photo appear to be Chinese, all graduates of the University of Michigan. In reading other documents at the Bentley Historical Library, I learned that the University of Michigan was one of the earliest institutions of higher education to develop relationships with China, arranging for student exchanges as early as the mid-eighteen hundreds. “The University of Michigan and China: 1845-2006,” posted on the Bentley Historical Library website, covers the major developments in this connection, mentioning that a member of the very first class of eleven students to graduate in 1845 served as a missionary in China. Many outside sources show that missionaries in China like the Smiths were firmly ensconced in an already established tradition. Finding the Littlefield Smith papers deposited in Ann Arbor confirms their attachment to the state and the institution.



**Figure 7. “Littlefield 1913 U of M Alumni Peking 1925,”
from Hazel Littlefield Smith Papers, Bentley Historical Library.**

Findings

The readers of scrapbooks, of course, value them because of their relationship with prior texts, since most of us look at scrapbooks to visit or revisit the events of the past. Reading a scrapbook weeks or months or years or decades after its creation, we engage with those past texts while at the same time making intertextual meaning in the present. In other words, reading old scrapbooks shows us what their authors thought was important, while at the same time we can interpret scrapbooks in the light of our own experience, what we consider important today. So when a scrapbook is created from other texts, it transforms them into a new symbolic system. In addition, each new reader similarly converts the text of the scrapbook into new meanings. While the pictures and letters tell me that Dr. Smith was a caring physician motivated by Christian beliefs, others from a twenty-first-century perspective, might view the same material and surmise that Dennis and Hazel Smith were narrow-minded do-gooders or condescending Westerners with little real appreciation for Asian culture.

Among the many letters, documents and scrapbooks left by Hazel Littlefield Smith, only a dozen pages are needed to tell some of her family story. Reading the items intertextually generates a narrative that, while not complete, is nevertheless rich and significant. It evokes the times and experiences of the Smiths while situating their lives in the larger context of the whole American missionary movement in China. There are thirteen scrapbooks of this kind in the collection, besides scores of letters and other documents yet to be analyzed. And, as archivists are fully aware, multitudes of personal family papers are waiting to be read in collections all across the country.

When I was trying to search systematically through the scrapbooks at the Bentley, (focusing mainly on nineteenth-century women’s examples), one of the archivists mentioned this particular collection to me, describing it in such intriguing detail that I scheduled my next trip to Ann Arbor just to examine and photograph it. Without her suggestion, I would likely have overlooked these China materials and missed

The Smiths' documents from their years as missionaries in China comprise only one of the many stories preserved, but as yet untold, that I have come across in my research. Much more can be derived from this collection, and other stories elsewhere are waiting to be revealed. For instance, in the Wisconsin Historical Society I found a collection of scrapbooks and other related documents about Dorothy Dignam, (1896-1988), a Wisconsin native and the first woman to make a career in the national and international advertising business. Her life narrative is well worth chronicling. More of her documents are in the Schlesinger Library at Harvard.

Without the texts and images that fill and surround these records of the past, we would have missed out on the chance to get up close and personal with these individuals from former years. Others might have chosen to write the Smiths' story, but chances are that professional historians would have selected "bigger" events in the lives of more prominent people. They would probably have smoothed the wrinkles out of the human face of this narrative. However, thanks to our own ability as readers, as interpreters of the webs of text we find everywhere, we can build the narratives ourselves out of the bits and pieces of texts, images, and artifacts we find in collections. As researchers we get to explore the varied and richly particularized "self books" that human beings have left for us to explore.

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