The Status of Female Missionaries Mental Health in Late 19th and Early-Mid 20th Century Mission China: Role Searching, Grieving, and Lacking Support, an Everyday Woman’s Life in Mission China

*This article begins the process of looking into female missionaries’ mental health and how it was affected during their time in China. Beginning in the nineteenth and twentieth century, a wave of female missionaries, both un-married and married, made their way to the slowly opening ports of China bringing with them the word of God. The article highlights some of the ways women’s mental health was affected as they lived and preached in China including their juggling of domestic and public roles, homesickness, and death of a child. Regardless of struggles and experiences these women faced while living in China, the mission societies and Churches these women were a part of did nothing to provide care or assistance for these women leaving them to grieve, suffer silently, and question God’s plan by themselves.*

***Keywords****: China; Female Missionaries; mental health; wives; mothers*

A warning before hand: This essay will be discussing the death of children due to unforeseen or unknown circumstance. Viewer discretion is advised.

Female missionaries in China played a crucial role in their mission communities and in the spreading of Christianity across China, but often did not get the recognition they so deserved for their sacrifices, which often came at the expense of their mental health. Two major trends emerged during late nineteenth and early-mid twentieth century for missionary women and their reasoning for going to China for missionary work: over 40 percent were influenced by their parent’s previous missionary work and another 17 percent went to China because their husbands wanted to go.[[1]](#footnote-1) However, these numbers do not represent every female missionary who traveled abroad as a great majority of them went as “they were driven by the general idea of service to one’s fellow humans.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Female missionaries, both coerced and willing, interacted predominantly with elite Chinese women and their children. However, due to a difference in culture, appearance, perceived status, and etiquette, female missionaries usually felt “overwhelmed by the requirements of entertaining aristocratic Chinese ladies” and wished instead to work with the societies non-elite members.[[3]](#footnote-3) Regardless of who they worked with, female missionaries suffered immensely during their time in China from the stress placed upon them by themselves, their husbands, and by their mission societies to be the perfect combination of mother, wife, and religious promoter. This suffering, sadly, was viewed as the highest virtue women could attain and was thus not seen as a mental health issue but instead a way to demonstrate one’s devotion to the cause.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Female missionaries mental health was greatly affected by the experiences and conditions they lived in during their time spreading God’s message in China. Through women such as Anna Steward Pruit and Eva Jane Price, I argue that mission women, regardless of single or married status, dealt with a myriad of challenges to their mental health such as homesickness, feelings of isolation, and depression. Through these mothers and wives, it can be illustrated how their multiple roles in the mission community and prescribed gender roles at home affected their mental health and left them exhausted and unfulfilled. Furthermore, these mothers illustrate clearly the emotional and mental toll that losing a child had on an individual. It is through their grieving and inability/ability to cope with this loss that these women began to question God’s plan and their own role in the mission societies. Run and overseen by male-focused mission societies and male-dominated Churches, the “female problem” that these women exhibited from their external missionary work and internal emotional battle was something to be ignored, overlooked, and hushed over by missionary societies. While that is no longer the case in twenty-first century missions to China, the nineteenth and twentieth century missions were not kind to these women who uprooted their lives for the sake of the cause.

The single largest stressor for these missionary women was the multitude of roles they had to play in their mission communities which included mother, wife, teacher, nurse, and preaching missionary. In fact, when applying for a position with the Student Volunteer Movement (SVM), it listed several possible jobs including nurse, teacher, evangelist, and superintendent of a philanthropic institutions.[[5]](#footnote-5) While offering a wide variety of possible jobs for women who went abroad, “women’s formal missionary work fell into three categories: medical work, the school system, and evangelical country work”; plus, the role of mother and wife.[[6]](#footnote-6) While men too had the same out-of-the-house jobs as their female counter parts, men were not involved in the domestic sphere as women were. While men were expected to be involved in the religious, medical, and teacher jobs, they were not expected to maintain a household role. These extra roles in the domestic sphere, which only pertained to the women of these religious communities, had greater emphasis placed upon them than the jobs which these women originally signed up for.

This juggling of roles, even though allowing women to be busy, left them feeling unfulfilled, as is seen in the case of Anna Steward Pruitt. The scholar Marjorie King notes how Anna “evangelized and mothered her family, the schoolboys [which she worked with], and the larger Chinese Christian community.”[[7]](#footnote-7) King’s point is that due to Anna’s constant moving between her various roles she suffered from “physical exhaustion, illness, and the guilt associated with unfulfilled expectations.”[[8]](#footnote-8) In fact, King comments on how Anna excelled at her missionary role but was lacking in her familial roles­–from a eighteen hundreds male point of view. Another female missionary, Eva Jane Price, wrote in her letters home about her various roles of “taking care of the children, studying with a teacher, sewing, and overseeing their home.”[[9]](#footnote-9) This kind of constant movement for these women allowed no time to even consider their own mental wellbeing. The idea of “sacrificing of self for others” was truly the motto placed upon these women.[[10]](#footnote-10) King summarizes it best by pointing out how personal needs and desires were overlooked for religious and familial duties.[[11]](#footnote-11)

However, stress and unfulfillment were not the only mentally taxing feelings women dealt with. Both single and married women faced other challenges such as the feelings of isolation, homesickness, and depression.[[12]](#footnote-12) For married women during the beginning of the eighteen hundreds, there was a real possibility of being left behind somewhere in China by one’s husband, seen in the case of Mary Morton, the wife of Robert Morrison. The scholar Christopher A. Daily points out that even if foreign women had been permitted to travel to seaports such as Canton, the idea of involving women such as Mary in the missionary assignment would not have crossed men’s minds.[[13]](#footnote-13) For married women, this would have left them isolated and alone, without a real purpose or cause to take up in a country which they did not know.[[14]](#footnote-14)

On the other hand, single women dealt with the discriminatory viewpoint of Victorian males who believed “women were too frail and fragile” and should instead of travelling to the countryside to spread the word of God, work amongst the elite Chinese children and women.[[15]](#footnote-15) Even Helen Nevius noted that during her time in China “there were many who disapproved of unmarried ladies engaging in missionary work in foreign lands.”[[16]](#footnote-16) This demonstrates an additional emotional and mental obstacle single woman had to deal with as they tried to get recognized as contributing to their mission community, but were instead viewed as a labiality. It should be noted that single women were more vulnerable to isolation when compared to married women since they did not have the family connections married women had access to.

With that said, both single and married women placed an incredible amount of emphasis on receiving letters from back home. Jane Hunter observes how a lack of letters could cause “hurt, depression, and anger” as these letters received from family and friends back home were sometimes the only sources of happiness for these women and the only way to vocalize their true feelings.[[17]](#footnote-17) Feelings of homesickness are seen best in one of Eva Jane Price’s letters when she writes explicitly: “I am homesick.”[[18]](#footnote-18) This bold statement allows scholars to see that women were willing to express, in certain contexts, how they were truly feeling. Thus, it was not just the juggling of roles which affected women’s mental health, but also the chronic conditions of homesickness, depression, and isolation which affected women, both married and unmarried.[[19]](#footnote-19)

One of the many role’s married women had, was the mother role. This role, although filled with love, wonder, and devotion to one’s children, also had a darker side to it. As stated earlier, women dealt with the guilt of trying to go between their various roles and maintain a household; though mother was one of their most important, it was also the most stressful and demanding. During the nineteenth century, the idea that women could only be involved in one sphere, either public or private still reigned strong: either privately as mothers and wives or publicly as missionaries, teachers, and nurses.[[20]](#footnote-20) The mothering role, although rewarding, became even harder when the death of a child occurred. Through these women’s stories, it is clear to see how the deaths of children affected these mother’s states of mind.

We see through Eva Jane Price’s experiences losing two sons how deeply affected missionary-mothers were by such devastating events. Eva noted in a letter home how they “gave [Donnie] back to [God] with joy” and how she did not wish her family to grieve for them or think that they were plagued with suffering.[[21]](#footnote-21) Instead, Eva wrote: “look up into Heavenly Fathers face with trust, peace, and gladness.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Even though it sounded as if Eva has accepted the death of her son, she continued to write about him in almost every letter for a full year after his death. That included, she wrote on two separate occasions asking for God to give her strength and wishing that God would “keep her patient and faithful.”[[23]](#footnote-23) From this, it is clear to see that Eva was in conflict between the religious side and the emotional side, between keeping her faith in God’s plan and rationalizing the death of her children. With her becoming pregnant again, she noted how this child would “surely be a comfort” to her and that her “arms would not ache with emptiness” as they did in the past.[[24]](#footnote-24) Thus, although she was upset, she slowly found a way to rationalize and come to a form of peace with her children’s deaths.

Unlike the story of Price who goes between conflict and acceptance, Anna Steward Pruitt was unable to maintain any assemblance of faith in God and His plan. After the death of two of her children, Anna did try to follow the Christian belief in the afterlife. She tried to cheer herself up by imagining her children in a better place, showing her faith in God’s will by giving up and accepting her children’s deaths.[[25]](#footnote-25) For a time, “Anna used her personal grief to the good of the missionary cause.”[[26]](#footnote-26) After the death of a third child though, Anna was no longer able to keep up any form of happy optimism. The acceptance of her children’s deaths took on a morbid tone and depression started to follow Anna as “she complained that her brain was tired and her mind difficult to compose.”[[27]](#footnote-27) King notes how Anna began to deal with psychological depression related to these deaths which was furthered on by feelings of homesickness and loneliness.[[28]](#footnote-28)

The sad thing about Anna, is that her story is common amongst missionary-mothers. All missionary-mothers who lost children, aware or not, had their faith challenged during the grieving and mourning process. The scholar Jane Hunter outlines how good Christian mothers were supposed to accept the death of their children with equanimity, but for these women it became a challenge to their faith.[[29]](#footnote-29) It appears that these mothers were only to a certain extent able to rationalize the deaths of their children. Eventually, this rationalizing stopped and instead, issues of depression, guilt, homesickness, and isolation crept into these mothers’ lives affecting their overall mental state of mind. Pushed into guilty despair, they blamed themselves for past sins of neglecting their missionary work as the cause for their children’s death.[[30]](#footnote-30)

While everyone in their life experiences hardships, the hardships and battles these women faces, both from the external world around them and the internal world of their minds, were not addressed by the male-run missionary societies and instead ignored. In twenty-first century Canada, mental health is something which is talked about freely and with little judgment or prejudice to follow it, but in late nineteenth and early twentieth century mission China, these problems of the mind were ignored. It was during the nineteenth century that a new term and idea emerged in psychology called neurasthenia or neuratropia, described and characterized as a nervous disorder of the mind.[[31]](#footnote-31) This new condition, used almost exclusively to diagnose women, was associated with nervousness, mental anxiety, and anguish which then depressed the physical functions of the human body.[[32]](#footnote-32) This would have most likely been the diagnosis in which these women received when abroad in China, even though this was not the actual condition which they suffered from.

Looking back at Anna Pruitt, King describes how Anna’s “struggles against loneliness, bitterness, and depression were all kept behind the closed door of the missionary compound”, a sadly common way in which women’s issues were dealt with.[[33]](#footnote-33) Even though these feelings started to affect Anna’s work and daily life, they were simply ignored by the male-run mission society. With that said, Anna “admitted that church members were loving and appreciative and the Chinese were kind and thoughtful” towards her, demonstrating a support in the mission communities but not from the societies.[[34]](#footnote-34) Instead, male-based mission societies took a very different approach to dealing with these women, their struggles and feelings. Their remedy to this mental health problem was to simply be happy and smile. The scholar Pat Barr outlines how “happy cheerfulness was valued” to make the best out of a dreary situation.[[35]](#footnote-35) But what did that mean for these women? Nothing. The belief that a cheerful attitude and hard work were the way to “forgetting one’s personal pains” did not help these women as they began to spiral even further into depression due to lack of support, leading them to questioning their faith in God and His plan.[[36]](#footnote-36)

One primary source from 1918 called *A Manual for Young Missionaries to China* was created in the hopes of helping future missionaries prepare for their time in this foreign nation of China. This source provides immense knowledge for missionaries regarding time off, dealing with the Chinese language, and making sure one was physically healthy. But this source failed to mention anything related to taking care of one’s mental health. In fact, the whole first chapter of this manual is dedicated to the physical health of the missionary and helping them prepare for navigating the different foods, landscapes, and illnesses one could encounter. The importance placed on one’s physical body over the mental mindset is seen mentioned in an earlier example as male missionaries tried to restrict the access female missionaries had to the countryside in fear of them being murdered or having their virginity compromised.[[37]](#footnote-37)

The manual does offers one line which is related to mental health. This line states: “Of course there will be lots of hard things to bear and overcome, any amount of vexing days.”[[38]](#footnote-38) What followed this line was a comparison to how smoothly things ran back home, moving the conversation onto more neutral ground. Even though this line mentions how there will be tough days ahead, it makes no note on how to overcome those obstacles nor how to deal with them in a healthy way. In fact, in all the primary sources used for this essay, only one mentions women’s mental health and their struggles. This single reference is seen in a letter written by Eva Jane Price’s husband, C.W. Price. In a letter written to her parents, C.W wrote how he knew it was hard for his wife to live such a monotonous life in China.[[39]](#footnote-39) He continued noting how living that life would have been hard on anyone but how it was even worse for women as they were kept mostly at home with their only enjoyment coming from visitors.[[40]](#footnote-40) C.W wondered how any women could endure such a life based in sameness.[[41]](#footnote-41) While individuals and these Christian communities were aware of the struggles female missionaries faced while in China, their mission societies took the easy way out by simply ignoring the problem.

Even with terms like neurasthenia which emerged in nineteenth century psychology, these conditions of the mind were still not taken seriously and either ignored or discredited. It is clear through firsthand accounts and twenty-first century research that women based in Chinese missionary communities were highly affected by many aspects of mission life that they were faced with. These women felt stress and pressure surrounding their myriad of roles and felt isolated and homesick which was rarely addressed or remedied. These conditions and feelings were not just limited to married women, but also extended to single women. While married women dealt with double the responsibility of single, single women dealt with less support and interactions compared to married. With these other feelings already in place, the death of a child caused mothers to question their faith in God further leading to feelings of guilt, anger, and immense sadness. But the biggest problem by far was the lack of acknowledgement and help from these male-driven mission societies.

A larger question that could be posed today is what were these mission societies supposed to do to help these women? The answer to this is unclear, but one thing can be said, simply ignoring the problem helped no one. The supposed fix to the problem, being cheerful and smiling, when taken in view of our modern context comes across as condescending and irresponsible. What these women needed was not a smile but rather a helping hand and a listening ear. However, these women did not receive this kind or any kind of help and were subsequently ignored. In fact, it can be noted that no one received help, but for women this pressure to be perfect in all realms of their life, in all their roles, was a major factor, the major cause for these later and larger issues which emerged.

There is hope that in our twenty-first century world that this pattern and story can be changed. With the creation of the manual *Helping Missionaries Grow: Readings in Mental Health and Missions*, a new view on how missionaries based abroad are affected mentally can be seen. This manual’s openness “between the mission agency and those working in the area of mental health” is a great start to helping missionaries work through homesickness, feelings of isolation, and depression.[[42]](#footnote-42) Particularly though, the manual notes how married women based in the missionary communities have constantly changing roles due to having children, being married, and being based in religious leadership.[[43]](#footnote-43) It outlines how men and single women do not have the same responsibilities as married women do and points out how wives are undervalued and do not receive the same kind of work as men, simply because they have children.[[44]](#footnote-44)

While this book does not have a set way to fix the problems which women face, what it does do is acknowledge the problem and note how women are treated unfairly. By simply acknowledging the problem, unlike late nineteenth and early-mid twentieth century mission societies, this manual legitimizes what women have gone through and are still going through. The manual helps to validate these female missionaries who struggled with mental health by recognizing that female missionaries abroad are, and were, vulnerable to dealing with mental health but should never be ignored and instead, always be heard.

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4. Irwin T. Hyatt Jr., *Our Ordered Lives Confess: Three Nineteenth-Century American Missionaries in East Shantung* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Bays and Widmer, *China's Christian Colleges*, 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Hunter, *The Gospel of Gentility,* 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid, 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
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10. King, *China's American Daughter,* 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
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