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In the End it was Infection: Ophthalmologic Diseases at Early Missionary Hospitals in China

From the mid-19th century onward, some mission boards of protestant churches in Europe and the United States began to set up hospitals in China. Despite their small size and limited resources, these hospitals managed to carry on and attract more and more Chinese patients. A major part of patients were those who suffered from eye conditions, particularly so in the early stage of the missionary undertakings. Using the diseases statistics in the hospital annual reports, this paper counts the proportion of ophthalmologic patients in the clinics and the percentage of the most common eye disorders, with the results shown in the form of tables and charts. Analysis shows that eye illnesses then were mostly infectious diseases, including “ophthalmia”, conjunctivitis, trachoma, and leucoma and opacity of the cornea. Blindness was frequently caused by trachoma and the ophthalmic symptoms of smallpox, syphilis, tuberculosis and gonorrhoea. The rampage of such diseases was a consequence of low living standards and a severe lack of medical resources.

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