

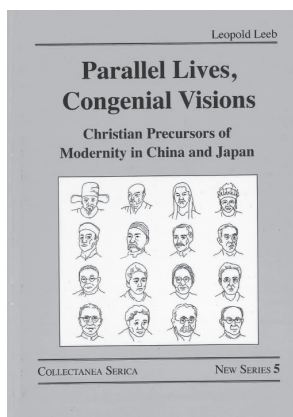
Book Review

by Patrick Taveirne ♦

Leopold Leeb

*Parallel Lives, Congenial Visions:
Christian Precursors of Modernity
in China and Japan*

Collectanea Serica. New Series 5.
Monumenta Serica Institute, Sankt
Augustin, 2024.



This book is the outcome of an extraordinary friendship and cooperation between a Japanese Christian scholar Muraoka Takamitsu who taught Hebrew among other places at Leiden University, The Netherlands, and an Austrian Catholic scholar Leopold Leeb who is teaching classical languages at China's Renmin University. Both are not academic historians, but are familiar with the history of Christianity in Japan and China respectively. This allows them to present comparative biographical sketches of the 57 "lives" of well and lesser known Christian or deeply Christian-influenced reformers in both countries between the end of the 16th century and the first half of the 20th.

♦ The author is researcher of the Holy Spirit Study Centre.

In his Preface by the author, Prof. Leopold Leeb refers to his academic supervisor Prof. Tang Yijie's principle of "mutual illumination" (hù xiāng fā míng 互相發明) which inspired Leopold Leeb to write this book. According to Tang, a former renowned philosopher at Peking University, people from East and West could look at each other and, as in a mirror, discover both themselves and the "other." After the apparent failure in tackling inter-cultural comparison between East and West in his earlier works, Leeb believes that Tang's principle also can help to analyze and understand some of the Japanese and Chinese Christian pioneers of modernity. The comparative biographical sketches, perhaps not systematically illuminating, indeed do offer glimpses of differences and similarities found between Japan and China when advancing Western-inspired modernity and/or the Christian faith.

Prof. Leopold Leeb, inspired by the Chinese Christian philosopher He Guanghu, defines modernity as a "spirit of egalitarian universalism." Jesuit Fr Benoît Vermader of Fudan University questioned this interesting link between (egalitarian) universalism and modernization within the East Asian context. Still, Leeb's book offers abundant material, captivating testimonies and historical context, for reflection on this question and related issues such as the influence of Christianity.



Leopold Leeb (雷立柏)

Leopold Leeb (雷立柏), the author, studied philosophy and theology in Mödling (near Vienna) and Chinese philosophy at Fu Jen Catholic University, Taipei, and at Beijing University. He received his Ph.D. from the latter with a dissertation on the Han dynasty mathematician, astronomer and writer Zhang Heng. From 1999 till 2004 he worked as a researcher and translator at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, where I met him for the first time. Since 2004 he is professor at Renmin University, Beijing, where he teaches Latin, Ancient Greek, Ancient Hebrew, and the history of Western literature. His research also focuses on the history of Christianity in China. He has published widely in China, among others an introduction to the language and thought of the Bible, language courses in Latin, Latin dictionaries, a dictionary on Chinese theology and the series “English-Chinese

Summaries of Western Classics,” of which volume 5 has been published in 2020. Recently, he published the monograph *One Dragon, Two Doves: A Comparative History of the Catholic Church in China and in Vietnam* (2022).

In his preface Prof. He Guanghu of Renmin University reveals that Leeb’s Chinese colleagues (most of whom study Sinology or Christianity) affectionately call him “Leizi,” actually a very respectful title, similar to Matteo Ricci the “scholar from the West,” who was addressed as “Lizi”.



Muraoka Takamitsu
(村岡 崇光)

Muraoka Takamitsu (村岡 崇光) was born in Hiroshima in 1938. He is a Semiticist and taught Semitic languages including Modern Hebrew as Lecturer in Manchester University, U.K. (1970–80), as Professor of Middle Eastern studies at Melbourne University (1980–91), Australia, then moved in 1991 to Leiden University (1991–

2003), The Netherlands, as Professor of the Hebrew Language and Literature, the Israelite Antiquities, and the Ugaritic language. In addition, he was editor of *Abr-Nahrain* [now *Ancient Near Eastern Studies*] 1980-92, and also edited or co-edited volumes on Biblical Hebrew Semantics, the Aramaic of Qumran, and the Hebrew of Qumran.

His comprehensive syntax of the Koine Greek of the Septuagint appeared in 2016. He co-founded, in 2000, the Dutch-Japanese-Indonesian Dialogue against the background of the Pacific War. He is representative of The Biblical Church in The Netherlands.

Since retiring in 2003 from the Leiden chair, he began yearly lecture tours teaching biblical languages and the Septuagint as a volunteer for a minimum of five weeks in Asian countries which suffered under Japanese militarism in the 20th century. His thoughts and reflections on this yearly teaching ministry up to the year 2015 can be read in English in “My Via dolorosa: Along the trails of the Japanese imperialism in Asia” (AuthorHouse U.K. 2016).

In *Parallel Lives, Congenial Visions*, Leopold Leeb introduces the history of cultural exchanges between East Asia and the West through comparative biographical sketches. These sketches illustrate how China and Japan, starting from a shared cultural heritage in script and Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist worldviews, took rather different approaches in their encounters with the European world since the 16th to 17th centuries. In particular in the 19th century under external

and internal pressure, both nations strove to modernize their societies by introducing technology and new ideas from the Western world, turning them into political rivals and even enemies. Thus, these biographical sketches also shed some light on the general dynamics of cross-cultural interactions between China, Japan, and the West up to the early 20th century.

Chapters 1 to 14 are concerned with trailblazers' guides like Francis Xavier's Japanese guide and interpreter Anjirō, as well as Matteo Ricci's guide, assistant, teacher, and interpreter, the first Chinese Jesuit brother Zhong Mingren, pioneering translators, military reformers, women leaders, philosophers and artists, who lived from the 16th to the end of the 18th century. There are only three chapters about the first teachers of foreign languages, reformers in modern media and higher education active during the 19th century. In contrast, the part dedicated to the first half of the 20th century is substantial. Leeb emphasizes the diverse role played by educators, physicians, lawyers, entrepreneurs, and social activists.

These Chinese and Japanese men and women were outstanding personalities who tried to open up the path to international relationships, pioneers in their respective domains who introduced Western culture to their nations, precursors who strove for modernization, e.g., in the fields of translation, education, medicine, media, constitutional law, and social welfare. Many of those who tried to be "cultural bridge-builders" since the 16th century were Christians, simply because the missionaries, who worked hard to learn the native languages of China

and Japan, were the first to introduce new cultural elements to these countries. The universal scope and vision of the Christian faith enabled both missionaries and native believers to overcome narrow nationalism or xenophobia and turned them into cross-cultural mediators.

One important obstacle to this cross-cultural mediation is the use of Chinese characters. The internationalization or alphabetization of the Chinese characters is an interesting topic. The question whether the Chinese script could and/or should be alphabetized was lively discussed among foreign missionaries and Chinese scholars alike, especially after the New Culture Movement (1917). Some missionaries like the Belgian Fr. Joseph Rutten argued that the use of Chinese characters was detrimental to both evangelization and educational equality. Interestingly, Leopold Leeb develops the same reasoning in his book (see his Chapter Eight: Precursors of the Internationalization of the Script). The efforts to Romanize or Latinize the script in the People's Republic of China ended with the adoption of simplified characters, common Standardized Chinese (*pǔtōnghuà*) and the Plan of the Transcription of Chinese (*Hànyǔ Pīnyīn Fāng'àn*) in 1958. Leeb however seems to ignore one of the major obstacles to alphabetization in China, namely the existence of dialects or regionalects like e.g. Cantonese, besides the additional problems of tones and homophones.

For the Chinese version of this book, Leeb created the term *lingru* 靈儒 “creative Confucians” or “spiritual servants”

to describe the pioneers of pre-modern and modern China and Japan. They exemplify the Confucian attitudes of learning, openness for friends coming from afar, and responsible service; and at the same time they practiced the Christian virtues of charity, faithfulness, and openness to the Heavenly Father who transcends and perfects human efforts.



The book is published in two versions, one in Chinese and the other in English (the writing of the former preceding the latter), as the enterprise could not be presented in the same way to both publics.

I enjoyed reading the English book and recommend it to all students and teachers of the history of Christianity in Japan and China. While congratulating and thanking Profs. Leo Lee and Muraoka Takamitsu for their excellent work, I hope this book may contribute to a future of mutual respect and friendship, peace and reconciliation between the two nations.