

Book Reviews

A REVIEW OF LEOPOLD LEEB'S TRANSLATION OF LIU, XIAOFENG. 2015. *SINO-THEOLOGY AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY: A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS BY LIU XIAOFENG*. LEIDEN: BRILL.

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Published online: 31 May 2016

Although perhaps originally intended as general terms, “Sino-Theology” (*Hanyu shenxue* 漢語神學), “Chinese-Language Theology” or “Sino-Christian Theology” have come to stand for a distinct academic discourse on Christian theology first popularized among some Chinese-speaking intellectuals in the wake of China’s Reform and Opening Up Policy. It was a time when novel intellectual goods were flourishing and in high demand, especially in the 1980s, and then, beginning in the 1990s, when new ideas and knowledge were introduced and translated in an increasingly systematized manner. Although not representative, the most prolific, well-known, and in many ways pioneering figure among the scholars initially advocating and contributing to this discourse was Liu Xiaofeng 劉小楓, born in Chongqing in 1956. He obtained a doctorate in theology at the University of Basel in 1993, but then moved on to promote liberal education in China according to the classical “reading method” of Leo Strauss (Liu 2015, 171). It is Liu’s period of reflecting on the complex relation between Christian theology and China that Leopold Leeb, Austrian professor and institutional colleague of Liu Xiaofeng’s at Renmin University of China, is most concerned with. In his translator’s introduction to a selective sampling of Liu’s writings, Leeb tells us that this translation is motivated by personal interest, a motivation for writing and a scholarly engagement that he apparently shares with Liu, who he describes as having “a very independent approach.” Liu “is not impressed by public opinion, [and] his intellectual preferences are the result of his genuine personal interests” (Liu 2015, 17).

Leeb’s English translation, which offers a non-Chinese-speaking readership interested in Christian studies in contemporary Chinese thought a first glimpse at several important articles, is divided into two main parts. First, there are eight dense chapters of Liu’s *Sino-Christian Theology and the Philosophy of History* (published in Chinese in his book *The Story of the Coming of the Holy Spirit* in 2003). Here Liu re-construes the “spirit” (*jingshen* 精神) which, according to Hegel, was so “very far away” from the Chinese people, in light of contemporary Chinese scholarship. It is a theme Liu wrestles with, as he returns to it repeatedly (Liu 2003, 7-43), along with the Christian encounter with Chinese modernity more generally, including its “nationalist state-ethics” and other ongoing concerns and debates among Chinese thinkers.

The second part of this collection presents Leeb’s translations of five separate texts, beginning with a preface to the revised version of Liu’s earlier influential work on Christianity, *Delivering and Dallying* (*Zhengjiuyu Xiaoyao* 拯救與逍遙), first published in 1988. It is offered here as a call to readers, perhaps with similar “personal interests,” to translate the whole work, a book Leeb notes “deeply touched” him when he first read it (Liu 2015, 1). Next, Leeb has

included an article previously published as an editorial foreword in Renmin University's *Journal for the Study of Christian Culture*. Entitled "Christianity, Paganism, and Modernity," Liu continues therein the conversation between antiquity and modernity in the history of thought, following an approach informed by Chinese learning, Christian theology, and classical reading. (Leeb had already translated the essay into English for this 2010 publication.)

Thirdly, Leeb offers his translation of the preface to *The Confucian Religion and Nation-State* (Liu 2007) before presenting two articles that Liu himself requested be included in the collection: "Leo Strauss and China: Encountering a Classical Disposition" (Liu 2011) and "Hobbes and His 'Apology'" (Liu 2009). The final two essays are significant as they shed light on the direction of Liu's current thought and interests. The division of the book into two parts might thus be drawn between the texts selected by Leeb, reflecting Liu's "theological period," and the final two essays, to which Liu would like to draw our attention.

Leeb's translation of *Sino-Christian Theology and the Philosophy of History*, along with the preface to Liu's revised version of *Zhengjiuyu Xiaoyao* 拯救與逍遙 (*Delivering and Dallying*) are highly significant for three reasons: First of all, although the scope here is limited (and restricted to one scholar's voice), these translated writings of Liu Xiaofeng offer non-Chinese readers a glimpse into what Sino-Theology is or might be; but also, and no less importantly, Liu's work shows what this brand of academic theology is probably not. Some portrayals of the Sino-Christian theological discourse (or movement) liken it to a third manifestation of Chinese Christianity, an image that is at once exaggerated and too confining. Liu's approach is concerned with the history of thought over a wide philosophical range, and this is an approach other Chinese scholars interested in the history of Christian thought share. Liu draws clear distinctions between this approach and a systematic theology and explains as much in his preface (written in 1999) to *Sino-Theology and the Philosophy of History*:

...by using the word "Sino-Theology," I do certainly not express my own concrete theological topic....I do not yet have my personal concrete substantial theological topic, and maybe there will never be a special name for that....I am not interested in establishing a systematic theology with a certain name, and I do not have any similar plans for the future. My personal interest and pursuit is to start from life experience and from the cultural-political context, to observe real, concrete problems of theological thought, and to touch [on] all kinds of arguments in concrete theological discussions—and not to establish any systematic theology. (Liu 2015, ix)

Secondly, Leeb does his audience the favor of placing Liu's works in context, especially those of the 1990s, when, as academic director of the Institute of Sino-Christian Studies in Hong Kong, Liu was organizing the translation project "Chinese Academic Library of Christian Thought." Leeb does this by offering an extended introduction that familiarizes readers with other leading figures in the Chinese academic religious and Christian studies scene, those of Liu's generation as well as important influences among earlier thinkers (Tang Yi and Deng Xiaomeng). In the appendix, Leeb also provides a useful list of scholars engaged in Christian studies in China.

Finally, and most importantly, Leeb's work offers an invitation: it reminds us that non-Chinese-reading scholars are in many ways woefully ill-equipped to make any meaningful judgments on the state of Christian studies in China today, because some of the most foundational texts have yet to be translated. Leeb, who is part of the Chinese-speaking academic world himself, and who translates prolifically into as well as from Chinese, invites us to work towards changing the "deplorable fact that only very few of [the works by Chinese scholars who have shown a lasting interest in Christianity] have been translated into any Western language so far" (Liu 2015, 1). We are reminded of the words of the Kangxi Emperor (1654-1722), quoted by Liu in his preface:

Those Westerners and other commoners (*xiaoren* 小人) of their kind, how could one say that they grasp China's great wisdom (*Zhongguozhidali* 中國之大理)? Besides, nobody of the Westerners really has a good command of the Chinese language, and for this reason their theories and statements are often ridiculous. (Liu 2015, vii-viii)

Need this state of affairs continue indefinitely? Translators of Leeb's caliber and willingness to serve as cultural intermediaries allow us to hope otherwise.

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