This volume is the result of the international conference “Xu Guangqi (1562-1633), Late Ming Scholar and Statesman” held in Paris from March 20 to 23, 1995. It presents the reader with a variety of material that a monographic biography on Xu Guangqi could hardly offer. In three major parts the life and work of the famous and unique Ming scholar known as the most eminent Christian convert, Xu Guangqi is placed in the context of the social and political life in Late Ming China.

The first part titled “Historiography and Context” deals with the image of Xu Guangqi as transmitted in the historiographical sources authored by Jesuit contemporaries as well as in texts concerning Christian topics written by Xu himself. The personality of the “Pillar of the Church,” as Xu was known to the readers of Jesuit letters, is backed up and differentiated by information on the contemporary social background that dominated Xu’s life in his Shanghai hometown and by his self-expression as an author.

In chapter 1 (“Xu Guangqi in the West: Early Jesuit Sources and the Construction of an Identity”) Gregory Blue gives a survey of Western language accounts and illustrations of Xu Guangqi. The sources comprise writings by seventeenth century contemporaries of Xu, comments by later competitors in the China mission such as Dominicans as well as Protestant missionaries from the nineteenth century and sinological evaluations of Xu’s work by present-day authors.

While comparing the different Jesuit sources for their relevance for Xu’s intellectual biography, Blue questions the sources’ authenticity with regard to their evaluation of Xu’s religious belief. The scientific cooperation between Xu and first Matteo Ricci as well as Johann Adam Schall von Bell is mirrored in the 150 Western scientific works that were translated into Chinese under Xu’s auspices. They leave little room for doubt regarding the reliability of the Jesuits’ reports. Yet his engagement for the Christian cause, as it can be seen from the apology which Xu wrote during the anti-Christian campaign in order to free the missionaries and their teachings from reproaches by Chinese officials, has been interpreted subjectively by different authors. Both cross-cultural activities show how Xu adopted Western cultural and intellectual concepts and became, as Blue calls him, an “active agent of change” in Ming statecraft. Therefore the identity con-
structured in the sources which concentrate on the period after Xu’s conversion is fragmented and largely depends on which aspects of his personality served the purposes of the respective sources best. It is just as fragmented, as cross-cultural interaction may leave its protagonists, Blue concludes rightly.

Timothy Brook in “Xu Guangqi in his Context: The World of the Shanghai Gentry” (ch. 2, pp. 72-98) complements the common image of Xu Guangqi as the famous convert by drawing a detailed picture of the social context in his native Shanghai and the ideas that molded his intellectual development. The influence of wealthy merchants inspired the pursuit and consolidation of newly acquired status by gentry members who could not rely on inherited status. Brook sketches biographies of the most outstanding examples of Shanghai celebrities who dominated contemporary society. He also makes us aware of the formative impact that the building of the city wall had on the local geography, including the establishing of scholarly gardens. Against this multi-faceted background he frames Xu Guangqi’s intellectual interests and the challenge that the Jesuits posed to the traditional concepts familiar to Xu.

The final chapter of this first part, “The Image of Xu Guangqi as Author of Christian Texts,” (pp. 99-152) is a detective story that analyses the authenticity of Xu Guangqi’s authorship of certain religious poems attributed to him by the Jesuits. Ad Dudink meticulously searches for indications of false attributions. This is especially interesting with regard to his assumption that the Xiaoluan bu bing ming shuo (Owl and pheasant do not sing together; 1616) may have been written by Xu instead of Yang Tingyun who used to be seen as the author and who wrote the colophon to the text.

In the initial chapter of the second part, “Statesman, Confucian, and Christian,” titled “Xu Guangqi and Buddhism” (ch. 4, pp. 155-169) Erik Zürcher looks at Xu’s critical, at times polemic, attitude towards Buddhism and the context of his acceptance of Jesuit teachings in his argumentation. Zürcher characterizes Xu’s creed “as best as ‘Confucian monotheism’.”

The different steps of Xu Guangqi’s conversion are analyzed by Nicolas Standaert in the following chapter titled “Xu Guangqi’s conversion as a multifaceted process” (ch. 5, pp. 170-185). Standaert applies a scheme developed by the pastoral psychologist Lewis Rambo to describe several stages of religious conversions and their sociological and psychological parameters. When recapitulating the process of Xu’s conversion along the outlines of Rambo’s theoretical frame Standaert concludes that Xu’s conversion may be characterized as an “intellectual conversion”—a description quite analogous to Zürcher’s judgement of Xu’s creed.

Chapter 6 is a note by Jacques Gernet, to whom the editors dedicated the volume in honor of his inspiration and encouragement for the present work. Gernet’s “Note on the Context of Xu Guangqi’s Conversion” (pp. 170-185) analyses Xu’s dedication to science rather than philology in his later life which was shared by some eminent contemporaries. Gernet calls two central aspects to our attention: his first point is that the seventeenth century in China saw an increasing interest
in scientific observations and experiments, and that Xu’s religious pragmatism must be seen in this context. And secondly we should be aware of the fact that the Jesuits’ support for Confucianism and rejection of Buddhism exerted remarkable influence on some Chinese literati since it followed the slogan “supplement Confucianism and replace Buddhism (bu ru yi fo)” then increasingly popular among intellectuals concerned with statecraft.

One of the main reasons for the Nanjing persecution of 1616-1617 is presented by Ad Dudink in chapter 7, “Opposition to Western Science and the Nanjing Persecution” (pp. 191-223). A complex set of adversaries against the missionaries had led to the persecution of the Jesuits in Nanjing that was initiated by the official of the Nanjing Board of Rites, Shen Que (1561-1624). Supported by contemporary scholars and government officials, Shen Que criticized the decision to commission the Jesuits with a calendar reform as superfluous, probably even hazardous, since their reform was bound to be inconsistent with the Chinese tradition and thus destructive to the moral of the people. The commission had been issued to the Jesuits and a group of Chinese officials, including Xu Guangqi, following a miscalculation of the solar eclipse on December 15, 1610. While the missionaries’ reports on the reasons for the persecution are inconsistent, Dudink in his detailed study of both the Chinese and the Western sources comes to the conclusion, that the main reason for the persecution must be seen in the disagreements between Chinese scholars and the missionaries in their intellectual discourse on astronomical concepts. The scholars accused the missionaries that they used their teachings to transport religious ideas that were intellectually unacceptable to the Chinese.

The last chapter of this second section, “Sun Yuanhua (1581-1632): A Christian Convert Who Put Xu Guangqi’s Military Reform Policy into Practice” by Huang Yi-Long (ch. 8, pp. 225-259) adds significantly to our knowledge of Xu’s wide spectre of concerns for strengthening and defending the country and his urge to apply practical Western knowledge in military matters. Methods of Western warfare, especially a systematic training in the use of firearms, were implemented by Xu’s disciple Sun Yuanhua and others under the pressure of the Manchu expansion in the North and of the devastating pirate attacks at the coast. Though Sun’s efforts finally failed in the Wuqiao revolt, Sun’s earlier achievements as well as publications by several of Xu’s followers show his essential role in developing new standards of military knowledge. It is an irony of fate that his ideas were later applied successfully by the Manchus. Huang quotes the Shunzhi emperor’s exclamation when reading Xu Guangqi’s Xu shi paoyan (Kitchen sayings of Mr. Xu): “If the Ming court had made complete use of his words, what chance would I have of standing here!”

The third part of the book is dedicated to Xu’s scientific endeavors. Astronomy, mathematics, astronomical mapping, and agriculture were the subject matters in which his writings gained prominent influence.

A major impact had the translation of Euclid’s Elements which Xu initiated. It provided the mathematical theory on which land surveys, water control projects,
and military strategies could be based. In cooperation with Matteo Ricci, Xu created the new terminology that became necessary for rendering Euclid’s essential concepts of geometry into Chinese. Keizo Hashimoto and Catherine Jamie describe in chapter nine, “From the Elements to Calendar Reform: Xu Guangqi’s Shaping of Mathematics and Astronomy” (pp. 263-278), how Xu made use of Western mathematics and categorized astronomical objects in order to improve traditional methods. They also show how his suggestions for the calendar reform were tested by the successful eclipse prediction mentioned above. Yet despite his success in the calendar reform, later generations relied less on Euclidean geometry than one might have expected, because Xu’s critics favored the traditional system. The authors make us aware of the fact that again it was only in the Qing that Xu’s achievements were commonly acknowledged.

In chapter ten Peter Engelfriet and Siu Man-keung concentrate on “Xu Guangqi’s Attempt to Integrate Western and Chinese Mathematics” (pp. 279-310). In addition to the translation of Euclid’s Elements, Xu wrote three mathematical works dedicated to the analysis of methods of measurement and one text on square root extraction with fixed divisor in which he tried to merge Western mathematical concepts with Chinese traditional mathematics. Xu followed a double aim: the introduction of Western mathematical knowledge and the restoration of the position of mathematics to its former importance within Confucian education. The authors demonstrate how Xu, who was interested in mathematics long before he started working with Matteo Ricci and other Jesuits, tried to improve the applicability of mathematics in tasks like water control. He criticized the shortcomings of mathematics in antiquity and we are provided with a detailed introduction to the individual works that were re-evaluated and checked for their reliability by Xu. Xu was not the only author who followed this workline. He assisted Li Zhizao (1565-1630), another eminent Christian convert, when Li wrote a comparison of Western and Chinese methods of calculation. Their major concern was to achieve an efficient administration through utilizing Western mathematics and Christian values, since they considered “mathematics as common to different cultures” (p. 309). In the judgment of the authors the attempt to restore traditional algorithms by Euclidean-style proofs was not entirely successful, though.

Sun Xiaochun in “On the Star Catalogue and Atlas of Chongzhen lishu” (ch. 11, pp. 311-321) deals with the astronomical reform that Xu Guangqi had initiated and that was carried out between 1629 and 1631 in cooperation with the Jesuits Giacomo Rho (1592-1638) and Johann Adam Schall von Bell (1592-1666). The result were “eight volumes of tables, maps, and images of constellations and a fold of a general atlas of stars” (p. 313). The most important changes that were introduced, are summarized on p. 315:
- the introduction of Tycho Brahe’s elliptical system of co-ordinates (though by replacing the Western zodiac signs by the Chinese Jupiter’s mansions for ideological reasons)
- the abolition of the 28 lunar lodges
the 360 degree calibration and
the introduction of the magnitude of brightness of stars.
Furthermore 23 new constellations from the southern sky were included. These constellations had not been considered before in Chinese star maps since they were invisible in China.

Next to mathematics and astronomy, agriculture posed a major concern for Xu Guangqi. In chapter 12 Francesca Bray and George Metailié ask “Who was the Author of the Nongzhen quanshu? [Complete treatise on agricultural administration; printed 1639]” (pp. 322-359). The rhetorical question is instantly answered: Neither had Xu Guangqi chosen the title, nor did he complete his work before he died. His writings on agriculture were edited and revised after his death by a group of scholars dedicated to agricultural reform under the guidance of Chen Zilong (1607-1644). After giving a survey on the genre of agricultural treatises devoted to farming methods grouped in the categories of technical instructions, works instrumental in relating practical and symbolic aspects of agriculture, and private manuals on farm work, the authors analyze Xu Guangqi’s commitment to conducting experiments and his engagement in the dissemination of agricultural knowledge. His theories on cultivation techniques and locust control aimed at fighting famine by prevention. The authors convincingly emphasize that Xu’s engagement in agriculture was not rooted in his introduction to Western science. It was derived from the traditional concept of linking knowledge and the application of practical techniques with moral principles that were supposed to determine the fabric of statecraft.

Xu Guangqi’s views on mathematics and on military reform received a positive response in the Qing as has been mentioned above. Han Qi dedicates his contribution titled “Astronomy, Chinese, and Western: The Influence of Xu Guangqi’s Views in the Early and Mid Qing” (ch. 13, pp. 360-379) to the reception and active implementation of Xu Guangqi’s ideas concerning astronomy. Some of Xu’s contemporaries and quite a few of his successors who were occupied with ideas of Western science followed Xu’s idealization of the Three Dynasties as the source of traditional science which in their opinion needed to be restored. Adoption of Western science to them meant “Retrieving lost rites from the Barbarians.” Since the barbarians had knowledge that had existed in China in antiquity but had not been preserved, Western knowledge of mathematics and astronomy could be used to restore Chinese knowledge of old. Han Qi explains the additional meaning that Xu’s concept gained in the Qing: The History of the Ming Dynasty reveals references to the Jesuit missionaries in the chapter ‘Memoirs on the Calendar’ in which their knowledge on calendrical calculation as well as the Muslim calendar are said to have originated in the classic Zhubi suanjing (The Zhou gnomon). Han Qi quotes other Qing authors who linked Western astronomical knowledge to a Shiji passage in which Sima Qian reports that experts of astronomy “went to the lands of the Eastern and Northern Barbarians.” The historical authority of the Shiji made the concept of ‘Retrieving lost rites from the Barbarians’ even more attractive. It came to be addressed as a tool for a ‘renewal
of tradition’ and was ultimately established as an officially accepted concept summarized as the ‘Chinese origin of Western learning.’

The final chapter by Horng Wann-Sheng investigates “The Influence of Euclid’s Elements on Xu Guangqi and his Successors” (ch. 14, pp. 380-397). Horng shows that the Elements translated by Xu Guangqi in cooperation with Matteo Ricci as the Jihe yuanben (Origin of quantity) influenced Chinese scientists in developing an axiomatic methodology. Scholars of the Jiaqing and Qianlong eras (1736-1820) based their new formal presentations of mathematical operations directly or indirectly on the Jihe yuanben. Xu Guangqi was followed by Mei Wending who assumed that Chinese and Western mathematics could form a comprehensive system because they supplemented each other. The eighteenth century not only saw attempts to relate contemporary mathematical and astronomical knowledge to Chinese antiquity but also their application in disciplines like philology and history. One prominent example was Jiao Xun’s (1763-1820) attempt to prove that the Book of Changes was based on mathematical principles. Jiao developed terms of symbols based on the horary characters in order to express arithmetical operations. Though the influence of the Jihe yuanben may not be immediately visible, according to Horng the methodology prevalent in the eighteenth century mirrors the inspiration by Xu Guangqi which was transmitted to Mei Wending and implemented by Jiao Xun in his presentation of mathematical principles.

The individual contributions are supplemented by a very useful apparatus that consists of an extended annotated chronology of Xu Guangqi’s career, a glossary, the bibliography, and an index. In the bibliographical entry on Monika Übelhör’s dissertation which is—next to Hashimoto Keizo’s work on Xu Guangqi and astronomical reform—one of the few works on Xu that had been published in a Western language, a funny typo has snuck in that ought to be eliminated in a future edition: Übelhör’s work is titled “Hsü Kuang-ch’i und seine Einstellung zum Christentum – ein Beitrag zur Geistesgeschichte der später [sic] Ming-Zeit” (p. 451) instead of “… ein Beitrag zur Geistesgeschichte der späten Ming-Zeit.” The typo changes intellectual history into a ghost story, a transformation that challenges the sense of humor.

The great variety of new perspectives presented in this volume greatly elucidates Xu Guangqi’s commitment to ‘concrete studies’ (shixue). The volume will become a standard reference work for important developments in the intellectual history of Late Imperial China.