Catholic University of Louvain Rector Paulin Ladeuze (left) addressing words of welcome to Crown Prince Hirohito (to the right) in the ruins of the burnt-out university library (20 June 1921). Standing to the left and slightly behind the crown prince is Cardinal Mercier. Further to the back are the two escorting Belgian officers, Raoul Pontus (left) and Aloïs Biebuyck (right), both veterans of the Great War. Photograph courtesy of Emilie Vilot, UCLouvain – Libraries Heritage Collections.
The University of Leuven/Louvain is almost six centuries old and many of Europe’s leading scholars refined their talents back here. Writing the European continent’s intellectual history, without paying due attention to great minds like Erasmus, Vesalius, Mercator and many other Lovanienses, is next to impossible. Leuven is where Georges Lemaître formulated his Big Bang theory and Christian de Duve conducted research that won him the 1974 Nobel Prize in Medicine.

In 1968 the bilingual University of Leuven/Louvain was split into the Dutch-speaking KU Leuven and the French-speaking UCLouvain. Hailed as Europe’s most innovative university, KU Leuven offers a myriad of disciplines that all proudly belong to the top 100 in their field. Its publication record puts KU Leuven at the forefront of the global conversation. UCLouvain is one of the highest ranked universities in the francophone world. Fifty years after the scission, the two universities have grown very close together, relating to each other like daughters of one and the same mother. Unity in diversity, that is the reality of today. There is intense research collaboration, the two sisters co-invest in multilingual programs and joint research, and they position themselves jointly in the capital city of Brussels and on the international forum. The two together form an academic powerhouse in Europe. Between them, they educate over 90,000 students of more than 160 nationalities. Both universities have successful research cooperations and student exchanges with partners around the world, among which Japanese universities are of eminent importance.

Today, the two universities are once again united in their common objective of further strengthening links with Japan and Japanese universities and maximizing the value of the Japanese book collection donated to the university in the 1920s. The precious collection was donated by Japan to symbolize the friendship between Japan and Belgium, after the university’s library had been destroyed during the First World War. Today, the collection also represents the intense collaboration and intertwining of the two parts of the Universitas Lovaniensis. One hundred years after the donation, Japan once more reunites KU Leuven and UCLouvain with the Special Exhibition on “Japan’s Book Donation to the University of Louvain: Japanese Cultural Identity and Modernity in the 1920s,” hosted in the KU Leuven University Library. In addition to a fundraising campaign to support the digitization of the collection and to create a position for a specialist in the book history or visual history of the Edo period, this book, which accompanies the exhibition, is published to serve as a lasting introduction to the magnificent book donation and its historical background, and as a reference for further research in the future.

Prof. Dr. Luc Sels, Rector KU Leuven
Prof. Dr. Vincent Blondel, Rector UCLouvain
Adachi Mine’ichirō, promoted to the rank of ambassador on 31 May 1921. The photograph, showing him in full regalia with various decorations pinned to his chest, dates from 1928 or later. Courtesy of the Japanese embassy in Belgium.