



CENTRE FOR ASIAN AND
TRANSCULTURAL STUDIES

INSTITUTE OF
EAST ASIAN ART HISTORY



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Mercury in China

The Transcultural Journey of an Astrological Image

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Monday, 11 May, 2020, 6:15 pm

The lecture will be held online. An invitation with a link to join will be sent to the IKO and CATS community via list serve. Watch for details!

The image of Mercury appeared in China during the Tang Dynasty as a woman holding paper and pen, accompanied by a monkey. This motif can be traced back to the Persian image of Mercury, where he appears depicted as a scribe. The deity's feminine appearance and the association with a monkey are instead ascribable to a Chinese indigenous appropriation. The images of planetary deities came into Tang China in close association with the astrologic system of seven planets and the zodiac. This adaptation reflects how the newly introduced astrological system was understood, accepted, and transformed by local actors. When reinscribed into the Chinese context, planetary images assumed animal features from Chinese zodiac; this connection explains why Mercury is associated with a monkey.

The astrological system of the seven planets and the zodiac originated from ancient Greece and, after travelling throughout Persia and India, came into Tang China. According to 10th to 14th century Arabic-Persian literature, the astrologic images enriched with animalized features were then disseminated back to Persia and India, and reached Europe during the Medieval period and early Renaissance.

Yanwu Wu

is a lecturer at the Guangxi Arts University, China (2017-present). His academic interest focuses on the cultural and artistic exchanges between China, Asia and Europe in the middle ages. After graduating from the China Academy of Art, he completed his Ph.D. degree at the Department of Art History of Peking University.

