The Diagram of the Taiyi Incantation from Mawangdui: the Interplay between Text and Image in Early China

A LECTURE BY
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Focusing on one of the archaeologically excavated silk diagrams (“tu” in Chinese) from the famous Mawangdui No. 3 Tomb (c. 168 BCE), the diagram of the Taiyi Incantation, this presentation is part of a larger research project that explores the cultural history of visual thinking in the Warring States and Qin-Han periods, investigating the dynamic interplay between text and image in the production and transmission of proto-scientific knowledge in early China. The text-image relationship has long been a subject of scholarly inquiry in literary studies and art history, in this study, instead I show that how correct understanding of that relationship can help us reconstructing the diagram and better understanding its nature and function. Diagrams played an important role in the production of technical manuals, the circulation and spread of knowledge among both the specialists and non-specialists in early China. The goal of this research project is to place the Mawangdui diagrams into the intellectual and art historical development of early China.

Guolong Lai is Associate Professor of Chinese Art and Archaeology at the University of Florida. His research interests include early Chinese art and archaeology, Chinese paleography and excavated manuscripts, museology, collecting history and provenance studies, and cultural heritage conservation in modern China. He has worked at the National Museum of Chinese History in Beijing (now the National Museum of China), the Getty Conservation Institute in Los Angeles, the Freer and Sackler Galleries of Art in Washington DC, and received various fellowships and grants from the Smithsonian Institution, the American Council of Learned Society, the Chiang Ching-Kuo Foundation, the Mellon Foundation, and the Henry Luce Foundation. He was a member of the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton (2014-15), a Getty Scholar (2018-19) and a Visiting Fellow at the IKGF at the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg (2020-21). He is the author of Excavating the Afterlife: The Archaeology of Early Chinese Religion (2015), which won the Society for American Archaeology’s Honorable Mention-Brock Award in the Scholarly Category (2016). He is the founding Associate Editor of the Zhejiang University Journal of Art and Archaeology (Hangzhou) and the associate editor of Bulletin of the Jao Tsung-I Academy of Sinology (Hong Kong). Recently he co-translated William Baxter and Laurent Sagart’s Old Chinese: A New Reconstruction into Chinese (Shanghai 2021).

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