The Shangguan Wan’er Moment
A Reading of Political Culture of Early Eighth-Century China

Professor LU Yang 陆扬 (Peking University)

5pm, May 24, 2017 (Wednesday); Rooms 8 & 9, FAMES

All seminars take place on Wednesdays (unless otherwise arranged) at 5pm in rooms 8 & 9 in the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies. Tea will be served at the same venue at 4:45pm. All are welcome!
Abstract  During the last two decades of the seventh century the Tang empire witnessed one of the most fundamental transitions in its history concerning the ruling ideology, and the source of this transition is the political revolution under the regime of Wu Zhao. Empress Wu’s ingenious use of spiritual and cultural capital to shore up support and forge political alliance is unparalleled in history. But the controversial nature of her regime led to deliberate suppression of historical information in later historiography. Consequently, this makes it more difficult for historians to understand the process of such a transformation and to contextualise it. Shangguan Wan’er (上官婉儿), a pivotal political and cultural figure of that period, provides a unique entrance to the political world of the eighth century. A female official who epitomised the court culture and power struggle of the time, she left behind a larger-than-life image, and the recently-unearthed funerary inscription further allows historian to re-examine the role she once played. This lecture attempts to take her beyond the day-to-day court politics and situate her in a broader context of the rise of writing in Tang political culture, and explains why her image changed within a very short period of time and how this may tell us about the society of the High Tang.

Speaker  Professor LU Yang (陆 扬) studied Sanskrit at Peking University, Indian and Tibetan Buddhism at the University of Vienna before receiving his Ph.D in East Asian Studies from Princeton University. He taught at Princeton University, Harvard University, and the University of Kansas before joining Peking University as Professor of Chinese History in 2011. He specialises in medieval Chinese history, especially the period of Sui and Tang dynasties, the history of medieval Chinese religions, and comparative historiography. He is the author of Literocracy and Empire: A Study of Political Culture of the Tang Dynasties (清流文化与唐帝国, Peking University Press 2016), co-edited Early Medieval China: A Sourcebook (Columbia University Press, 2014) and published more than a dozen seminal articles on the history of the Tang Empire and medieval Chinese Buddhism. He has been a featured guest in several BBC and National Geographic documentary films on Chinese history.