



**Universität
Zürich** ^{UZH}

Chair of East Asian Art History

University of Zurich
Institute of Art History
Rämistrasse 73
8006 Zurich
www.khist.uzh.ch/ostasien

Zurich Lectures in East Asian Art History

October 30, 2025
18:15–20:00

University of Zurich
Rämistrasse 59
8001 Zürich
Room RAA-G-01

Tribute Animal, Urban Spectacle, and Social Reality: A Cultural History of Elephant Keeping in Early Modern China

Prof. Dr. Fan Lin
Leiden University



Anonymous, Brush Pot with Scene of Washing an Elephant, porcelain painted with cobalt blue under transparent glaze (Jingdezhen ware), 16.5 x 12.4 x 11.2 cm, mid-17th century, object number: 2008.80, The Met.



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Abstract

Elephants are the largest land animals alive today. While they were once native to early China, they had been pushed to the southwestern margins of the country by the tenth century due to climate change and human expansion. From the eleventh century onward, elephants were brought back to the imperial capitals from Southeast Asia as tribute animals. Their ceremonial processions quickly became a popular urban spectacle. Through Buddhist associations, the washing of these elephants came to symbolize the purification of the restless mind. However, the living realities and emotions of both the elephants and their keepers were largely ignored in contemporary scholarship. This talk examines three facets of the cultural history of elephant keeping: first, the political agenda behind the elephant processions; second, their parade as an urban spectacle and its Buddhist implications in visual imagery; and third, the lived reality of elephants and elephant keepers.

Fan Lin is University Lecturer at the Institute of Area Studies at Leiden University. She earned a PhD in Art History and East Asian Studies at McGill University, Montreal. Her research revolves around two interests: first, the visual and textual representations of locality and space in maps, landscape paintings, and texts in middle period China; second, the making, representation and experience of urban space.