

What's Mud Got to Do with It:

Botany, Cultural History, and the Ideology of a Flower

Xiaofei Tian, Professor of Chinese Literature, Harvard University



Friday November 20, 4:30pm Seelye Hall Room 106

Followed by a reception at the Lyman Plant House
with the Chrysanthemum Show on View

Cultivated in Asia for thousands of years, the lotus, *Nelumbo nucifera*, has a much shorter, albeit rich and complicated, cultural and textual history in China. It is not only celebrated in Chinese writings from antiquity, but is also an important symbol in Buddhism, imported into China in the first century AD. Gradually, the lotus becomes a contested site where diverse and often conflicting meanings converge: spirituality and purity, high-mindedness and detachment, sensuality and erotic love, and food and medicine. The multiple facets of the lotus provide a perspective on Chinese culture even as they effectively call into question the existence of a monolithic “Chinese tradition.”



Xiaofei Tian received her BA from Beijing University in 1989 and her Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from Harvard University in 1998. Her research interests include Chinese literature and culture, manuscript culture, book history, the history of ideas, and world literature. She is the author of *Tao Yuanming and Manuscript Culture: The Record of a Dusty Table* and *Beacon Fire and Shooting Star: The Literary Culture of the Liang (502-557)*. Her Chinese publications include a book on the sixteenth-century novel *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, a book on Sappho, and several works of translation. She has also published several collections of poetry and essays.

Sponsors: Ada Howe Kent Fund, The Botanic Garden Curricular Enhancement Program, East Asian Languages and Literatures Department, The Endowed Lecture Funds, Friends of the Botanic Garden