Beyond the Frontier: Cultural Politics and Regional Identity in Yunnan Province

Gary Sigley

Gary Sigley is professor at The University of Western Australia and works on the contemporary social, cultural and political transformation of China.

This seminar will pay particular attention to the rise of the ‘Ancient Tea Horse Road’ (茶马古道) and its important place in the spatial reimagining of contemporary Yunnan. For much of its history as part of the People’s Republic of China, Yunnan Province has been regarded as ‘backward’ (luohou 落后). It occupied a highly undesirable location and was inhabited by ‘uncivilised’ ethnic minorities and mysterious miasmas (zhangqi 瘴气). During the Maoist period, national borders that separate Yunnan from Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam were tightly closed and cross-border trade limited. However, over the course of the last three decades, and in particular the last decade, Yunnan has undergone a remarkable transformation. Rather than being seen as a ‘backwater’ and ‘dead-end’ region, Yunnan is now promoting itself as a ‘bridgehead’ (qiaotoubao 桥头堡) to Mainland Southeast Asia and an important strategic corridor to the Indian Ocean.
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Gary Sigley has been working at The University of Western Australia since 1997, though his time is split between Western Australia and China. His has two broad areas of research interest: governmental and social policy reform in contemporary China; and cultural heritage and community development. In the former, his approach offers a critical combination of governmentality studies, sociology and political economy. In the latter, he has been inspired by the important role that China’s rich cultural heritage plays in its social and political life. He is particularly interested in the development of cultural heritage tourism and the place of such development among grass-roots communities. You can read more about Gary’s research in this area by visiting his blog at: www.chinawatch2050.com