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

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

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’ (落后). It occupied a highly undesirable location and was inhabited by ‘uncivilised’ ethnic minorities and mysterious miasmas (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’ (桥头堡) to Mainland Southeast Asia and an important strategic corridor to the Indian Ocean.
27 March 2014, 4:00pm - 5:30pm (Thursday)
Seminar Room (ground floor)
Australian Centre on China in the World, Building 188, Fellows Lane, ANU

Gary Sigley

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

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’ (qiutoubao 桥头堡) to Mainland Southeast Asia and an important strategic corridor to the Indian Ocean. The construction of roads, expressways, railways, airports and other transport infrastructure has created a process of mobility that is fundamentally changing the cultural and social landscape. Certain destinations within Yunnan have now even become desirable targets for ‘lifestyle migration’. At the same time, scholars, official developers and tourism operators have ‘rediscovered’ Yunnan’s past cultural heritage in ways that support its new status as a ‘bridgehead’ and also as a model for ethnic unity. This paper 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.

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