Sinophobic Tales

Modernity and the Other in Mongolia

Dr. Franck Billé
(University of Cambridge)

5pm, October 21 (Wed), 2015
Rooms 8 & 9 FAMES

Abstract Emerging in the mid-nineteenth century, the discourse of the “Yellow Peril” has shown remarkable resilience and adaptability. No longer tied merely – or even primarily – to ethnic purity and miscegenation (Marchetti 1993), the “Yellow Peril” is frequently used as shorthand for global issues such as economic competition, territorial sovereignty, and climate change. The association of China with threat has a long history in Mongolia. Throughout the twentieth century it was actively fostered by the Soviet Union: China was routinely described as an imperialistic nation intent on invading Mongolia, only prevented from doing so by the Soviet Union. Not only aggressive, China was also portrayed as culturally backward, dirty and nonmodern, while the Soviet Union represented the pinnacle of high culture and urban modernity. Over the twentieth century, as Mongolia became increasingly aligned politically and culturally on the Soviet Union, it actively sought to expunge all its cultural links to Asia, and to redefine itself as a Eurasian nation. In postsocialist Mongolia this worldview remains dominant, and the Mongolian public discourse is saturated with media articles, graffiti, popular songs, and rumors pointing to alleged malevolent Chinese intentions. The paper argues that the Mongolian version of the “Yellow Peril” constitutes both an internalization of Russian ideas of Asia, and a policing discourse emphasizing distance from China, and Asia overall. Ostensibly about the Chinese, it is in fact an internal discourse by and for Mongols, as well as a claim of membership to the cultural “West.”

Dr. Franck Billé is a social anthropologist working in North East Asia (Russia, China and Mongolia) and affiliated with the Mongolia and Inner Asia Studies Unit (MIASU), Cambridge. He specializes in race and ethnicity, borders, cartography, and urbanism. His current research in Blagoveshchensk and Heihe, on the Russia-China border, focuses on mutual perceptions and social transformations, analyzed through the prism of urban development. His previous work on anti-Chinese sentiments in Mongolia, based on his doctoral research at Cambridge, was recently published by the University of Hawai’i Press (Sinophobia: Anxiety, Violence, and the Making of Mongolian Identity).

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!