Book Review

Poddar, Prem, and Lisa Lindkvist Zhang. *Through the India–China Border: Kalimpong in the Himalayas*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024. ISBN: 9781009499354. 288 pp.

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Border studies, a stream of exploratory research in socio-anthropology, socio-ecology, and socio-politics, has witnessed substantial scholarly expansion in recent years. The borders between nation-states are increasingly examined not merely as demarcations where sovereignty ceases and stops being traversed, but as a dynamic zone of interaction, negotiation, and symbolic production. The borderlands have come to be viewed as a melting pot for diverse cultural, social, and heterogeneous identities. In this context, a work like *Through the India–China Border: Kalimpong in the Himalayas* represents a significant scholarly intervention that warrants critical engagement through both inter- and intra-disciplinary optics.

The publication of *Through the India–China Border: Kalimpong in the Himalayas* arrives at a moment of renewed scholarly and strategic interest in the historical formation and present-day tensions of the India-China border. The border dispute between the two nations—marked by recurring military standoffs, most notably in Doklam (2017), Galwan Valley (2020), and the Yangtse area of Arunachal Pradesh (2022)—has received harsh scrutiny through diplomatic and military lenses. The polemics often overlook the rich tapestry that the borders carry and represent. The scholarship in borderland studies, postcolonial theory, and transnational history has been used to prod the cultural, symbolic, and everyday dimensions of border-making.

This book responds to and advances that shift by situating Kalimpong within a broader constellation of historical forces, including British imperial frontier policy, Cold War geopolitics, the legacies of Tibetan autonomy, and the lived realities of Himalayan communities. In doing so, it challenges dominant narratives that reduce border zones to strategic buffers or sites of exceptionalism, instead offering a more nuanced understanding of how borders are discursively and materially produced over time. The authors instead focus on the unique factor by avoiding duplication of debates and contests over borders, lands, possessions, and legacies, while touching on the fundamental question of historicization. Such an understanding of realities through

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the process of co-evolution, conditioning of neighborliness amid culture and geography, is crucial beyond the definitions of power and influence of ideologies and interests. The book sets off by underlining this and clarifying at the outset, "What we want to emphasize in this book is not so much the willfulness of the regimes in New Delhi and Beijing to secure their frontiers, but the historicization of how this came about and how Kalimpong has featured in this political complex" (p. 8).

Formerly part of the Darjeeling district until its elevation to district status in 2017, Kalimpong, though absent from many mainstream policy discussions today, played a quietly pivotal role in shaping the symbolic and historicizing dimensions of India-China relations. In the early 20th century, it served as a vital link in the Indo-Tibetan trade network, hosting Tibetan aristocrats, Chinese merchants, and British frontier officers. During the 1950s, it became a hub of diplomatic and ideological activity, notably as the site from which the 14th Dalai Lama's escape to India in 1959 was facilitated. More recently, Kalimpong's relevance resurfaced through discussions around cross-Himalayan discourse over development, sustainability, cross-border migration, and unmasking broader narratives of boundaries. The book leverages these local and transnational histories to illuminate how borderlands, such as Kalimpong, serve as critical sites for unpacking the underlying logics of territoriality, sovereignty, and nation-state imaginaries in South Asia.

Prem Poddar and Lisa Lindkvist Zhang present a rigorous, interdisciplinary examination of the historical, geopolitical, and symbolic significance of Kalimpong—a seemingly obscure and marginal Himalayan town. In this study, however, it is reconstituted as a critical site of intersection in the ideological, cultural, and strategic entanglements between India and China from the colonial era through the Cold War. Far from being a mere regional history, the book constitutes a theoretically informed and archive-grounded analysis of how borders are imagined, enforced, and contested. Through Kalimpong, the authors interrogate the longue durée of frontier politics and the symbolic cartographies of modern Asian statecraft.

The authors present Kalimpong as an "interface," as described by Alexander Galloway.[1] A key argument of the book is that Kalimpong should be viewed not as a distant periphery but as a "contact zone" and "interface" where multiple sovereignties, ideologies, and economies intersect. Poddar and Zhang examine the "border" not just as a geopolitical boundary but as a space shaped by history and discourse. They draw on Hegelian and Foucauldian ideas about space, territory, and power, suggesting that Kalimpong is a center for what they term "presence and presencing"—where China is both physically absent yet symbolically ever-present, and vice versa (p. 28). This approach enables the authors to see Kalimpong not as a site of cartographic fixity, but as a layered palimpsest marked by imperial histories, Cold War fears, and nationalist ambitions.

The book is structured thematically across six chapters, each drawing from distinct archival or ethnographic materials. It opens with a historical overview of Kalimpong's emergence as a trade hub and colonial frontier space following the British annexation of 1865 (p. 9, 13). The town gained strategic importance with the construction of the road to Jelep-La and its proximity to the Chumbi Valley, making it a British outpost in the shadow of Tibet and China.

The authors employ the terms "interface" and "metonym" to describe Kalimpong's dual role as both a site of interaction and a symbol for the broader India-China relationship. For example, in the early 1950s, Kalimpong was celebrated in Chinese media as a site of India–China friendship during the 'Hindi–Chini bhai-bhai' era (p. 54). However, by the late 1950s and early 1960s, amid the Tibetan uprising and the Dalai Lama's flight to India, Kalimpong had morphed into a "nest of spies" and "a command centre" for Tibetan rebellion, at least in the eyes of the Chinese (56-61). The examination of Kalimpong's emergence within the political imagination of revolutionary China in Chapter 2 details how the Chinese Communist Party's official newspaper, *the People's Daily,* portrays them as a site of instability and a nucleus of Tibetan resistance (pp. 61-65). This transformation in the perception highlights a shift in trust or mistrust between the two states. The authors argue that the oscillating representation of Kalimpong—once idyllic, later seditious—mirrors the ideological volatility of the Cold War and the fluid geopolitical imaginations of India and China.

The latter chapters of the book offer a sobering examination of how Kalimpong became a symbol of national anxiety. After the 1962 Sino-Indian war, Chinese residents in Kalimpong were subjected to state surveillance, internment, and even expulsion under suspicion of espionage (pp. 86, 100). The authors frame this as part of a broader process of disciplinary nation-state formation, where ambiguous identities—especially those that straddle borders—become threats to national integrity. The book (Chapters 3 and 4) narrates how the local politics of espionage, education, and ethnic identity evolved over time. The Chung Hwa School, for instance, is analyzed as a microcosm of GMD[2]–CCP[3] factionalism, with suspicions of espionage operating through educational and cultural fronts. Kalimpong was not just a geopolitical frontier, but also a psychic battlefield for clashing ideologies and intelligence agencies.

The story of Ma Zhucai, the Ancient Tea Horse Road (ATHR) trader, in Chapter 5, exemplifies this entanglement. A Chinese trader who lived in Kalimpong for over four decades, Ma's biography—pieced together from Chinese state archives and British intelligence reports—becomes a lens through which the authors explore themes of loyalty, ideology, and transnational commerce. Ma was lauded in Chinese media as a "patriot," but British documents depict him as a suspected spy entangled in Cold War espionage (pp. 166, 172). This dual portrayal fore-

grounds the contradictions inherent in nation-building and ideological representation.

A striking strength of the book is its methodological reflexivity. Poddar and Zhang are acutely aware of the limitations and biases of their source materials. Each chapter is built around specific types of archives—British intelligence files, Indian government records, Chinese sources and literature, and oral histories. The authors read these sources both "along and against the grain," allowing for a critical evaluation that foregrounds absences, silences, and ideological interpolations. This is particularly evident in the chapters that analyze the Chinese state's use of propaganda, especially via *the People's Daily*, to construct Kalimpong as either a site of revolutionary camaraderie or nefarious intrigue depending on geopolitical shifts. The book's treatment of these propagandistic representations draws from Žižek's concept of ideological suturing—emphasizing how state ideology operates not merely through coercion but through the affective production of pride, nostalgia, and belonging.[4]

A central theme in the book is the concept of "translocality," which enables the authors to transcend rigid notions of fixed borders and national sovereignty. Kalimpong is portrayed as a place deeply connected to a network of movement—of people, ideas, goods, and information—that continually challenged and blurred the boundaries between territories. The authors also use the concept of "vernacular cosmopolitanism" to explain how Kalimpong's diverse communities—Tibetans, Nepalese, Bengalis, and Chinese—engaged with global political dynamics through everyday local practices and personal networks. These conceptual tools allow for a bottom-up history of the border, giving voice to subaltern actors like muleteers, traders, and schoolteachers, even as the authors acknowledge the elusiveness of many such voices due to the limits of the archive.

The book brings rich description to the forefront by combining narration, access to archival details and knitting it well with personalities and communities on the ground. The book's interdisciplinary breadth is particularly noteworthy. Works of this nature often risk becoming unwieldy-either due to the density of their theoretical frameworks or the complexity of their archival layers and sub-narratives. Maintaining analytical coherence while navigating such complexity is a significant challenge for scholarship of this kind. Although the theoretical depth may occasionally prove demanding and overwhelming for readers not steeped in border studies or postcolonial theory, the authors manage the flow with ease without sacrificing empirical richness and interpretive nuance. Nevertheless, these critiques remain marginal when weighed against the book's accomplishments. *Through the India–China Border: Kalimpong in the Himalayas* is a monumental contribution to the historiography of South Asian borderlands, Sino-Indian relations, and transnational studies. Kalimpong is no longer a forgotten hill station in this account—it becomes the stage upon which the dra-

mas of decolonization, Cold War rivalry, and nation-making play out. By situating Kalimpong as a site of both entanglement and estrangement, Poddar and Zhang reveal the border not as a limit but as a productive space of negotiation, surveillance, resistance, and imagination.

Notes and References

1 Alexander R Galloway, *The Interface Effect* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2012).

2 Guomindang, the Chinese Nationalist Party.

3 Chinese Communist Party.

4 Jonathan Auerbach and Russ Castronovo, "Introduction: Thirteen Propositions about Propaganda," in *the Oxford Handbook of Propaganda Studies*, ed. Jonathan Auerbach and Russ Castronovo (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1-16.