

Book Review

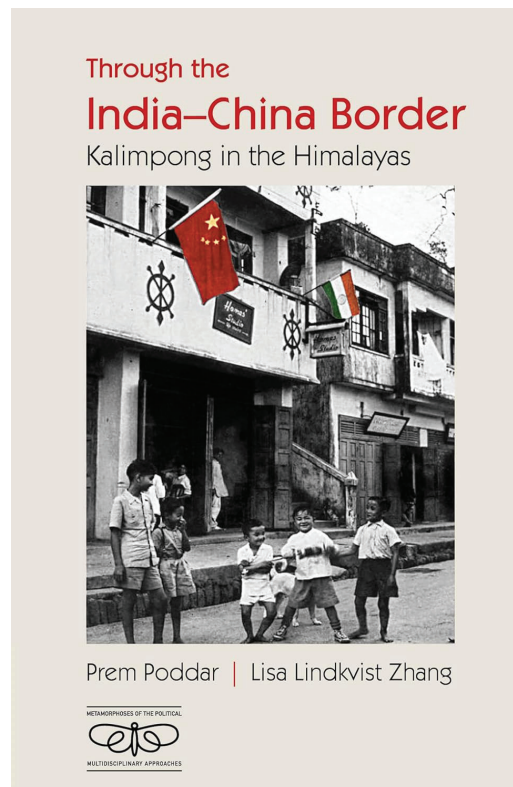
A Borderland's Soul: Through the India–China Border and the Hidden Histories of Kalimpong

Review of *Through the India–China Border: Kalimpong in the Himalayas* by Prem Poddar and Lisa Lindkvist Zhang

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Kalimpong has long been a place of passage, where history lives through the stories strewn across its gentle hills, where multiple cultures coexist. In *Through the India–China Border*, Prem Poddar and Lisa Zhang bring to life a landscape that is as enigmatic to insiders as it is to outsiders. As a native of this borderland—and as someone privileged to call Prem Poddar a friend—I can attest to the depth of his insight and the lyrical precision with which he, together with Lisa Zhang, unveils Kalimpong’s layered past. I was also impressed by Lisa Zhang when I met her in Kalimpong during one of my winter sojourns.

From the outset, I felt the pulse of Kalimpong—the bustling trade routes that once hummed with Tibetan and Marwari traders, the Tibetan muleteers, British explorers and administrators, and the many people who gathered there from around the world. Poddar and Zhang trace the journey of Kalimpong with historical finesse, revealing how this small town became a crucial node in British imperial ambitions, Chinese geopolitics, and Indian frontier administration. The book does more than narrate a history of the town—it resurrects voices and moments that might otherwise fade into obscurity. As a son of Kalimpong, I take pride in this monumental book, which taught me much about the history and geopolitics of my hometown.

What makes this work exceptional is the way it intertwines grand political narratives with the intimate details of local life. The book pulses with the stories of Kalimpong’s people—the traders with their lingering nostalgia for a vanished trade, the Chinese shoemakers who made it their home, the monks from Sikkim and Bhutan walking with rosaries or prayer wheels in hand, the autochthonous Lepchas paying respects to their religious specialists called Muns and Bongthings, and a host of others shaping the town’s cultural tapestry. It is through their voices that Kalimpong’s vibrancy shines, and Poddar and Zhang capture this uniquely.

Throughout the book, there are reflections on Kalimpong as both a place of

convergence and a site of tension. The spectres of World War II, shifting borders, and territorial uncertainty linger in the background. Yet there is also resilience—a quiet determination among its people to preserve their way of life. The authors do not merely recount the past; they allow us to feel its weight—every diplomatic manoeuvre, every exile’s longing, every trader’s dream, every spy’s imagination.

One of the most poignant aspects of the book is the way it frames Kalimpong as a space of imagination and belonging. It is not just a town perched on geopolitical fault lines; it is a home, a crossroads of cultures, a testament to human endurance. If one walks through its winding paths, one still sees traces of lost caravan trails. Poddar and Zhang have given Kalimpong a voice that speaks of its past with honesty, of its present with subtlety, and of its future with hope—as seen in the possible reopening of the Jelep-La pass.

Nestled in the Eastern Himalayas, Kalimpong has historically served as a crucial interface between India, Bhutan, Sikkim, and Tibet. Its strategic location made it a hub for trade, diplomacy, and cultural exchange, particularly during British colonial rule and the early years of India’s independence. The town has remained a focal point for geopolitical tensions, such as the Doklam standoff in 2017 and the Galwan Valley confrontation in 2020, underscoring its continued relevance in India–China relations.

Kalimpong has also been conceptualized as a metonymic space, representing broader India–China relations, particularly in the mid-20th century. Historically, it was a British trade post strategically positioned on the Lhasa–Kolkata trade route, which later became a vital corridor for the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in the early 1950s. The town housed a sizeable Tibetan population, including refugees and influential members of the Kashag (Tibetan governing council), making it a focal point for political manoeuvring in Tibet. Additionally, a diasporic Chinese community lived in Kalimpong, many of whom were later

interned in Deoli, Rajasthan, following the 1962 Sino-Indian War. Even today, some Chinese families remain part of the town's social fabric.

Through archival research and fieldwork, the authors examine how Kalimpong functioned as both a symbolic and geopolitical node, shaping narratives in Chinese and Indian official circles during the 1950s and 1960s.

Kalimpong has long been a crossroads of espionage, political intrigue, and covert operations. During the 1950s, it was infamously labelled a “nest of spies” by Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Chinese authorities and media, including *People's Daily*, denounced Kalimpong as a command centre for Tibetan rebels and espionage.

Its proximity to Tibet made it a crucial intelligence outpost for various nations with interests in the region. British intelligence maintained networks in the town, particularly during World War II, when operatives like Frederick William “Bill” Bailey and Lawrence “Laurie” Waddell gathered intelligence from Tibet and Burma (now Myanmar). Of the two, Waddell was a well-known author, notably of *Among the Himalayas* (1899).

After the British departure, Kalimpong remained vital to Indian intelligence efforts monitoring Chinese movements and Tibetan resistance. The town was a key transit point for Tibetan refugees fleeing the Chinese occupation—among them informants and operatives working for various governments. The CIA-backed Tibetan resistance movement had deep ties to Kalimpong; some volunteers were recruited from the town itself. It was also a meeting ground for Tibetan exiles, traders, and monks—many of whom engaged in intelligence gathering. Gyalo Thondup, the elder brother of the 14th Dalai Lama, lived in Kalimpong and played a crucial role in diplomatic negotiations between Tibet, India, and the West. His death in February 2025 is rightly described as “the end of an era.”

Chinese intelligence was also active in Kalimpong, closely monitoring Tibetan

activists and Indian border personnel. The town's vibrant trade routes provided cover for spies posing as merchants, scholars, and travellers.

The authors employ a rigorous, multidisciplinary approach to uncover the historical and geopolitical significance of Kalimpong. Drawing on rarely used documentary materials from British, Chinese, and Indian archives, they shed new light on the “Tibet Question” (pp. 85-86) in India–China relations. Their framework—blending historical analysis, cartographic studies, and oral histories—demonstrates how Kalimpong's past continues to shape contemporary geopolitics. As John Keay notes on the book's “Advance Praise” page, it is a “model of international scholarship.”

The book's methodology is grounded in postcolonial and transcultural theory, enabling the authors to treat Kalimpong not merely as a geographical entity, but as a political and ideological flashpoint. This approach permits a nuanced reading of imperial histories, postwar politics, decolonization, and frontier cultures. The authors also integrate trade records and intelligence reports, offering a comprehensive view of Kalimpong's role in espionage and diplomacy.

Overall, *Through the India–China Border* stands out for its innovative theoretical engagement, which enriches our understanding of Kalimpong while contributing to broader discussions on border studies, postcolonialism, and transcultural interaction. It is a seminal work that challenges dominant historiographical frameworks and offers a fresh, interdisciplinary perspective on one of Asia's most politically charged regions.

I believe it should be read by every person who feels they belong to Kalimpong—or who has visited this rather unruly (Prem might prefer to call it “dystopian”) town that it has become in recent years, where there is nowhere to park a private vehicle or walk without being pushed or jostled.

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