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Kalimpong as Interface

(Post)Colonial and Transcultural

> In Kalimpong, high in the northeastern Himalayas … where India blurred into Bhutan and Sikkim, and the army did pull-ups and push-ups, maintaining their tanks with khaki paint in case the Chinese grew hungry for more territory than Tibet, it had always been a messy map.
>
> —Kiran Desai, *Inheritance of Loss*[1]

> My dear Jawaharlal,
> … The contact of these areas with us is by no means close and intimate. The people inhabiting these portions have no established loyalty or devotion to India. Even Darjeeling and Kalimpong areas are not free from pro-Mongoloid prejudices …
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> —Vallabhbhai Patel, November 1950[2]

That bit on the 'messy map', the corner around Kalimpong, has been on edge in more senses than one. During the Doklam crisis of 2017, as China and India faced off against each other, the tension of a looming skirmish—if not full-scale war—radiated through this junction between China, Nepal, Bhutan and the former Himalayan kingdom of Sikkim. This tense dynamic rumbled over into a replay in the Galwan Valley standoff in May–July 2020, as skirmishes were also reported during July–August on the border between Sikkim and China's Tibet Autonomous Region.[3]

Anxieties flared up in Kalimpong. Kalimpong, after all, is a privileged prism, a unique entry point for looking not only at the India and China undercurrents but also at China in India.[4] This introductory chapter sets the scene for the chapters that follow in this book. While the events covered in them start in the 1910s but are mainly between the 1940s and early 1960s, this overture attempts to corroborate the longer history of how Kalimpong was intimately connected to the northeastern border leading into Tibet and China. This history

is largely inaugurated by British frontier anxiety as well as the lure that Tibet as a 'forbidden' land held for the colonial *imaginaire* in its singular way of living, seeing and making of the world. Thus, the 'opening' of Kalimpong along with the 'opening' of Tibet is recounted in this chapter, first in the section on frontiers and Lord Curzon (1859–1925) and then in the section on survey, settlement and Charles Bell (1870–1945). A fragment follows on missionaries who also considered the frontier town a strategic springboard to Tibet.[5] Before launching on to that, the China connect is briefly narrated in the emergence of Kalimpong as a kind of threshold.

Interfacing the Chinese Dimension

With cartographic coordinates at latitude 27°03'36.00"N and longitude 88°28'12.00"E, Kalimpong's geo-strategic position next to Jelep-La (meaning 'the lovely level pass' in Tibetan) evidently spurred both frontier colonial strategists and administrators as well as missionary projects alike. Jelep-La with links to Sikkim and Tibet historically lay on a route that connects Lhasa to India, and the Kalimpong stretch remains subject to a military presence. The Indian media prefer to describe the area adjoining Kalimpong as the 'Siliguri corridor' that links in a transportation chokepoint through the 'chicken neck' (a mere sliver of 27–35 kilometres' width) to India's landlocked northeastern states.[6] The more one delves into the Himalayan borderland town's truncated history, the more intriguing it becomes. While the colonial production of the space of Kalimpong is discernible, as is the Indo-Tibetan trade nexus, the town's emergence as an enigmatic and marvellously complex place with superdiversity in human terms is less obvious. Its translocal and transregional character,[7] especially in its linkages to the 'Chinese' and/or Tibetan dimension, indubitably and enticingly, also invites scholarly attention.

This is the impetus for this work. Probing the Chinese connections entwined within the Kalimpong interface, the book is an exploration of four trails twisting and turning within and beyond this Chinese connection and mainly focuses on the time period between the 1940s and 1960s.[8] The use of 'interface' in the title of this chapter is borrowed from Alexander Galloway, who conceptualises interfaces as processes, or 'thresholds, those mysterious zones of interactions that mediate between two different realities'.[9] Thresholds should not be mistaken for ontological surfaces *on* which things happen; rather, they are changing configurations or settings *through* which things happen. Because of this, individual interfaces produce what Galloway calls certain 'effects' which exist for particular historical and social reasons. The interface is in itself also an

'effect' that brings changes to its surroundings. As the 'effect of other things', these surroundings thus tell the story of the larger forces that engender them.[10] Imagining Kalimpong as a 'hierarchically interconnected' space consisting of 'difference *through* connection', to recall the words of Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson,[11] the interface of Kalimpong is what allows for the jumping of scales, linking together the 'Chinese effects' which affected Kalimpong and and the resultant vector in these produced 'Chinese effects' marking another leap. This also means that the 'Chinese connection' tangled up in Kalimpong can be read as an entity of multiple interfaces, and Kalimpong itself conceived of as partly an effect of this order. One can hardly forget the dialectic of the Indian interface in this mix.

We have chosen to approach the project through this optic or methodology because the goal is not to define 'Chinese' or 'Kalimpong', but to recognise that there is nothing essential in these entities, that there are only unfolding linkages.[12] What the book strives to do is interrogate the dynamic relationship between the two as they are articulated vis-à-vis each other. Address, or a directed discourse or statement, plays an important role in this conceptual makeup; it is the address that questions authority through the political act of enunciation, which on the flipside can also become that very same authority, present in its 'original' epiphany, that articulates 'cultural difference'.[13] Cultural difference in this sense can be understood,[14] we argue, as the product of the interface process that bridges the 'impossibility' of 'two different realities' meeting, creating occasional moments of discursive transparency. The Kalimpong interface in its negation and negotiation of 'Chinese' becomes accessible in these moments of address, subsumed under authority, questioning authority, shaping and differentiating the referent 'Chinese'. The 'Chinese connection' is thus nothing more than an imagined totality of these processes in a formal representation; it aims to move towards a 'thick description' whenever possible.[15]

This book is inspired by and engages with scholarship on 'Zomia' and borderlands. Zomia, which in some quarters has less traction now, as an idea and term was first coined by Willem van Schendel in 2002, who suggested that Zomia could be conceptualised as a space which classical area studies had neglected.[16] The geographical stretch of Schendel's initial Zomia proposal can be seen as spanning from the 'western Himalayan Range through the Tibetan Plateau and all the way to the lower end of the peninsular Southeast Asia highlands, as a political and historical entity significantly distinct from the usual area divisions'.[17] In this land stretch one can also arguably find a quasi-Zomic Kalimpong interfacing with other connecting regions.[18] In his now-well-read

book *The Art of Not Being Governed*, James Scott has further contended that Zomia equalled the old 'area' of the Southeast Asian Massif, arguing that Zomia is characterised by its resistance to state control – a resistance which came to an end after the Second World War.[19] As to how much of this applies in the eastern Himalayas is an open question, although there is some value to be found in the communities' attitudes and agency vis-à-vis the states. Kalimpong, we imagine, inhabited in a rather loose sense the space of 'Zomic resistance to state control' and still inhabits that of a 'borderland'. The two notions are central to the book, especially in their methodological inversion of 'centre' and 'periphery'.[20]

Since the territorial scope of both India and China is imperial, based most recently on British and Qing conquests, the eastern Himalayas remain subject to ministrations of their need for control. From the viewpoint of the ethnic minority peoples who can be found on both sides of this frontier area, Indian as well as Chinese states become outsiders whose ways of life—in the case of India, encapsulated in the Patel epigraph ('Mongoloid' race)—diverge from those of the local people. These people who inhabit the eastern Himalayas can be seen to have considerable agency as a rivalry for these local peoples' compliance and consent hovers, in Bérénice Guyot-Réchard's words, like a 'shadow' over national states claiming the territory.[21]

While Charles Bell (detailed in the following discussion) was to impose a definitive grid on the terrain as his predecessors had already mapped it out arguably, Kalimpong developed as a small colonial hill station from the early twentieth century onwards. With its own distinct albeit entangled history, Sikkim ruled over Kalimpong until 1706, when Bhutan invaded Sikkim.[22] Thereafter, the territory was controlled by the Bhutanese until they lost it to the British in 1865. The British did not restore Kalimpong but made it a subdivision of the Darjeeling district, administratively part of Bengal. After the Younghusband expedition in 1904, which will be discussed soon, forcibly opened up a 'new' path to Tibet, the hill station established itself as the focal exchange point in general and a hub in the Tibet–India wool trade in particular.[23] The town became both a contact zone and a vernacularly cosmopolitan space, attracting labourers (mainly from Nepal) and traders from the surrounding region.[24] A cosmopolitan (in the classical Kantian[25] sense of the term) elite was likewise drawn to the town's moderate climate and beautiful scenery, and many summer residences were built for rich Anglo-Indians, Bengalis and northwestern Europeans.[26] A 'colonial' Kalimpong was thus set up with labour and peasantry from Nepal; traders and tradesmen from the plains of India, Kathmandu, Kham and Amdo; European and American travellers in search of manuscripts and mysticism; and a heavily

one-sided set of political relationships with Bhutan and Sikkim. Alexandra David-Néel, Georg Nikolaivitch Roerich and René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz were not the only well-known Tibetophiles who made it their base. The Himalayan Hotel, owned by the MacDonalds, served as a hangout and listening post for the circulation of rumours as well as information about Tibet and the Raj.[27] More recently, the British linguist R. K. Sprigg, who continued to reside there until the 1980s, was just one of the many intellectuals, researchers, informants and nobility associated with Tibetan, Lepcha and other regional matters in Kalimpong. Rinpoches (an honorific term in Tibetan Buddhism for 'incarnations'—*sprul sku* or *tulku*—literally meaning 'precious one') and aristocrats such as Tsarong as well as Rani Chuni Dorji, daughter of the Sikkim Chögyel and the queen mother of Bhutan, provided social and intellectual heft to the town.[28]

Kalimpong's population was predominantly Nepali (in the sense of the ethnonym) from the beginning of the twentieth century,[29] but in the hill station a mishmash of people, ethnicities and languages could also be found. The census from 1961 states that there were 'one hundred and nineteen mother tongues' in the Darjeeling district (where Kalimpong belonged before becoming its own district in 2017).[30] It is the lure of the place, not least its convenience of being at the border, the civil wars and the Second Sino-Japanese War between 1927 and 1949 in China and the Indo-Tibetan trade, that facilitates the migration of the Chinese to this region. The town flourished up until the late 1950s, when China–India relations deteriorated, leading to the closing of the Tibet–India border with the 1962 war, which dissipated most trade.[31] Today's Kalimpong has become a 'postmodern dystopia' marked by unauthorised and unplanned construction on the heels of large-scale migration from rural areas as well as beyond.

The Kalimpong bazaar features in the book *Darjiling Parichay* (Introducing Darjeeling) (1950, in Hindi) by the writer, traveller and scholar Rahul Sankrityayan. The intriguing scenes that he witnessed there could not fail to fascinate a man who had been to Tibet three times:

> Even though Darjeeling has people from many countries, Kalimpong is a far more multiculturally international town. At the Wednesday and Saturday *haat bazaar* [open-air market], you are likely to encounter not only Bhutanese, Tibetan, Lepcha, Marwari, Bengali, Nepali, Bihari and some European men and women, but Chinese from as far as Peking and Manchuria, Mongols from Siberia, Kirgiz Kazaks from the Middle East. More pandits of languages from different parts of Asia can be found here than probably anywhere else. After the upheavals in Tibet, this town will become an even bigger refuge for scholars, seigneurs, sages, and artists. Tibet's greatest sculptor already lives

> here. Kalimpong is anyway already the gateway to Tibet. During the last half-century, the Indo-Tibetan trade has been conducted through Kalimpong. It cannot be predicted whether Red China and our country's relations are going to be that of friends, enemies, or develop into neutrality. If our relations are not good and because Tibet is in Greater China and we are verboten from it, then as the aperture through which feeble light infiltrates both the sides, the place will become a den of strategic spies (which to an extent it already is); with not just Indian or Asian, but other world powers also involved.
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> In Kalimpong you hear every sort of language and see every mode of dress. All kinds of materials for varied costumes and attire are made here. Here you can savour Kazak as well as Mongol cuisine. Chinese and Tibetan food can be tasted anytime at Shanghai and Gompu's restaurants.[32]

The hill station's 'Chinese connection', highlighted here, can be firmly dated back to at least the beginning of the twentieth century. A biography of the Church of Scotland missionary John Anderson Graham (1861–1942) tells us that there 'were a few Chinese carpenters in town' in 1906;[33] the Roman Catholic Church in Kalimpong recorded the baptism of a Chinese (and Lepcha heritage) with the Christian name Gratia Elizabeth in 1910;[34] and the oldest (still legible) gravestone in the Chinese cemetery in the town dates back to 1918. The first wave of Chinese immigrants to Kalimpong began in 1911, after the fall of the Qing dynasty (1636–1912), when Chinese soldiers were expelled from Tibet, many of whom settled down in the northern borderlands of India.[35]

The first time Kalimpong appears in a surviving Chinese text is in Kang Youwei's (1858–1927) 'India travelogue' from 1901, at a time when Curzon was viceroy, where the scholar briefly mentions that Kalimpong was one of three British hill stations belonging to the Darjeeling district.[36] It must be noted that Kang Youwei and his student Liang Qichao (1873–1929) are linked in India–China studies (in terms of representations of India) for the long letter that Kang sent from India to Liang, where he argued that the independence of the Mughal princes in India's provinces encouraged incessant internecine squabbles and fighting. This devolution of power led to a situation where a disunited India was easy pickings for a conquering imperial Britain. This, he held, was not a path for China to follow; China must turn away from becoming a 'lost country' (*wangguo*).[37] Kang's argument, which was the prevailing view, helped mould modern Chinese perceptions of India, and India's image among Chinese intellectuals became predominantly that of a failed nation. Despite the fact that an increasing amount of varied knowledge about India was known by

the early twentieth century, the late Qing and Republican periods in China, the trope that began to appear in China in this period was that India was a country responsible for its own ruin.[38] One of the most famous instances of this sentiment is the intellectual Hu Shih's (1891–1962) pronouncement that allied the 'slave' mentality in China to the weak popular resistance mounted against the Japanese. The simple reason for this is the 'Indianization of China'.[39]

Views like Kang Youwei's may have impacted such jarring Chinese perceptions. When he penned his letter from Darjeeling in May 1902, he was visiting India to arrive at more complex understandings. He wrote that he had tea with Curzon at the Government House in Calcutta in 1901. Living in Kalimpong's neighbouring Darjeeling for some time,[40] when Francis Younghusband (1863–1942) was preparing his expedition, the thinker and political reformist was not the only Chinese scholar who visited the area. Later in 1930, Tan Yunshan, the founding director of Cheena Bhavana at Visva Bharati University, Santiniketan (in present-day West Bengal), sojourned the town when he was travelling to Lhasa incognito.[41] Zhang Junmai (1887–1969), the eminent Chinese thinker, concluded his Indian lecture tour in Kalimpong in 1951,[42] writing in the preface of *China and Gandhian India* that 'in the beauty and restfulness of the Darjeeling hills I have been able to work quietly on my lectures'.[43]

A Tenuous Border Line

While the decay of the Qing dynasty prompted Kang and other concerned Chinese intellectuals to urge fundamental institutional reforms, the border dispute between China (which now had jurisdiction over all of Tibet) and British India was bristling. In 1914, representatives from Britain, the Republic of China (ROC) and Tibet gathered in Simla to parley and negotiate a treaty that would determine the status of Tibet and effectually settle the borders between China and British India. The Simla Convention stipulated that Tibet would be partitioned into 'Outer Tibet' and 'Inner Tibet'. Outer Tibet, corresponding to Ü-Tsang and western Kham, although remaining in the hands of the Lhasa Tibetan government, would be under a non-interfering Chinese suzerainty. 'Inner Tibet', roughly corresponding to Amdo and eastern Kham, would be under the jurisdiction of the Chinese government.[44] The Chinese, disagreeing with proposed terms that would have allowed Tibet to be autonomous but remain under Chinese control, refused to sign the deal. But Britain and Tibet signed a treaty establishing a border, what would be called the McMahon Line. 'McMahon's achievement,' observes a scholar, 'seemed substantial at the time, but its meaning proved to be ambiguous at best.'[45]

India maintains that the McMahon Line, a line of demarcation running between Tibet and the northeastern parts of India, extending for 890 kilometres from Bhutan in the west to 260 kilometres east of the great bend of the Brahmaputra River in the east (along the crest of the Himalayas), is the official legal border between China and India. This has never been accepted by China. Chinese forces occupied the area south of the line, capturing mountain passes and towns, during the Sino-Indian War of 1962. In November 1962, Premier Zhou Enlai declared a ceasefire, unofficially redrawing the border, the so-called Line of Actual Control (LAC). This line was much more extensive than the McMahon Line in that it referred to the entire border, rather than the northeastern portion of it. Skirmishes, like the one in 1987 at the Sikkim border, subsequently occur around the LAC, as China presses its claims to Arunachal Pradesh as southern Tibet in the east. The mountain passes Jelep-La and Nathu-La in Sikkim, both close to Kalimpong, continue to mark the territorial border.[46]

In their respective territorial legacies, expressions such as 'fragile' and 'flimsy' are used by scholars to describe what both India's and China's contention(s) in relation to their territorial claims are. But Guyot-Réchard in her book *Shadow States: India, China and the Himalayas, 1910–1962* argues that this frailty is a postcolonial product:

> The Indian Union and the PRC [People's Republic of China] alike derive their geographical claims to the Himalayas from the conquests of a foreign empire (Manchu for China, British for India), but these empires' territorial inheritance in the Himalayan regions east of Bhutan was fragile, if not flimsy. Chinese and Indian authorities' presence there is in fact very recent. Indeed, it truly dates back to the 1950s. Effective, lasting state expansion largely happened *after* formal decolonisation.[47]

What we want to emphasise in this book is not so much the wilfulness of the regimes in New Delhi and Beijing to secure their frontiers, but the historicisation of how this came about and how Kalimpong has featured in this political complex.

The Emergence of Kalimpong

How and when did Kalimpong and its trade route to Tibet via Jelep-La emerge? This is not an easy historical question to answer in any precise or satisfactory way before the concessions brought about by the Younghusband invasion of Lhasa in 1904. The road from Kalimpong built in 1879, according to Charles Bell, terminated at Jelep-La, allowing for horseback journeys, which in turn permitted

access to the Chumbi Valley.[48] The first trade mart on the Tibetan side in Yatung opened after the Anglo-Chinese Convention of 1893.[49] Trade continued, but a government report of 1886 indicates that the Tibet trade via Kalimpong was yet to flourish.[50] It was this concern and the British Indian government's frontier anxiety (articulated fiercely by Curzon) that led to the 'opening' of Tibet.[51] Prior to colonial intervention, relations across the border, between Tibetan territories and the Qing empire, cannot be rendered in terms of modern structures of political authority with their in-built hierarchies. It is true that the Dalai Lama remained under Beijing's shield until 1913. But it is also the case that his figure represented spiritual tutelage and a higher position in some spheres in relation to the Qing emperor.[52] Even though the Qing empire had troops, and entrenched an *amban* (a Manchu official who lived in Lhasa to keep an eye on the Tibetan government), it did not administer or rule the country directly. Its presence peaked and valleyed at best, and the Dalai Lama maintained autonomy in central Tibet.[53]

The Qing claimed suzerainty over numerous domains in eastern Kham so as to realise military and political control; but the Chinese state influence remained slight, and by 1900 only 'a light sprinkling of state power' around it was obtained.[54] Kham's extremely complex and fluid political patchwork defied concrete subordination to any external power. By 1900, the Qing empire's position in Tibetan areas was significantly weaker.[55] The autonomy of the Dalai Lama's government had grown, and Beijing had failed to intervene in wars between Tibet and other powers.[56] As for the eastern Himalayas (near Shangri-La), located at the junction of western Kham and central Tibet, they had never seen Chinese troops or officials.[57]

In this scenario, C. Patterson Giersch argues, it was traders who played an essential role as channels for imperial power.[58] The absence of a distinct state attendance in the eastern Himalayas in the early twentieth century served as an encouragement for the British. The trade aspect in relation to Tibet and China is the focus of an entire chapter towards the end of the book.

Frontiers, Maps, Expedition

Although the precise emergence of British colonialism in South Asia is much debated,[59] the Kalimpong region has a distinct date (that is, 1865) for when it arrived under the ambit of the British colonial state.[60] James Scott in *Seeing Like a State* is useful here in thinking about the administrative strategies of the modern state that come into play in the area, in terms of 'schematic categories' and 'typifications' that make social space legible, achieved through a detailed map and

metric of its terrain, its location and its subjects, their resources, their landholdings and yields.[61] Enumeration, location, mapping and adoption of traverse or route surveying that began in late-eighteenth-century India is clearly where colonialism finds expression (in ownership and justification of power) through the modern state.[62] Arguments for the legitimate and historical control of territory that are central to colonial forms of knowledge and practice find somewhat fuzzy expression later in the northeastern frontier with the Bhutan War of 1865 and the effective takeover of Sikkim in 1888–1889.[63] Bhutan and Sikkim were effectively treated as 'princely states', with a political officer appointed to oversee control.[64] Bernard Cohn distinguishes between the various generic modes of knowledge generation—important ones being observation or travel, historiography, survey, enumeration, surveillance. Surveys and enumeration served as keystones in providing a corpus of ethnographic and statistical knowledge.[65] Nicholas Dirks was thus to call British India the 'ethnographic state'.[66] Charles Bell, later to serve as political officer for Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet from 1908 to 1918, central in providing a colonial map that gave Kalimpong (grabbed from Bhutan) a governable shape, is an inheritor of such a governmentality.[67]

Thomas Holdich (1843–1929), the superintendent of frontier surveys in British India and a geographer decorated for his map- and boundary-making, saw active service in the Bhutan expedition of 1865.[68] In these frontier districts, particularly Kalimpong, the primary imperial concern was in the context of British India's security. Tibet, Sikkim, Bhutan and the other Himalayan state of Nepal were seen as offering a strategic buffer shielding British India from the Russian and Chinese empires.

With rival imperial projects like China and Russia foremost in his mind, Lord Curzon, in his influential 1907 Romanes lecture on 'frontiers', projected the idea of externally demarcated borders as 'an essentially modern conception' which is antithetical to 'the oriental mind'.[69] It was imperative that the English, as 'the first mountaineering race in the world', be allowed to demonstrate their empire in the Himalayas.[70] Mountaineering feats affirmed a virile, manly imperial dominance for Curzon and many others; while a scientific or recreational activity it may be, it was above all a geopolitical act which displayed national power.[71] Heroic authority over colonial spaces and nature, by drawing boundaries across maps, demanded control over whatever mountains, snows or jungles may be thrown in one's path.[72]

As the viceroy of India (1899 to 1905), Curzon believed that Tibet, relying on Russian and Chinese support, stood as a threat to British interests. Even intrusions into British Indian border territory by herdsmen and their droves