Losing Shangri-La?

I sit beside the dark
Beneath the mire
Cold grey dusty day
The morning lake
Drinks up the sky
Katmandu I'll soon be seeing you
And your strange bewildering time
Will hold me down...

— Cat Stevens, 1970

By most accounts, Kathmandu is a medieval city nestled between two main rivers called Bagmati and Bishnumati. Also known as Kantipur, it is the largest of the three major cities in the Kathmandu valley, the other two being Patan ( Lalitpur) and Bhadgaon ( Bhaktapur). Kathmandu is the capital and cultural hearth of Nepal, a country invariably viewed by Westerners as a Shangri-La, an alluring piece of imaginative geography. Imaginative geography is more than a mental map with its own distorted lines and vexed contours. It is more than a cultural landscape with definable characteristics that are produced and reproduced through a series of interactions between people and their physical environment. It is a distinct creation of what Bishop calls "cultural fantasy-making"—a place filled with fantasies, a place of mythical proportions. It is, in other words, a cultural sanctuary imagined to be sacred no matter how "strange" and "bewildering" it may be. But Kathmandu is choking, today, on the exhaust of its own modern march: environmental pollution. So severe is the problem of pollution that it not only poses a serious threat to the very tourist industry that sustains its march of modernity, but also to public health.

Investing Shangri-La
Tibet, of course, was the ultimate Shangri-La until its political demise in the late 1950s. James Hilton's Lost Horizon left little doubt about it. In the novel, he discovered Tibet, not the one that is rugged and unforgiving, that Tibetans lived and knew as an integral part of their daily reality, but the Tibet that Westerners imagined. Not only did Hilton introduce the word "Shangri-La" into the English lexicon, he also popularized a vision of utopia, an imaginative cultural landscape superimposed on the actual geography of Tibet, thus elevating it to the zenith of sacredness, a world where the axis mundi connected heaven and earth, where time was frozen and space unbounded, where brutal forces of nature and treacherous antiquity turned into a scene of serene beauty and youth, where realities were invented through imaginations and then authenticated through regurgitated travel accounts and postcards, poems, and letters to the dear ones back home. Immensely popular in both Britain and the United States, Hilton's novel was made into a movie in 1937, thus mobilizing for public (mass) consumption the captivating vision of utopia that Shangri-La exuded.

Sacred places are, however, paradoxical. They engender a sense of both fear and fantasy, terror and tranquility. They are places of awe and worship as they possess what I call "raw beauty" that defies depth as well as simple description. Once their paradox is resolved through the production of imaginative geography, the fear and darkness of such places yield to hope and healing, thus releasing a stream of fantasies. They become a Shangri-La—a place of loss, of self discovery, of transcendence, of ennui.

It was in this tradition of producing imaginative geographies, places of mythical proportions, that the Shangri-La of Nepal was carved out. It is plausible to argue that Nepal was produced as a place of mystical beauty to fill the void left by the