American Peace Corps volunteers arrived year after year, followed by waves of Western hippies who came in search of hashish and hiatus from their stale suburban lifestyles. In the sanctuary of the Nepali Shangri-La, they found both.

Along came Cat Stevens, who took the city's imaginative geography to a newer height in his famous song, “Katmandu,” and the city, where time was still and bewildering, was eager to hold him down. A couple of years later, Bob Seger traced Stevens's Shangri-La pilgrimage. In a tone similar to Stevens's, his song “Katmandu” also projected the city as a place of spiritual healing and reprieve from the mire of American materialism. To countless Westerners, Kathmandu was the place of self-discovery and self-recovery, where one found the meaning and balance of life as well as the path to eternal wisdom. It is precisely this image of Tibet and Nepal that even The Wall Street Journal has masterfully exploited in a recent ad to promote itself as a source of another type of balance and eternal wisdom: business wisdom.8

KATHMANDU
A Paradoxical Shangri-La

As noted above, Kathmandu was a medieval city with a quaint look. Similar to the tradition of National Geographic that routinely presented non-Westerners as closely blended into nature with bare breasts, or as exotic and colorful with smiles fixed on their faces, Westerners configured even native residents and their lifestyles into the vast vista of their imaginative geography of Kathmandu. Like other imaginative geographies, Kathmandu was a paradox, however, made of juxtaposing pictures—one immersed in the daily reality and experience of its residents, and another invented in the fantasy-filled imagination of Westerners.

Although chained to its past and deeply shrouded in its medieval veil, the city was restless in its quest for a modern future. It radiated an aura of charm and challenge, mysticism and mystery, with few barriers imposed against outsiders to penetrate its mystical depth and explore its mystery. Kathmandu was a city where its timeless past was vividly stored in its shapeless present, where its ubiquitous ancient temples, packed houses, and narrow streets with countless shops and crowded conditions formed the core of its life cultural curiosities and bewildering beauty: an instant museum. Space was tight as it was distanceless, yet getting around the city was no easy chore. The city looked chaotic and disorderly and difficult to navigate, yet Westerners found it uniquely titillating as they could freely romance with its pristine qualities. For some, a journey to the city was like traveling back in time to medieval days, whereas it was, for others, a fantasy

A Kathmandu woman wearing a typical Newari (jyapu) sari and carrying a child on her back.


loss of Tibet’s Shangri-La or to satisfy what Bishop calls Western “erotic, imagining compulsion.” When Tibet was annexed by China in 1959, its borders were effectively closed; its spirituality and levitating power were suddenly grounded. “By comparison with its fullness in the past, Tibet as a place was left vacant of spiritual significance to Westerners—except, that is, for a few devotees.”6 After all, Nepal was the closest “thing” to Tibet, both geographically and spiritually. Moreover, freshly emerging from the darkness of Rana autocracy in 1951, Nepal vaulted into the world of modernity, ready to welcome Westerners and Western values with open arms.7 Nowhere was this imaginative geography played out more lusciously than in its gravitational center: Kathmandu. To many, Kathmandu was Nepal imbued with mysticism, where Western cultural fantasy-making could readily be superimposed on its actual geography to produce a sacred landscape, a place of loss and self-discovery and self-recovery. The rapid unfolding of events after 1950 further solidified its Shangri-La image. For instance, Sir Edmund Hillary and his Sherpa guide, Tenzing Norge, conquered Mt. Everest in 1953. This not only paved the path for the rapid growth of Western mountain expeditions to Nepal, but also laid the foundation of its modern tourist industry. Even the illusory image of Yeti proved to be fascinating and mystical enough to arouse Western “imagining compulsion.” Then, starting in 1962,