

**DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY**  
**2023/24 SEASON**



**LUNANA: A YAK IN THE CLASSROOM**  
(Language: Dzongkha)

Director: Pawo Choyning Dorji, 2019. Running time: 110 minutes.  
Presented by Dorchester Film Society, 27 September 2023.

“This gentle, sweet-natured movie is the debut feature from Bhutan-born and US-educated film-maker Pawo Choyning Dorji: last year it became the first Bhutanese film to get an Oscar nomination for best international feature (losing out to Ryūsuke Hamaguchi’s *Drive My Car*). Despite these unusual credentials, *Lunana: A Yak in the Classroom* runs on pretty familiar, even traditional lines, although its likability and humour – and almost childlike faith in the power of singing to overcome melancholy and adversity – means you’ll find yourself smiling along.

Ugyen (Sherab Dorji) is a young man in the Bhutanese capital, Thimphu; since his parents’ death, he lives with his formidable grandmother who is exasperated at his aimlessness and shiftlessness. He is four years into a five-year teacher training course, but only wants to hang out with his girlfriend and other friends, and nurtures a dream to go out to Australia and make it as a singer. But a stern government official informs him that he must do a season teaching at the village school of Lunana in the country’s mountainous north-west. It’s the most remote school anywhere in the world, she tells him, with lipsmacking satisfaction. Ugyen whines that he has an “altitude problem”. More like an attitude problem, snaps the official. Like it or not, he’s going.

So, our pampered, resentful hero finds that his big-city pop-music dreams must be put on hold. After a long and uncomfortable bus journey, Ugyen is met by heartbreakingly polite and respectful village representatives and told that the rest of the journey will be on foot: a nice walk along a river, they assure him. It is, of course, a punishing hike that goes on for ever, mostly uphill, in the course of which he ponders the progressive disappearance of snow and ice on the mountain peaks, owing to climate change. But this uphill walk is a parable for humility and patience.

And inevitably, after a rocky start, and acting on some level as a single samurai to fight for the villagers against the marauding forces of ignorance, Ugyen grows to love them all, and even, perhaps, a certain young woman in the village: Saldon (Kelden Lhamo Gurung) who sings by herself in the countryside. Ugyen wants to light fires to warm himself and is cheerfully told that the way to do this is to light the yak dung, of which there is a great deal.

The village elders even provide him with his own yak in the classroom for necessary material, as well as general morale-raising.

It is, perhaps, a movie machine-tooled for audiences outside Bhutan and despite early talk of the children being educated for a life beyond what they would traditionally expect, we don't get that much discussion of how things might change for them or for the village. Yet there is something winning in this calm, walking-pace drama – and the landscape is amazing.”

**Peter Bradshaw, *The Guardian*, 9 March 2023.**

“Tucked away in the Bhutanese mountains is a small village called Lunana. It's likely you've never heard of it, given that its total population sits at just 56 people, and that its location is hard to pinpoint on a map. In fact, the village's name literally translates to ‘the dark valley’: a valley so far and distant from the rest of the world that the light doesn't even reach it. When the narrative of *Lunana: A Yak in the Classroom* starts, our protagonist is also unsure of its whereabouts.

The protagonist in question is Ugyen Dorji (Sherab Dorji), a young aspiring musician from Thimphu, who is stuck in a government-mandated teaching programme. His disdain for teaching is clear to his supervisors and, tired of his constant declarations that he doesn't want to be there (he dreams of moving to Australia), they decide to send him to the most remote school in the world. He isn't exactly thrilled at the assignment, especially given that the village is so isolated; even today, it has no electricity. The journey to get there will be a gruelling, tiresome, days-long trek. This trek, in fact, occupies the first forty minutes of the film's runtime...

Once Ugyen eventually reaches Lunana, aided by villagers Michen (Ugyen Norbu Lhendup) and Singye (Tshering Dorji), he is introduced to the village elder Asha (Kunzang Wangdi) and the children he is expected to teach. Ugyen is shocked at the lack of facilities and resources, his city sensibilities completely thrown. Feeling unequipped and just unwilling, he tells Asha that he cannot stay. The next morning however, the class captain Pem Zam (played by an extremely adorable nine-year-old with the same name) comes to wake him up, and an immediate attachment to the class encourages Ugyen to stick out his term in Lunana.

The film is fairly simplistic not only in its narrative, but also in its execution of it. The writing doesn't explain the quick nature of Ugyen's character

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development, so we are left to believe that it is purely the cuteness of these children that drives his change of attitude. In fairness, the children's cuteness might just be enough that the audience do believe that. However, the film is sustained by its wholesomeness not just in the child characters, but in the warmth that every supporting role emits. From the assertive but tender patriarch found in Asha, to the gentleness of Saldon as she sits in nature, to the wide and welcoming smile of Michen, the village of Lunana invites us to be a part of its community as much as it does Ugyen.

This simplistic nature may well be down to the director's (Pawo Choyning Dorji's) quest for authenticity in his portrayal of Lunana. The film was shot on location, with production solely dependant [sic.] on solar-charged batteries. Of the choice he said: "Though extremely challenging, I specifically wanted to shoot the movie in Lunana, inspired by the purity of the land and the people. I also wanted everyone involved in the production to experience this life-changing journey, so that the authenticity of experience could translate onto the film."

It is likely also influenced by the number of people making their debut here. Not only is it the directorial debut for Dorji, the entire cast is made up of non-professional actors. Pem Zam shares the same back story as her character, and is a real-life student at Lunana Primary School. In the lead roles of Ugyen and Saldon, Dorji cast two musicians, both of whom have worked with Thimpu-based record label *M-Studio*.

It is telling that there are musicians at the heart of this film, as the music is undoubtedly one of the strongest elements of *Lunana: A Yak in the Classroom*. There is an eeriness and mysticism to Yak Lebhi Leder, the yodel they sing throughout the film, that is fully realised through the beautiful clarity and tone of Gurung's vocals. Many of the other villagers also perform traditional Bhutanese yodels, and every time, the song pierces through the narrative, sending chills down the spine and raising goosebumps. Dorji talks of the purity of Lunana, and this purity is clearly demonstrated through these songs. Though the score is used sparingly, when there is non-diegetic sound, it further adds to the warm and peaceful atmosphere of the film.

Another technical strength of the film is its cinematography, shot by DP Jigme Tenzing. There is a sense of intimacy throughout, the camera often choosing to close in on specific details, or a certain look in a character's eye. Even in the wide, panning shots of the landscape, the imagery manages to retain that intimacy, creating a connection between the viewer and the Bhutanese

mountains. It is a film that's beauty lies in the unsaid rather than its dialogue; a film whose naturalism provides its tenderness and appeal.

It's oddly paced, being both a slow-burner and yet somehow rushing through Ugyen's time in Lunana. That being said, it remains engaging throughout, and its kind heart encourages you to keep going when it does veer into sluggishness. Telltale signs of it being a debut are noticeable, but the vision is clear and the motives are pure: these things are enough to make this Bhutanese flick a gem worth watching.

Whilst its simplistic nature highlights its imperfections, *Lunana: A Yak in the Classroom* draws audiences into its warm, loving embrace. Its intimate rendering of the village of Lunana and its inhabitants is sure to make your heart feel full, and leave a smile on your face."

**Rehana Nurmahi, *The Independent*, [sic.] February 28, 2023.**

### **BACKGROUND TO THE FILM**

#### **“THEY’D NEVER SEEN SLICED BREAD’: HOW A TINY FILM ABOUT HIMALAYAN YAK-HERDERS CONQUERED THE WORLD.”**

“It took eight days for Pawo Choyning Dorji to trek up to the location of his debut film, a settlement of 56 people so high in the Himalayas that it had no communication with the world below. Everything his 35-strong crew might need for the shoot had to be hauled up by mule, with solar batteries for power because there was no electricity. The villagers he was enlisting to take part had never seen a lightbulb. “They’d never even seen sliced bread,” he says, “and had no idea how to eat it.” Nor did they have any understanding of what it might mean to appear in a film. “My only instruction to them was, ‘Tell your story to this box.’”

The result is a unique and beautiful film, *Lunana: A Yak in the Classroom*. Nominated for the best international film Oscar last year, *Lunana* records a way of life in Bhutan that was vanishing in real time: even as the company were packing up after the 2018 shoot, engineers were moving in to install the first 3G masts alongside the yaks grazing on the mountainside. But the absence of modern communications had not meant the community was unaffected by the outside world...

Ugyen drills his eager recruits in reading and counting, tearing the paper windows from his shack when stocks run low in the classroom. They, in turn,

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teach him about contentment and about the complex musical culture of the yak herders. Being a teacher is a wonderful thing, they say, “because a teacher touches the future”. At one end of the makeshift classroom is a blackboard improvised from planks and charcoal; at the other is the community’s oldest yak, Norbu, who is too precious to be left out on the cold mountain slopes. “You can feed him according to how much dung you need,” Ugyen is told. Lunana is situated above the treeline, so dried dung is the only kindling freely available. It keeps the stoves burning and the biting winds at bay.

Dorji never envisaged a career in film. The son of a diplomat, he travelled the world with his family as a child. Later he studied international relations in the US but decided to return home and immerse himself in Buddhism. Once back, he took up photography and mountain-hiking. The upside of Bhutan, he says, is that it measures its prosperity not by GDP but by a happiness index. It has protected itself from the ravages of tourism by charging visitors hundreds of dollars a day just to be there, with the result that it has more unclimbed peaks than anywhere else in the world.

The downside is that it is so small and poor – its population was measured at 777,000 in 2021 – that many young people want to leave. This is true of both Ugyen and the actor who plays him. “The film industry is very, very small in Bhutan,” says director Dorji, speaking via Zoom from Taiwan, where he spends part of the year with his Taiwanese wife and two children. “We are lucky if we produce anything on an international level every three or four years. We have no equipment, our crews are very small and inexperienced, and finding actors is so difficult. At the end of every scene, I was left wondering, ‘Where am I going to find the actor to do these lines?’”

His solution was to write the script, then go hunting for people who might fit. Sherab Dorji, like his character Ugyen, dropped out of high school to pursue a music dream. The director came across him playing the clubs of Thimphu, the capital, while waiting for an Australian visa. Fortuitously, his girlfriend, Kelden Lhamo Gurung, is a singer who can act as well. She took a break from college to play the shy young woman who coaches Ugyen in the music of the mountains.

Many other characters appear as themselves. “So many of my friends said, ‘You don’t have to be in the most remote place in Bhutan. This is a film – people cheat.’ But I was adamant about shooting it in Lunana, because I wanted to capture the purity of the place and the people. So this movie is almost like a documentary of their lives.”

The film is also partly about language. Dorji recalls hanging around wood-burning stoves as a child, waiting for adults to start telling stories as they cooked. “Storytelling forms such an important part of our culture,” says the 39-year-old, “that there is no word for ‘story’. It cannot be expressed. For example, in English, I might say, ‘Claire, tell me a story.’ In my language, Dzongkha, I have to say, ‘Claire, please untie a knot for me.’ The whole act of telling a story has this purpose of liberating, freeing and untying.”

He’s aware that untying the knot of life in Lunana could disturb its delicate social ecology, while also presenting an unrealistically idealised picture. “Whenever I tell people I’m from Bhutan, the next question is, ‘Oh, you must be very happy?’ It’s nice, but it’s also a little unfortunate, because Bhutan is a third-world country. We have the same difficulties many third-world countries face and because of that, not everyone is happy. That’s why I made the protagonist someone who is searching for his happiness elsewhere.”

Since the pandemic, the queue to leave has lengthened. “Most younger Bhutanese,” says Dorji, “seem to be looking for what they see in the western world, which is represented by the glittering lights of Sydney. I wanted to create an alternative journey for the protagonist, taking him into the most desolate place in Bhutan, and that happens to be Lunana.” The name means Dark Valley. “The question is, ‘Can we discover in the darkness what we seek in the light?’” One standout performance is from a nine-year-old village girl, Pem Zam. In life, as in the film, she is the daughter of an alcoholic father, raised by her grandmother after her mother’s death. Since making the film, Pem Zam has travelled all around the world with it. “Touching people’s hearts,” says Dorji. “She has made people cry and burst out with joy.”

He says he was determined to save her from the usual fate of local children, which was to quit school at 11 or 12 to become yak herders. “I was in constant clashes with her father, because he wanted her to leave school. I was foreseeing that if she dropped out, she would get married at 15 or 16 and become a mother by 18, when I felt she had so much more to give.”

Pem Zam is a teenager now, with her own TikTok account on which she posts cute videos of herself dancing. She was recently accepted by one of Bhutan’s most prestigious schools. “She will continue her studies now,” says Dorji, happily. “And the funniest thing is, when we finally got confirmation of her admission, her father phoned me. He was so drunk, he couldn’t form his sentences, but he called to thank me.”

He shakes his head, marvelling that his little film has come so far. “But you know,” he adds, “in Buddhism, we talk about karma. You could say that my

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karma, Pem Zam's karma and the movie's karma have become interwoven. And it just fills my heart with joy knowing that.”

**Claire Armitstead, *The Guardian*, 6 March 2023.**

