



Lunana: A Yak in the Classroom

Director: Pawo Choyning Dorji

Country: Bhutan

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A review by Richard Kuipers for *Variety*:

The trusty old tale of a city slicker teacher being posted to a school in the sticks is given a fresh coat of paint in the delightful Bhutanese comic drama “Lunana: A Yak in the Classroom.” Gloriously filmed on staggeringly beautiful locations around the most remote school on Earth and wonderfully performed by a cast comprised almost exclusively of first-time actors, this big-hearted crowd-pleaser marks a bright debut for writer-director Pawo Choyning Dorji. After winning audience awards at numerous festivals including Palm Springs and Cairo, “Lunana” will line up as Bhutan’s official entry in this year’s Oscar international feature race.

Premiering at London in 2019, “Lunana” was forced to withdraw from the 2020 international Oscar category on a technicality related to the formal nomination process. It’s fair and correct for this charmer to now be accepted and become the Himalayan country’s first submission since Khyentse Norbu’s 1999 hit “The Cup,” which put Bhutan on the world cinema map. “Lunana” appears certain to become one of the most widely distributed of all Bhutanese films.

The starting point for Doji’s tale is the widely held perception of Bhutan being “the happiest place in the world.” Doji doesn’t want to debunk the claim or tear anything down here — his love for Bhutan shines through in every frame — but he does want to investigate what it means for Bhutan’s young generation. Connected to the world and exposed to outside influences like never before, can these kids and young adults be as happy as the rest of the world thinks they must be?



If anyone asks twentysomething Ugyen Dorji (Sherhab Dorji) whether he’s happy, the answer is no. Four years into a five-year government contract as a school teacher, Ugyen regrets his career choice and would much rather leave his nagging grandma (Tsheri Zom) behind and chase his dream of becoming a professional singer in Australia. That day seems even further away when Ugyen is posted to Lunana, pop. 56, a tiny village located in the shadow of the Himalayas and accessible only by a week-long trek on foot. When Ugyen asks to be ruled out of the assignment because he suffers from altitude sickness, his no-nonsense female boss (Dorji Om) says that he’s really suffering from “attitude problems,” and “I’ve never seen anyone less motivated than you.”

True to form, Ugyen trudges along Karchung La Pass and through breathtaking landscapes while barely looking up or speaking a word to Michen (Ugyen Norbu Lhendup) and Singye (Tshering Dorji), the cheerful Lunana locals sent to escort him to their village. Everything’s as dreadful as Ugyen imagined once he arrives. There’s no cellular reception, his accommodations are spartan to say the least, and electricity supply from solar batteries is intermittent at best. It comes as no surprise when Ugyen tells village chief Asha (Kunzang Wangdi) he’s not the right man for this job and asks to go straight back to Thimphu.

It’s even less of a surprise when Ugyen’s return is delayed for a week, giving him time to be won over by his bright-eyed students and have his spirits raised by friendships he forms with Michen and Saldon (Kelden Lhamo Gurung), a young woman whose beautiful voice fills the valley with songs about nature, spirits and the immeasurable importance of yaks in the economic, cultural and religious lives of Bhutanese

mountain communities. For much of the year, yak dung is the main source of fuel at these high altitudes. The yak in Ugyen's classroom (named Norbu, meaning "wish fulfilling jewel") is a gift from Saldon, so that he may have a ready supply of fuel at all times.

There's a lovely, natural flow to Ugyen shedding his indifference, collecting his yak dung and gradually embracing a simpler way of life in a place where, despite what he might have previously thought about country folk, learning is highly valued and teachers are greatly respected. "I have hope that you will give these children the education they need to become more than just yak herders and cordyceps [Chinese medicine fungus] gatherers," says Asha.



Donji's screenplay finds an ideal balance of gentle humor and life-affirming drama. Amusing situations never outstay their welcome, and the film's messages about the pursuit of happiness and valuing the people, creatures and places around you never sound preachy or didactic. Coupled with the glorious visuals of top cinematographer Jigme Tenzing ("Hema Hema: Sing Me a Song While I Wait," "The Red Phallus"), Donji has created a package that's irresistibly entertaining and uplifting.

Everyone in the cast drawn largely from Lunana itself — many of whom had never seen a camera before —

deserves praise for their natural and appealing performances. Special mention must be made of nine-year-old village girl Pem Zam, who plays the class captain and is the most delightfully eager student any teacher could ever wish for. The smiles and enthusiasm on the faces of Pem and her buddies is a marvelous advertisement for the philosophy of Gross National Happiness that has played an important role in national political and social policies since it was conceptualized in 1972 by Bhutan's fourth Dragon King, Jigme Singye Wangchuck.

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