



# **BFI FAMILIES**

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## **LUNANA A YAK IN THE CLASSROOM**

### **What's it about?**

Trainee teacher Ugyen is disappointed to learn that in the final year of his learning will be spent in Lunana, a remote village in northern Bhutan. It's a staggering seven-day walk from the nearest drop-off point and so far from anywhere Ugyen is desperate to leave. But as winter approaches, cutting off all access to the outside world, Ugyen becomes more involved in the lives of his students and the community. Filmed using cameras operating on solar-powered batteries, Pawo Choyning Dorji's drama is breathtakingly beautiful and offers a window on to a rarely seen world.

## 'Lunana: A Yak in the Classroom' reviewed

Despite years of training, twentysomething Ugyen (Sherab Dorji) lacks motivation to become a teacher. His real dream is to get an Australian visa and pursue his singer-songwriter ambitions beyond Bhutan, the small Himalayan kingdom he calls home. But Ugyen's world shrinks even further when he's summarily posted away from Thimphu, the capital, to a school in the remote village of Lunana, population 56, altitude 4,800 metres, an arduous week-long trek away.

In Lunana, there's no mobile reception and precious little electricity; the schoolroom doesn't even have a blackboard. What the locals do have is a determination, as headman Asha (Kunzang Wangdi) puts it, for their children to be 'more than yak herders and cordyceps gatherers' (cordyceps is a fungus used in Chinese medicine). So Ugyen is greeted like a visiting dignitary. In the words of his wide-eyed young students (played by real, adorable Lunana kids), a teacher can help them 'touch the future.'

So begins a charming, easygoing, gently humorous fish-out-of-water tale, culturally specific but universal enough to become Bhutan's first-ever Oscar contender (it was nominated for Best International Feature Film last year). When we first encounter Ugyen, his T-shirt sports the country's 'Gross National Happiness' slogan, a philosophy officially introduced 50 years ago by Bhutan's then-king to emphasise the prioritising of his subjects' personal fulfilment over commercial or industrial commitments. And the question of what one genuinely needs, what circumstances elicit contentment, is one writer-director Pawo Choyning Dorji delicately probes.

Contrasts abound between the modern and the traditional. At first, Ugyen burns paper to heat his primitive living quarters, only to find it's a precious resource in a school with almost none. Once his headphone batteries – and dreams of pop stardom – power down, he's better able to hear, even learn, the sad folk song of herder Saldon (Kelden Lhamo Gurung), which honours the yaks that provide the community with meat, milk and fuel (through their dried dung). When Saldon gives Ugyen a yak in his new workplace, it seems to embody the village's holistic worldview.

The inevitable, movingly understated climax doesn't judge Ugyen; yet the very first shot, long before Ugyen reaches Lunana, is of Saldon singing in the mountains. That's where the film's heart truly lies. If teachers, or anyone, can 'touch the future', Dorji quietly insists that we hold on to the past too.

Leigh Singer, *Sight and Sound*, April 2023

### **Lunana: A Yak in the Classroom**

*Director:* Pawo Choyning Dorji

*Production Company:*

Dangphu Dingphu A 3 Pigs Production

*In association with:* Huanxi Media Group

*Producers:* Pawo Choyning Dorji, Jia Honglin, Stephanie Lai, Steven Xiang

*Production Manager:* Pema Lhamo Tamang

*Assistant Director:* Kelzang Dorjee

*Writer:* Pawo Choyning Dorji

*Cinematographer:* Jigme Tenzing

*Editor:* Hsiao-Yun Ku

*Production Designer:* Tshering Dorji

*Hair-stylist and Make-up:* Sherab Lhamo

*Sound Editors:* Yi-Chen Chiang, Duu-Chih Tu

*Sound Mixer:* David Stevens

### *Cast:*

Sherab Dorji (*Ugyen Dorji*)

Ugyen Norbu *Lhendup (Michen)*

Kelden Lhamo Gurung (*Saldon*)

Pem Zam (*Pem Zam*)

Sangay Lham (*Kencho*)

Chimi Dem (*Pema*)

Oriana Chen (*Extra*)

Tashi Dema (*Lhamo*)

Dophu (*Phurba*)

Tshering Dorji (*Singye*)

Art Finch (*bartender in Sydney*)

Dorji Om (*education secretary*)

Tandin Sonam (*Tashi*)

Sonam Tashi (*Tandin*)

Kunzang Wangdi (*Asha Jinpa, the village headman*)

Tshering Zam (*personal assistant to the secretary*)

Tsheri Zom (*Ugyen's grandmother*)

Bhutan 2019

109 mins

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