

FILM REVIEW: REFUGE FROM THE CHAOS OF THE MODERN WORLD?

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The Golden Land of Myanmar. Directed by Cathy Korson. 2014.

Twenty-first century audiences might puzzle at the fact that a place like Suvarnabhumi can still exist. The medium of film itself seems out of place in this remote region on Myanmar's southern peninsula, where technology gives way to tradition and excess to asceticism. Yet if the simple life is what director Shoshana Cathy Korson sets out to capture in her film *The Golden Land of Myanmar*, then by all means she has succeeded. The documentary provides us rare insight into a spiritual land that is far-removed from the complexities of our modern age.

Korson is a Buddhist nun. Having first traveled from the United States to Southeast Asia in 2002 she became inspired by the teachings of a Burmese monk; after delving deeper into the religion she was ultimately invited to join a local monastery. She now shaves her head, wears traditional robes, and has adopted the Burmese name Daw Sanda Wadi.

Suvarnabhumi, which translates roughly into the "Golden Land," is a region in the Mon State of southern Myanmar, which borders the Andaman Sea. Small villages and ancient Buddhist pagodas dot the countryside of this bucolic landscape, secluded from the swells of modern civilization.

The Golden Land of Myanmar was compiled from years of footage taken during Daw Sanda Wadi's service throughout the area; while some shots thus come off as amateurish, the film loses none of its charming authenticity. On returning to northern California, Daw Sanda Wadi made the acquaintance of local filmmaker Drow Millar, also a longtime practitioner of Buddhism, and together they produced this documentary.

While the film focuses primarily on the land of Suvarnabhumi, it serves equally as an exploration of the Buddhist philosophy that the filmmakers adhere to. The opening sequence embraces this dual-purpose with a passage from Buddhist scripture: "It is in the sanctuary of nature's silent places, with mindful attention, that the true liberation of the heart can be attained."

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The villagers of Suvarnabhumi are thus filmed conducting daily routines. Farmers tilling land, wives cooking meals, and children playing games paint the picture of a peaceful community united by spiritual belief. This solidarity is most apparent during the intimate footage we are afforded of community prayer gatherings led by local monks.

Juxtaposing the vibrant and colorful activities of the community is the solemn, disciplined world of its spiritual leaders. Audiences are granted exclusive insight into a monastery where Buddhist monks rise with the sun at 4 a.m. and devote their entire days to meditation and meaningful work. The monastery and the villages are mutually dependent in Suvarnabhumi—the monastery educates and guides the village, and the village economically supports the monastery.

Suvarnabhumi has been continuously occupied for over 11,000 years and we are told that the peaceful ways of its inhabitants have changed little over time. Villagers here make little use of technology, do not care for material possessions, and shun ambition. Panorama shots of plush mountains, sprawling rice terraces, and golden sunsets confirm an environment of immense natural beauty; a serene place where “ritual, reverence, routine, and timelessness” reign supreme.

At its core the documentary serves as a thought-provoking examination of a region that has largely managed to elude contact with the outside world. Yet while the filmmakers shroud Suvarnabhumi in a paradisiacal aura, at times one cannot help but question the completeness of such a depiction. Does the majestic portrayal of *The Golden Land of Myanmar* reflect reality, or is it more an illusion of divine grandeur?

In so strongly focusing on the spirituality of Suvarnabhumi, the filmmakers have chosen to elevate the region from its sociopolitical context. Meanwhile Myanmar for decades has experienced a brutal civil war—a situation fraught with constant instability, violent ethnic tensions, and myriad violations of human rights. If Suvarnabhumi is indeed a Garden of Eden in the twenty-first century, we are given little account of the belly of the beast in which it lies.

Whether this portrayal is valid or not seems to be largely a matter of faith. Buddhists believe the physical world to be a fleeting illusion, the violent turmoil they are subject to an inescapable part of it. By ignoring the war, the documentarians seem to acknowledge the Buddhist tenet that life is suffering, and present the alternative path of spirituality as a transcendent repose.

So while mass media and the ethos of the times would lead us to perceive Myanmar as a war-torn, poverty stricken country, we are instead introduced to a simple land whose inhabitants are perfectly content in overlooking these temporal affairs. For Daw Sanda Wadi, as for countless other spiritual seekers, Suvarnabhumi has provided refuge from the chaos of our modern world.

Whatever your opinion on the matter, the documentary captures a fascinating community that has managed to withstand centuries of change while holding onto its core beliefs. If you can spare an hour and want to chew on some food for thought, check out *The Golden Land of Myanmar* for an otherworldly adventure.