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by **Jordan Lee**

Film festival provides rare glimpse into Myanmar

MYANMAR



Associated Press/Photo by Jae C. Hong
Myanmar democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi

Monks in saffron shrouds waiting in line for a scoop of breakfast rice at dawn. Groups of men with tattooed thighs artfully juggling a woven ball. Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi using Skype to speak to a foreign politician.

Americans caught a rare glimpse of these scenes from Myanmar (also known as Burma) that filmmakers captured and screened for a crowd of mainly Burmese-Americans at the 5th Annual Myanmar Film Festival of Los Angeles.

Capitalizing on the awareness generated by Suu Kyi's first visit to the United States since being released from house arrest, the Network of Myanmar American Association screened a selection of Burmese films and short documentaries at the Downtown Independent Theater Sunday night.

The film topics were eclectic, ranging from a look at the ancient Burmese social sport Chinlone to following the lives of a couple of budding entrepreneurs.

"[This festival] is really one of the only opportunities to see Burmese films in America," said Yasmin C. Rams, an L.A.-based filmmaker whose short documentary, *A Life in Blue*, explored the daily life of a young Burmese migrant worker in a Thai factory.

The films provide a rare glimpse into Myanmar, a country that remains closed to the West due to a succession of military regimes since 1962. Myanmar is slowly emerging from decades of relative isolation after the establishment of a more civilian government last year.

Still, it is difficult for Americans to get into the country to make films. Howard Worth, a Hollywood filmmaker, remembers the government officials' response when he asked to bring a camera to interview Suu Kyi in 2006 for a documentary.

"[The authorities] told me that I was allowed to come and film, but I would not be allowed to leave," said Worth, who attended the film festival.

Worth ended up declining the offer and used Burmese-based cameramen instead. His documentary, *Douye* [<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yG33b4hsD9k%5D>] (*Our Cause*), celebrated Suu Kyi and her fight for democracy in Burma. The film's release in 2007 coincided with the rise of pro-democracy spirit surging through the country, with the government retaliating by arresting or killing thousands of Burmese.

Things started turning a few years ago when reformist President Thein Sein launched a series of political reforms. Government officials released Suu Kyi in November 2010, after 21 years of intermittent detention. Hillary Clinton traveled to the country last December, marking the first diplomatic visit by a U.S. Secretary of State in more than 50 years.

Suu Kyi's vision for her country deeply moved Worth while he worked on the documentary: "She is not swayed by anyone else; she doesn't need anyone else to confirm her vision," Worth said.

Suu Kyi recently finished a 17-day trip through the United States, during which time she spoke with senior politicians and democracy advocates. She delivered her final speech to a crowd of Burmese natives in Los Angeles, her final destination before returning home.

Zin Marhtun, the hostess of the film festival, was one of only a handful of people who got to meet with Suu Kyi after her speech: "I got to shake her hand. I've been waiting for that day since I was a little girl."

Marhtun, who left Myanmar as a young child, admires the way Suu Kyi represents her country to the rest of the world: "Most people don't know anything about Burma, but we want to make sure our culture and traditions are preserved."

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