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# Who Will Be a Gurkha

By *Kesang Tseten*

3-4 minutes

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Kesang Tseten's *Who Will Be a Gurkha* (2012) is a corporeal film full of movement, exertion, physicality, and masculine energy. The film follows the archaic selection process of young Nepali men into the British Army as they undergo a series of physical examinations, tests of strength, odd interviews, and verbal exams. Propelled by an organic visual narrative of suspense and competition, we are quickly drawn into the story. Tseten's camera invites us alongside the hopes and insecurities of young men who dream of becoming Gurkha soldiers and the fame, respect, and employment stability they believe it promises. "I'm very happy to go to Afghanistan," a recruit says to the British officer during his interview. "But it's a very dangerous place," the British officer replies. "Would you be happy to put your life in danger?" Through their measured composure and premeditated answers, it becomes clear that the young men are willing to do anything to become the next Gurkhas.

Throughout the film, Tseten splices contemporary shots with archival footage of Gurkha soldiers undergoing identical examinations and measurements. A series of uncanny corporeal resemblances and colonial-era anthropometrics suggest that little

has changed over the past century. The gestures, expressions, and techniques of the body overlay the past onto the present in a double exposure. Two hundred thousand Nepalis fought for the British Army in WWI and WWII in exchange for a pension and passport to the UK. This mercenary tradition began during the period of British colonial rule in India and has continued into the contemporary wars of empire. Throughout the film, Tseten suspends viewers into a space of ambivalence, refusing to provide a one-sided narrative of neocolonial exploitation. Instead of offering a clear-cut story of good and bad, oppressed and oppressor, Tseten presents us with a more complex picture that places the aspirations of young men at its center. In doing so, *Who Will Be a Gurkha* invites us to contemplate the convoluted depths of imperial relations; how the allure and desire to fight foreign wars can coexist alongside critique, and more generally, why so many young Nepalis continue to see this as an opportunity worth living and dying for.

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