

Minari: Filmmaking “interested in life” for a change

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Minari is a semi-autobiographical fiction film written and directed by Lee Isaac Chung. It is an honest and moving work, which treats the experience of an Asian-American immigrant family in the 1980s.

Chung was born in Denver in 1978 to a family from South Korea, who later moved to a small farm in the Ozark region of northwest Arkansas. His previous films include *Munyurangabo* (set in Rwanda, 2007), *Lucky Life* (2010) and *Abigail Harm* (2012).

Deservedly in this case, Chung’s new film recently collected six Academy Award nominations, including Best Picture, Best Director, Best Original Screenplay, Best Actor for Steven Yeun, Best Supporting Actress for Youn Yuh-jung and Best Original Score.

It is 1983 or so. The Yi family—Jacob (Yeun) and Monica (Han Ye-ri), with their children, Anne (Noel Kate Cho) and David (Alan Kim)—arrive by station wagon in rural Arkansas. The family has been living in California since their emigration a decade or so earlier.

Monica is appalled by their new dwelling—a single-wide trailer home in the middle of a large meadow, miles from anywhere. Jacob shows her a handful of earth, “This is why I picked this place. ... This is the best dirt in America. ... We wanted a new start, right?” Monica is not happy at all. Disagreements between the parents over this and other big life-decisions figure largely in the film’s drama.

While Jacob makes plans to grow Korean vegetables and fruit, the couple go to work at a hatchery, sexing chicks, that is, distinguishing their sex. Female chicks, valued for egg-laying, are kept, while most male chicks are “discarded.” Jacob, during one of his fights with Monica, bursts out that he has already spent 10 years “staring at chicken butts all day, coming home to a tiny apartment without a penny.”

One of Monica’s concerns is her son’s medical

condition. David has a heart problem and the nearest hospital is an hour away. He is not allowed to run or make any physically demanding effort.

Arkansas represents other problems for the Yi family. Snakes, tornados and more. Jacob hires Paul (Will Patton), well-meaning, eccentric and fervently Christian, as well as a Korean War veteran (“I was there. A hard time. I’m sure you know”), to help with the farming. Paul speaks in tongues and lugs a large, wooden cross along a dirt road on Sundays, in honor of Christ’s suffering and in penance for his own past sins. Jacob pours scorn on much of this, including water divining. “Stupid Americans, believing that nonsense,” he tells his son, “Koreans use our minds.” Monica refers to the area as “a hillbilly place.”

Monica’s mother, Soon-ja (Youn), whose husband died during the Korean War, comes from South Korea to live with the family. David shares a room with her, which does not please him. The lively older woman does not conform to his limited idea of a grandmother. She “smells like Korea,” he complains. He tells Soon-ja to her face, “You are not like a grandma! ... They make cookies! They say nice things!” Instead, *his* grandmother watches professional wrestling on television with great interest, plays cards and swears freely. Justifying why she is teaching her 7-year-old grandson card games, Soon-ja tells Monica, “If he learns now, he’ll beat all the other bastards!”

Jacob is determined to succeed at farming, even if it brings his marriage to the breaking point. He tells Monica, “If this farm fails, take the kids and leave me for good.” Their faces are strained. Farming life is unstable, precarious. The father of one of David’s friends tells the boy that the previous owner of the Yis’ land “went flat broke.” He shot himself. “I guess that’s what a man does.” Paul suggests an exorcism to rid the

place of the dead man's presence. "Out! In the name of Jesus, out!"

Soon-ja plants *minari* (water celery) by a stream. She tells David that *minari* is "the best food. It grows like weeds, so anyone can have it. Rich person. Poor person. Anyone can pick it and be healthy."

Soon-ja suffers a stroke, throwing the family into a new crisis. She is left on her own at home while the rest of the family travels to Oklahoma City, to see David's doctor and, incidentally, to see about selling their farm produce. Things come to a head between Monica and Jacob. "Life was so difficult in Korea," he says. "When we married, remember what we said? That we'd go to America and save each other. Remember?"

A further tragedy strikes.

Minari is a psychologically realistic and compelling film. The film truthfully, artistically confronts the economic struggles, the challenges of emigration, the move to a remote, rural area and the frightening health issues. Each character is given his or her due, including the small-town Arkansas residents, who are treated in a generally sympathetic manner.

Chung's new work has the texture of and a feeling for life. He has explained to interviewers that his first few films were more self-conscious works, influenced by directors such as Ozu, Tarkovsky, Kiarostami and others. He told *Hypebeast* that "when I started working on *Minari*, I thought I should take a slightly different approach ... I thought more about the audience. Mostly, I wanted to make a movie that I can share with my daughter. My daughter won't care what the film critics say. So, rather than taking too serious and intelligent approaches, I just wanted to make a movie about people."

Chung's decision to think "more about the audience" was a proper choice. His *Lucky Life* is an intelligent, thoughtful and slow-moving film, which examines how the death of a friend influences and works on a young middle class New York couple. *Minari*, however, takes in more of life.

Is there a wider, more general significance in Chung's trajectory, his new-found or rediscovered interest in mundane, plebeian matters? It is hard to say, but one would like to think so.

In any event, he continues to bring to bear his artistic training and rigor. The direction of the actors is impeccable. Youn, a performer with a fifty-year history

in South Korean films and television, is especially memorable. The humor comes organically from genuinely human situations. The film's imagery is concise, exacting, and doesn't shy away from complex matters.

Neither Jacob nor Monica wants to do the other—or anyone else—harm, but the pressures on them are intense. She wants to take David, for his health, back to California. "Can't you come with us? We can't do this without you." The farm work is back-breaking, but he wants to finish "what I started," otherwise they will "be chicken sexing till we die" in the dismal, low-paying hatchery. How can people stay together under the accumulated weight and pull of such things?

In an essay, the director once wrote that his grandmother "didn't finish elementary school and lived a daily resignation to poverty and struggle for most of her life. Her illiteracy caused both shame and sympathy for my father, notably because he is a gifted writer. Yet, he remembers the way others revered her in the village because she told stories."

The art of memory, Chung continued in the same piece, "collects disparate details from the past and reshapes them into a harmonic whole. It is a dying art in much of the world where society has less of a demand for remembrance and a greater emphasis on daily production and consumption. So great is the divide between everyday existence and active reflection that modern storytelling—the cinema—is no longer interested in life. There is a common saying, 'I go to the movies because I wish to escape.' Meanwhile, the culture of escape spreads from the West to the rest of the world like industrial haze."

This is a serious artist and filmmaker.



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