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Cover Page Footnote

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Minari: The Concealed Asian Aspiration Wrapped in the American Dream

Lee Isaac Chung's fable about following the American dream debuted at the 2020 Sundance Film Festival and won the Grand Jury Prize of that festival (a24films 2020). *Minari* was positioning itself as a wildcard for the Oscar 93rd, securing six nominations in main categories, the same as 'Parasite' directed by another Korean director, Bong Joon-ho (TheAcademy 2020). *Minari* made a splash in the 93-years-long chronicle of the Academy Awards, with a historical nomination for an first Asian-American actor, Steven Yeun (who played Jacob Yi), in the best actor category (Ovenden 2021).

Although *Minari* came away with only one Oscar award – in the Best Supporting Actress category, for Youn Yuh-Jung as the grandmother – the film did lay down some significant cultural and historical markers. The journey of the Korean immigrant family in Arkansas – the South-Central region of the United States – did engage and enamor the viewers and critics by recalling the real childhood memories of the director, with a typical classic and coherent story.

While other independent movies of this kind have focused predominantly on pointing out aspects of racial discrimination, *Minari* treads a different and more difficult path: laying out the contradictory facets of an immigration story, as well as the struggles and compromises in chasing the American dream.

Highlights of the Storyline and the Struggles in Chasing the American Dream

The first scene captures a family moment with Jacob and Monica (played by Yeri Han) and their two children moving to Arkansas. A close shot in the car with a view of a quiet and primitive world through the windshield and the gloomy mood of the music signal the unexpected is coming. "This isn't what you promised," Monica says to Jacob, with a disappointed look while overlooking their new place: a tiny house on wheels in the middle of nowhere, on a solitary stretch of land. Observing around the house, Monica sighs: "It just gets worse and worse." In contrast to Monica, David (played by Alan S. Kim) and his sister Anne (played by Noel Cho), as well as their father, enjoy discovering their new virgin land. Jacob

enthusiastically leads his small family to explore the vast land they now own, where he thought it would be suitable for him to make a 'garden,' seeding Korean plants that might thrive in the strange color of the rural Arkansas mud. Whereas Monica struggles with a ton of questions in her mind: she questions the distance to the chicken farm they are supposed to work at; she grumbles about the reasons Jacob picked this place to live just because of the color of the mud, and she even deters their son from running around due to his congenital heart disease. Just in these first few minutes of the movie, Monica portrays the typical character of an Asian woman: children are always the top priority, and she cannot stop nagging at her husband.

The movie director leads viewers to follow the footsteps of Jacob and Monica to the place where the couple works: a chicken hatchery, where the male chicks are discarded and the female are kept for producing eggs and meat. The owner of the hatchery, a white American, introduces Jacob to the workers who are all Asian, pointing that Jacob is an expert in chicken sex screening, with years of experience in California and Seattle.

After this introduction, Jacob and his wife encounter a sullen silence from the Asian work colleagues despite the boss asking everyone to make a gesture of welcome for the newcomers. This scene unfolds the metaphor that Lee Isaac Chung skillfully invokes, representing the act of jostling for the foothold and privilege, even in the difficult work setting of the hatchery. The viewer is left with questions: Is this shadowy hatchery, with an incandescent light bulb above each austere Asian worker, bright enough for them to fulfil their tasks? Is this the place where the American dream cherished by them will be achieved? Will the dream end up in a crematorium like a cock; or will it open to a sunny day, to collect the lucrative eggs, like a hen?

Monica's colleagues watching Jacob's manicured hands expertly separating the male and female chickens could be interpreted as sowing seeds of jealousy. This could be seen as a sign of caution for the Asian immigrant community about a rate-buster super-worker has suddenly appeared on the scene to derail – via his uncanny and superior sex-separating skills –the life-changing dream of the struggling immigrant community.

The dissent within Jacob's family was further exacerbated by Monica getting to know more about her work colleagues. After learning

where the compatriots are living, on the way coming home, Monica aggressively pushed her husband with the inquiry regarding utilities and the schools around this so-called dream town.

Asians, when immigrating abroad, like to gather in groups, building their own communities (Kaufman-Scarborough 2000), and Monica is no exception. She needs someone to keep her company. She needs a school for her children, a hospital in case of emergency for David (who has a heart condition), and a babysitter. Monica's American Dream is just as simple as that. For Jacob, however, the dream is much bigger, ten times more than the five-acres-gardening-hobby, a dream that would not be realizable if they were to leave their land and move into that town.

“That land is your dream?” – Monica’s angry snarl results in Jacob's resigned sigh.

The tension between the traditional immigrant American dream, which is on the verge of being shattered, and another one – of starting a farm of specialized vegetables like Minari – that has just taken the first steps toward that journey, is exacerbated when a storm nearly destroyed their house-on-wheels during the night. The house stands, but their faith in marriage seems to have vanished. What is striking in these scenes are on the one hand the responsibility that Jacob must shoulder as the head of family and as the eldest son for his relatives in Korea and on the other hand, the devastating alienation of his mother-in-law. The rumblings of thunder, the lament for lost faith, the “Don’t Fight” paper aeroplanes rushed down by the children, all create a chaotic, broken scene. The American dream is replaced by a family breaking apart, which is supposed to be the origin, the foundation and the seed of life in Asian culture (Hamano 2016).

Furthermore, chasing the American dream requires a process of acculturation. For Peñaloza (1994), acculturation is the process by which immigrants learn the value system and behaviors of another culture to adapt to the host country’s cultural environment. This concept is revealed by the way Monica grapples with her American dream, improving her working skills and practicing a religious belief. She goes home with chickens to speed up work, goes to church every weekend, tries to make friends with people, entrusts her children to her mother, but still follows Jacob's every move. She neither supports, nor interferes with her husband's work, but still takes care of Jacob when he is overloaded at work. Somewhere, in Monica's heart, there is still a glimmer of hope in her

husband's enlightenment. The process of acculturation also includes gender socialization as elements of culture, including advertising, that provides guidelines regarding "appropriate" sex-role behaviour for members (Littlefield and Ozanne 2011). David was born in America, and he knows how to reinforce this notion. He makes friends easily, naturally asks to stay with his new friend on the first day they met and truly enjoys the cultural activities at his friend's family. His elder sister, Anne is given completely the opposite personality: she is quiet, listens to her mother and keeps being a good Asian child, as she is supposed to be.

Family Bonds, Compromises, Tension Resolution

Jacob and Monica's wedding vows are a lodestar to embark on their journey to pursue the American dream. When their marriage is falling apart, Jacob tries to save it by going back to the family roots, bringing Monica's mother to America.

The grandmother, Soon-ja (played by Youn Yuh Jung) appears with the seeds of Minari, brought from Korea. Minari, a small green vegetable, is indispensable in Korean side dishes like bibimbap and kimchi (Yeung 2021). Right from the first day she arrived in the United States, Soon-ja plants the first seeds of Minari in a ditch nearby.

The success of Minari is breeding Jacob's dream for a farm specialized in growing typical Korean agricultural products and supplying supermarkets to serve the Korean community. To pursue his Korean dream, he gives up everything, from the vows he made to the risk of the congenital heart disease of his youngest son, by living so far from the hospital. In the end, Jacob abandoned the family-oriented values, the backbone of an Asian family and Korean families in particular (Hamano 2016; Lee and Kim 2014; Wu 2020). The scenes where Jacob is obsessed with a sample of agricultural products and makes a great fuss to keep them fresh and his expressionless face when he learned about the progression of David's illness clearly underscore his obsession and desire to conclusively succeed after he has spent 10 years looking at a chicken's butt. For that yearning with a superiority complex, Jacob is willing to refute the spiritual traditions of Arkansas locals, mocking of Monica's faith and even of fanatical supporter Paul (played by Will Patton), a middle-aged fellow who is a Korean-war veteran and religious fanatic when he prays for him and for his cursed land. "Americans are believing that nonsense! Korean people use their heads," Jacob boldly says to his son when he

tries to find the source of water for his farm. Different from his wife and children, Jacob's acculturation process into American culture is slower, maintaining his beliefs in Korean cultural values and practices. Clinging to his beliefs, Jacob sacrifices the domestic water to maintain his farm while being sabotaged by his countrymen who cancel the orders for Korean vegetables on the delivery day. His struggle between Asian and American culture could be interpreted as a torn self. Jafari and Goulding (2008) studied the Iranian young people who are living in the United Kingdom and struggling with retaining an authentic culture while still enjoying Western freedom. The conflict over the social roles that consumers have to adopt and perform is understood as a state of torn self (Jafari and Goulding 2008). The crusade leads Jacob to choose his farm, wanting to finish what he started although his wife tries to convince Jacob into returning to California because she cannot handle the struggles. His decision, as a result of his torn self, makes Monica completely collapse. The odd thing is that only Jacob in the family is struggling with a torn self. David speaks English whenever he wants to express his nasty feeling and refuses to utilize Korean to communicate with his grandmother. He even rejects his grandma because "she smells like Korea".

Losing faith in Jacob, in the promise to protect each other, in a better life in America, in the core values of the family are all restored by Soon-ja, Monica's mother. Her appearance upsets the 'American values' cultivated in the small family. Grandma 'smells like Korea', does not know how to bake, wears men's underwear, watches Korean movies, forces David to drink horrible-tasting Korean health drinks, makes him share a room with her. She also pushes her grandson to run, ignoring all the warnings about his heart disease while she is willing to protect him and to be accomplice with him, even though every night, David still whispers to send her home. Soon-ja supports her daughter by giving her savings to Monica. Soon-ja is an embodiment of the old-fashioned, traditional Asian grandmother. She is ready to mock American values, to embarrass David in front of his friends, even to replace the prayer that Monica reminded David of every night by offering him tight hugs. The performance of the legendary Korean actress has brought pure Asian values, helping to heal the damaged elements in her immigrant family.

Again, it is Soon-ja, who despite her illness, kindles the fire that sweeps through all the debris of brokenness. The warehouse and the ready-to-deliver agricultural products are burned down despite Jacob's

desperate attempt to save these, but at this time, the act of Monica, plunging into the fire, has awakened both of them about the “save each other” promise. The scene where Soon-ja runs away in her aberration and David, overcoming a weak heart, chases and leads her with his sister back to the wheeled house, “Please don’t leave, grandma. Go home with us,» is almost like the rain that drenches the fires – in the warehouse as well as smoldering in this immigrant family for so long.

After the fire, everything is reborn from the ashes like the way Soon-ja sighs when she comes upon Jacob’s family lying asleep on the floor, like the old days. Jacob adopts local spiritual norms to find natural water for his farm, and beside him, now is Monica. The film ends with the scene where Jacob follows David to the thriving Minari thicket. “Grandma picked a good spot. Looks tasty!”- Jacob’s last words are uttered when he quickly picks up fresh pints of Minari with melodious music in the background, next to David playing around is a perfect ending for the Asian dream that is gradually rising in the American land.

Concluding Comments

Minari is a plant that has great vitality and resilience, with it being able to sprout in any dry patch of land or in a dirty water canal (Yeung 2021). Does the intense vitality of Minari symbolize the perseverance, the overcoming of the cultural and human impediments, silently but strongly keeping alive the Korean immigrant dream in particular and Asian immigrant hope in general?

Minari by Lee Isaac Chung brings a gentle, quiet recollection, filled with natural scenery that he experienced in his childhood. The portraits of each character are depicted in a rustic, everyday life with carefully selected gestures and lines when the film uses Korean-English bilingualism; even actor Steven Yeun changed his English accent to become more Korean (Han 2021). Without getting into the rut of films about the lives of immigrants rife with racism, misery, and stalemate, Lee Isaac Chung skillfully employs metaphors in a simple frame and exploits a new perspective: the interweaving of the desire to locate self-worth, the cultural value of the place of origin, and how to reconcile these with the place where one ends up in, in the immigrant journey. This contradiction and the gentle storytelling have helped Minari retain great values of humanity in the minds of the viewers and the film received enthusiastic

support from critics. And after Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite*, with this film, the Korean cinematic quality has been raised to a new level.

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