



Minari

Director: Lee Isaac Chung

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A review by A O Scott for *The New York Times*:

Minari is a leafy green vegetable (sometimes called water celery or water dropwort) popular in Korean cooking. In Lee Isaac Chung's lovely new film, it flourishes in an Arkansas creek bed, supplying a title, a precise bit of detail, and maybe also a metaphor.

Like the minari, Jacob and Monica Yi and their two children, Anne (Noel Kate Cho) and David (Alan Kim), are transplants. In the 1980s, reversing the path of an earlier, Dust Bowl migration, the family, originally from South Korea, has left California to take up farming near the Ozarks. The parents (Steven Yeun and Yeri Han) work as chicken sexers in a local poultry processing plant, but Jacob has entrepreneurial ambitions. Every year, he explains to his wife, 30,000 Koreans arrive in the United States, and he wants to grow the kind of produce that will give them a taste of home.

"Minari" is partly the story of his struggle to get the business off the ground. The film's moods and rhythms — the gentle intensity of the scenes, the way the plot emerges from hard work, careful attention and the mysterious operations of the natural world — feel rooted in agrarian life.

This isn't to say that everyone is happy on the farm. Home is a trailer propped up in the middle of a meadow, far from any neighbors. The isolation bothers Monica, who isn't entirely sold on her husband's plans. David, the younger child, has a heart condition that magnifies his mother's worry. "Stop running!" she scolds him, an order that's almost impossible for a 7-year-old boy in a wide-open space to obey.



The household expands — and the movie takes on layers of intergenerational drama and domestic comedy — with the arrival of Monica's mother, Soonja (Yuh-Jung Youn). The children are put off by her old-country ways and the weird things she eats and drinks. "She's not like a real grandma," David complains. "She doesn't bake cookies." But the two of them forge a wary, increasingly close sitcom-style bond. Soonja teaches her

grandson a card game that involves a lot of Korean swear words, and he introduces her to the pleasures of Mountain Dew.

A lot more happens, some of it predictable, some of it not. A warm sense of familiarity is one of the film's charms. The chronicle of an immigrant family, often told through the eyes of a child, is a staple of American literature and popular culture. But every family — every family member, for that matter — has a distinct set of experiences and memories, and the fidelity to those is what makes "Minari," in its circumspect, gentle way, moving and downright revelatory.

It's not just that Chung, a Korean-American filmmaker in his early 40s who grew up on a farm in Arkansas, is drawing on what he knows. Any movie-watcher knows that real life can all too easily be falsified by melodrama or drowned in sentimentality. There is certainly plenty of emotion here; Jacob, who has some trouble with his well, could irrigate his crops with the audience's tears. But Chung's touch is careful and precise. Everything is weighed. Nothing is wasted.

There is no need — no time, no room — for cultural generalizations. David and Anne, in their early encounters with other children, are made aware that they are different. “Why is your face so flat?” a white boy asks David. It sounds almost like an innocent question. A girl rattles off nonsense syllables to Anne, saying “stop me when I say something in your language,” which somehow happens. But exoticism can be a two-way mirror, and America is a pretty outlandish place. Jacob makes fun of the local practice of looking for water with dowsing sticks, which offends his sense of rationality.

He also befriends Paul (Will Patton), a middle-aged fellow who served in Korea with the U.S. Army and who tries to banish evil spirits from the Yis’ property with prayer. Paul’s eccentricities — on Sunday, while his neighbors are in church, he carries a homemade crucifix along the rural back roads — are appreciated rather than mocked. People are different, after all.

Even members of the same family. “Minari” doesn’t insist on making its characters representative of anything but themselves. Youn is a sly scene-stealer, but that’s also true of her character, who infuses her daughter’s home with mischief, folk wisdom and mostly unspoken memories of war, poverty and other hardship.

She is tough but kind, and wise by virtue of having lived long and seen a lot. David and Anne — the big sister is a somewhat neglected figure in this group portrait — are as wide-open as satellite dishes, gathering information from every corner of the known universe and decoding it as well as they can. The grandmother and her grandchildren are free in a way that Jacob and Monica are not, hemmed in as they are by responsibilities, anxieties and promises that may prove difficult to keep.



Jacob is a traditional patriarch, but he’s also a young man who has taken an enormous risk, and his struggle to grow into a new version of himself is the film’s dramatic heart. Yeun, an effortlessly magnetic actor, finds the cracks in the character’s carefully cultivated reserve, the large, unsettled emotions behind the facade of stoicism.

It all seems simple and straightforward. “Minari” is modest, specific and thrifty, like the lives it surveys. There’s nothing small about it, though, because it operates at the true scale of life.

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