

A Life from Scratch: Motives, Conflicts, and Love of a Family Migration Story in *Minari*

Tsz Kwan Samantha Kwok¹

ABSTRACT

With the lens of family migration experience, this paper aims to explore *Minari* (2020), a semi-autobiographical film directed by Lee Isaac Chung, and focuses on the psychological development of the Yi family as they adapt to their life in rural Arkansas. While another contemporary Korean movie, *Parasite* (2019), depicts lower-class Koreans as likened to cockroaches through satire and criticism, *Minari* offers a portrayal of resilience, cultural identity, and family dynamics within the Korean American migrant journey. Chung also deploys the symbolic nature of the minari plant to portray the challenges of migration, adaptation, and reconciliation. Based on filmic and narrative analysis, this article examines how the family responds differently to their new environment, which creates tensions, conflicts, and exposes the pressure migration places on them. Drawing on historical and cultural context, this paper believes the migration experience in *Minari* is portrayed not only as a pursuit of the American Dream but also as a testament to the silent power of love and resilience that holds a family together. Regardless of their ultimate success or failure in rural Arkansas, the film invites audiences to recognize the sacrifices and silent devotion that often define our daily lives.

KEYWORDS

Film analysis; Migration; the American Dream; Korean American; Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965; Confucianism

1 Introduction

Immigration stories are family stories. . . . What often gets overlooked in that story is the fact that a lot of that is happening due to the feeling of love, that feeling of a desire to sacrifice for each other.

– Lee Issac Chung, 2021c

Inspired by 80 little visual memories and details from Lee Issac Chung's rural Arkansas childhood as a second-generation Korean American, Chung wrote and directed *Minari* released in 2020 (Chung, 2021c). The film, which won an Oscar for Best Supporting Actress and a Golden Globe for Best Foreign Language Film in 2021, portrays the story of a Korean American family pursuing the American dream in rural Arkansas. When writing the screenplay, Chung rooted it in his own experiences and adhered to a rule that "this is not my parents and this is not me or my family's story" (Chung, 2021b), creating a fictional family that exists solely within the world of *Minari*. The combination of his life experiences and creations makes *Minari* a semi-

¹ MA student at Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz; tkwok@students.uni-mainz.de; ORCID: 0009-0003-1149-2020

autobiographical work. While another acclaimed film, *Parasite*, winner of the Oscar for Best Picture in 2020, captivates audiences with its darkly comic thriller about the poor Kim family's struggle for survival, *Minari* approaches a similar theme of survival through the lens of migration. Directed by Bong Joon Ho, *Parasite* depicts the Korean lower class as resourceful but doomed, likened to cockroaches scurrying in the shadows. In contrast, Chung's *Minari* presents the Korean American Yi family as resilient, symbolized by the minari plant. In an interview with Arun Venugopal on National Public Radio, Chung explains the significance of the plant:

I just thought there's something so poetic about the plant [minari] as well. It's a hearty plant. It kind of grows in places where you can't grow anything else. It can take root in very poor soil conditions. And what it ends up doing is actually revitalizes the soil and it cleans up the water. It has a purifying effect and so I thought there's a poetic resonance there that this plant speaks to. (Chung, 2021c)

The minari plant, a hardy and adaptable herb that thrives in challenging conditions, plays a significant role in the movie, which makes Korean culture and language further legible in global cinema and popular culture, in different ways compared to *Parasite* (We, 2021, p.87). Under the theme of survival, *Parasite* employs satire to expose the class divides in Korean society, whereas *Minari* provides a more nuanced exploration of the immigrant experience in America, highlighting themes of hope, perseverance, and the dignity found in striving for a better life.

Similar to many migrants who harbor fantasies and high expectations of starting a better life in new destinations, the Yi family in *Minari* relocates to Arkansas driven by father Jacob's (played by Steven Yeun) pursuit of the American dream. Yet, these hopes often quickly turn to be mere dreams, as illustrated by the challenges they face. Uprooted from their familiar California city life and settled on the raw soil of rural Arkansas, each family member, especially Jacob and his wife Monica (played by Han Ye-ri), responds differently to their new environment. These varied reactions lead to conflicts and mounting tensions. For them, migration represents a one-way journey. Regardless of unexpected situations and dissatisfaction, they have to remain adaptable and resilient as a whole to thrive in their new reality, like minari. I advocate that despite Monica's and Jacob's differing responses and life priorities, as depicted through various conflicts in their new environment, they reconcile and grow stronger as a united family with a mutual commitment to the place and their future together.

Through the interdisciplinary analysis of 1) historical, cultural, social, political, economic, and agricultural contexts in Korea and America, 2) the push and pull factors for migration, and 3) filmic and narrative elements, this paper draws on a variety of terminologies and concepts, such as Confucianism, American Dream, Homi Bhabha's postcolonial theory of the Third Space, and postdubbed sound. According to the OED ("Confucianism," 2024), Confucianism is an ancient Chinese philosophy based on Confucius' teachings, emphasizing "human goodness and the importance of ethical relationships, humanistic values, and hierarchy for the maintenance of social harmony". The American Dream embodies the idea that America is a land of opportunity where anyone with talent and hard work can achieve success and prosperity, free from class barriers, offering abundance and fostering an ideology of individualism (Vanneman and Cannon, 1987, p.257). The Third Space denotes a space where different cultures can be conceptualized, recognized, and embraced, highlighting the blending and interaction inherent in cultural hybridity (Cuddon, 2013, p.723). For sound and dialogue that are added later in the studio, they are classified as postdubbed sounds (Corrigan, 1951, p.23). Under the intersection of historical, sociological, and filmic analysis, this paper is going to examine how the Yi family

responds differently to their new environment in rural Arkansas, leading to various conflicts and tensions within the family. The motive to relocate from Korea to urban California then to rural Arkansas is vital in shaping these responses and conflicts. Therefore, this paper begins with the historical context of Koreans' (Americans') experiences in the 20th century, exploring potential connections in relation to Jacob's pursuit of the American dream. The article moves on to the analysis and interpretation of the characters' psychological development upon their arrival and their adaptation to life in rural Arkansas. Finally, this paper concludes with a discussion on how the family manages to reconcile and adapt. How does the Yi family cope with their struggles and a looming threat of divorce? What factors contribute to their mutual decision to remain in rural Arkansas and grow as a unified family? .

2 Korean Americans and Jacob's American Dream

Under nearly 40 years of authoritarian rule starting in 1948, South Korea was marked by state violence and military coups. This oppressive environment drove many Koreans to migrate to America due to the prospect of greater freedom. Those South Koreans, who had endured over 30 years of Japanese rule, continued facing the Korean War (1950-1953), Cold War military confrontations, coups in 1961 and 1979, and the 1980 democratization massacre (Shin, 2020, p.241). Beyond the severe repression of human rights and civil liberties, the nation's poor economic conditions are vividly depicted in the Oscar-winning film *Parasite*. The movie presents Korea as having the world's poorest economic position by displaying the protagonists' squalid basement apartment. Although set in present-day South Korea, *Parasite* reflects the societal anxieties from the mid to late 20th century, a time when the nation was "paranoid after the Korean War", as noted by Gina Kim (2019), a UCLA professor and filmmaker originally from South Korea, in an interview about *Parasite*. Despite having some degree of mobility in Korea, many felt constrained by the country's economic and political conditions, limiting their further accomplishment (Light and Bonacich, 1984, p.124). The deteriorating conditions drove many Koreans to seek a better quality of life. Korean Confucianism plays a role by emphasizing upward economic mobility as a value (I. Kim, 1976, p.298). Yang and Henderson (1958) note that Confucianism first appeared on the Korean peninsula in 108 BC at Lolang, colonized by the Han Chinese. Stories of "filial piety" were illustrated on the famous Lolang artifact – "Painted Basket" (p.82). Between the 3rd to 4th centuries, Korean literati and court nobles began to learn it for practical governance or mastery of literature. Thus, from an early period, Confucianism had become "necessary for gentlemanly communication and the formalities of government was[sic] acquired" (p.81). Although Confucianism was no longer the official state philosophy by the late 19th century, it had been "a central philosophical system" in Korea for centuries, and its heritage continues to exert a strong indirect influence on Koreans and their society (Myonggu and Douglas, 1967, p.43; Kim and Naughton, 1993, p.187). Concerned with improving their social status, many Koreans looked to the United States, which had long symbolized freedom and prosperity (Kim and Naughton, 1993, p.188).

Koreans were also attracted by expectations of high wages and promises of rewards for hard work (Park, 1990, p.81). Findings by Hurh and Kim (1984, p.49) indicate that Koreans frequently cited the greater opportunities for economic success in the U.S. as a key factor in their decision to emigrate. Similarly, Chung reflects on the working prospects and the vision that his father held before emigrating to America:

[H]e was working as a sock factory manager. And, you know, those settings are not that great for work. But what he would do is he would save up money... And he loved films like "Giant," "Big Country," "East Of Eden," "Ben-Hur." He felt like, if there is a place where movies like this can come from - and, you know, the land you see in those films, it just seems so expansive, full of opportunity. He wanted to go there. (Chung, 2021c)

Since the specific motives behind Jacob's move to America are not explicitly detailed in the movie, understanding Chung's depiction of his own father's vision and dream becomes crucial in interpreting Jacob's character, especially considering the film's semi-autobiographical nature. Chung has also discussed the blending of real-life experiences with fictional elements, underscoring its personal nature. He notes:

I wasn't sure if I'd have more chances to make [a] film... so this was a project where I just wanted to be as personal as possible because I knew if I held anything back, I would regret it... I let those memories become the basis for the story, so there's quite a lot in the film that's very personal and very real that actually happen[ed]. And then the fictional elements are just as personal to me, you know, I look at all the fictional elements and still feel like even if they didn't happen, they're completely me and I'm being very honest with those things. (Chung & The Upcoming, 2021, 00:33-01:36)

Therefore, it can be inferred that in *Minari*, Jacob's motive for moving to America is driven by the perceived abundance of opportunities available in America. By presenting freedom and opportunities via films, for example, America upholds the ideology of the American Dream. Jacobs's aspiration also aligns with the Korean Confucianism of upward economic mobility, especially under authoritarianism. The prevalence of authoritarianism leads to higher levels of economic inequality and a more hierarchical society (Solt, 2012, p.704), fostering a more oppressed atmosphere. Fueled by the universal belief that a prosperous America will allow him to achieve greater success, Jacob envisions a new life and his American Dream sprouts.

Apart from the push factor of societal turmoil in Korea, the Immigration and Nationality Act (1965) and its subsequent amendments in America served as pull factors for migration, opening doors for many Koreans to pursue their American dream. Given that *Minari* is set in the 1980s and is semi-autobiographical, certain assumptions could be drawn from Chung's interviews about the timeline of the Yi family's migration:

He [Chung's father] wanted to go there [America]. So pretty early on, he had decided he's going to make a way to America one day. And after he married my mom, that's what he set out to do. And my mom stayed in Korea for a couple of years as my dad moved to America on his own and really tried to find a living. And he ended up in that job of chicken sexing. And that's what brought my mom and sister over. And shortly after, I was born. (Chung, 2021c)

Based on these insights, it is possible that Jacob immigrates to America after marrying and following the birth of his daughter, Anne, who appears to be around 10 years old in the film. Chung moved to Arkansas with his family at the age of 2 in 1980 (Ito, 2021), which would likely place his father as well as Jacob's immigration in the late 1960s to 1970s, followed by Monica and Anne several years later. This timing aligns the Yi family with the wave of post-1965 Korean immigrants who benefited from the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act. The new immigration law eliminated race-based discrimination in immigration quotas, offering "equal opportunit[ies] for U.S. immigration to all countries" (Min, 2011, p.196). By the late 1970s,

numerous Koreans arrived in the United States through family-reunification provisions introduced in the 1975 amendments (Kim and Naughton, 1993, p.182). The 1965 immigration policy, along with subsequent modifications, significantly contributed to the rise of the Korean population in America during the late 20th century. Korean immigration reached 30,000 in 1976 and maintained an annual influx of over 30,000 until 1990 (Min, 2011, p.200).

The opportunities and prosperity from the American Dream, alongside the values of Korean Confucianism, continue to influence the lives of Korean immigrants in their pursuit of economic achievements. Despite these aspirations, the economic outcomes of post-1965 Korean immigrants, especially those in non-professional roles within the secondary labor market, have been relatively poor (Kim and Naughton, 1993, p.183). Research by Barringer and Cho (1989, p.77-107) reveals that while post-1965 Korean immigrants had attained income levels surpassing several groups in America, their earnings still fell behind those of White Americans and some other Asian American communities. Additionally, data from California in the late 1990s underscores this disparity, with Japanese Americans reporting the highest average family income (\$49,978), followed by Chinese Americans (\$41,887), and Korean Americans (\$35,605) (Ishii-Kuntz, 1997, p.28). These statistics suggest the ongoing economic setback faced by Korean immigrants in California. California has always been a popular state for Asian immigrants since the 19th century because of its economic prospects stemming from the 1848 Gold Rush and the construction of the Central Pacific Railroad from 1862. Though in 1900, its population was less than 2% of the nation's population, it boomed to 10% in 1964, even before the enactment of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (Rischin, 1972, p.75). When California became the nation's "foremost Mecca for immigrants" in the 1960s (Rischin, p.77), anti-Asian sentiment also arose as native-born American farmers were worried that their land would be taken by immigrants (Saloutos, 1975, p.187). Besides, modernization in farming had made it difficult for farmers in California to be on top of "the highly competitive business of agriculture" (Spurlock, 1960, p.7). Farmers need to have "vision and know-how" because "[s]cience is blazing new trails and is opening up new agricultural frontiers", Spurlock asserts in 1960 (p.7). As portrayed in the movie, the Yi family's farming system is primitive. Lacking professional agricultural knowledge and modern scientific equipment imply that they might struggle to succeed in the evolving California.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the expanding American economy created new opportunities that Korean immigrants seized. They capitalized on the rising demand for cosmetics and apparel, contributing to the growth of the wig industry and manufacturing (Kim and Naughton, 1993, p.186). Besides, they excelled as operators of greengrocers and dry cleaners across American cities and suburbs (Kim and Naughton, p.186). By the early 1980s, U.S. Census data revealed that Koreans had the highest rate of self-employment among immigrant groups, with their number of businesses increasing from 8,504 in 1977 to 31,769 in 1982 (Light and Bonacich, 1984, p.149). Post-1965 Korean immigrants are, thus, noted for their entrepreneurial success. Influenced by the Korean Confucian value of upward economic mobility, many Koreans were willing to invest significant effort and make sacrifices to enhance their financial status (I. Kim, 1976, p.298; Kim and Naughton, 1993, p.187). This drive for improvement is reflected in the aspirations of both Chung's father and Jacob. They might have seen the potential of opening a farm as a feasible business opportunity, especially given the success that some Korean immigrants had achieved in becoming greengrocers. Jacob's statement that "[e]very year 30,000 Koreans immigrate to the US" with his observation that they will miss Korean food, further highlights the potential market he sees for the farm (Chung, 2020, 00:26:18). According to the Census of Agriculture, the number of farms in California rose from 67,674 in 1974 to

82,463 in 1982 (U.S. Department of Commerce Bureau Of The Census, 1984a, p.11), indicating growing agricultural activity and competition. Meanwhile, Arkansas saw relatively stable statistics, with a slight decrease from 50,959 farms in 1974 to 50,525 in 1982 (1984b, p.10). The data suggests that farming in Arkansas may have been less competitive, a more accessible agricultural environment for neophytes. The modernized farming and the high competitiveness in California prompt the Yi family to relocate to rural Arkansas. Chung also suggests that the move to Arkansas represented a desire for a fresh start and the American Dream (Chung, 2021a). Considering the historical context and Chung's interview, it can be inferred that Jacob's motives for emigrating are driven by the pursuit of the American Dream. Jacob, in seeking a better life, is influenced by similar aspirations and opportunities to his contemporaries during the late 20th century.

3 Psychological Developments of the Characters

Jacob's motives and aspirations, rooted in the American Dream, shape his responses and expectations in Arkansas differently from his wife, Monica. Though the reasons Monica emigrated to America are not clearly depicted in *Minari*, it can be assumed that she follows Jacob in support of his American Dream, adhering to Confucian ideology. It is a traditional cultural norm in Korea to expect a wife to obey her husband, support him, and bear children for her husband's lineage (Min, 2001, p.305). While Jacob is driven by the goal of achieving the American Dream, Monica appears to be supportive, following Jacob's lead to America. Their contrasting perspectives highlight the varied emotional and psychological developments that they undergo as they adjust to their new life in Arkansas. This chapter aims to analyze and compare these developments by focusing on the characters' initial impressions and the evolution of their life priorities as they adapt and dwell in the new environment. By examining these factors, a deeper understanding could be gained regarding the complexities of their mental journeys, the conflicts that arise, and the broader impact of their relocation on family dynamics.

3.1 First Impression: Feel Out of Place or See Opportunities?

Arriving in America with hopes of achieving the American Dream, Jacob reacts very differently to their new environment compared to his wife, Monica. While Jacob sees potential and opportunity in the field where they plan to settle, Monica feels out of place and disconnected from their surroundings. Their contrasting perspectives shape their emotional responses and adaptation to life in Arkansas. Monica's first impression upon arrival is going to be scrutinized first through the events the camera captures and the dialogue she delivers. The film begins with a series of close-up shots of Monica, David, and Anne inside a station wagon, where Monica drives while the children either sleep, read, or sit quietly. Some pan shots and scenery shots are interspersed with the characters' close-ups. These scenic shots, captured throughout the station wagon's windows, showcase the surrounding landscape with a mix of lush verdure and industrial factories. These exterior views emphasize the tranquility and intimacy of nature while underscoring the isolation of urban life. The director employs close-ups through the rearview mirror to emphasize Monica's facial expressions as she glances

around her surroundings while driving closely behind a moving truck (Fig.1). These shots seem to convey her skepticism and unease about the environment she is entering.



Figure 1 Chung, 2020, 00:03:34

Moreover, the introduction of the trailer home amplifies the idea that, for Monica, Jacob's decision to move there is inconsiderate. Upon arriving at a vast meadow, both vehicles come to a stop. Everyone exits the station wagon, and Jacob steps out of the moving truck that leads them there. A few long shots provide a brief view of their new, expansive living area, including the trailer home, giving the audience an overview of the setting. David and Anne then run toward the house and peek underneath the trailer. The low angle shot, positioned between the grassland and the trailer's underside, captures the children's curiosity about their new surroundings. This shot, highlighting the trailer's wheels, not only emphasizes their curiosity about the new life but also underscores the mobility of their home and the broader theme of immigration. Since the family has recently relocated from California to Arkansas, the presence of the trailer's wheels foreshadows the possibility of further moves within the film, creating suspense and hinting at future relocations, particularly when conflicts arise later in the movie. This aligns with the idea that "[m]igration is continual" (Ahmad, 2019, p.27). Rather than a discrete process, Ahmad believes that migration has an ongoing nature; it could be permanent for some people, but temporary for others (p. 27). To emphasize this nature, Admah includes Pauline Kaldas' "A Conversation" in the "Return" section in *The Penguin Book of Migration Literature* (p.27). This sense of flux is also exemplified in Frank McCourt's 1996 memoir *Angela's Ashes*, which was adapted into a movie in 1999. The film captures the Irish McCourts' relocation from Brooklyn, New York, back to Limerick, Ireland, in search of stability amid extreme poverty. Yet, it ends with the father, Malachy MaCourt Sr, who abandons his family and leaves for work in England, and Frank MaCourt departs for a better future in America.

Before any potential future moves, the trailer home in *Minari* symbolizes the Third Space, where their Korean heritage coexists and blends with the unfamiliar American life they have to accustom themselves to. As the narrative unfolds, the trailer home is shown without stairs, elevated off the ground, which makes it difficult for the characters to enter. This design suggests the family's potential struggle to adapt to this Third Space. While the children receive Jacob's help as he lifts them into the trailer home, Monica declines his offer of assistance,

opting to climb up on her own (Fig.2). This perhaps implies her reluctance to adapt to their new environment with Jacob's support. Chung (2021d) mentions that he intended the climbing scene to appear "clumsy and almost demeaning," aiming to immediately convey the mistake Jacob made by moving them to Arkansas. Although Chung (2021d) acknowledges that the final outcome differs from his original vision, the audience can still see Monica's struggle as she climbs, with the strain evident in her back muscles, revealing the challenges she faces in this new setting.



Figure 2 Chung, 2020, 00:03:08

In addition to visual elements of facial expressions and setting, Monica's dialogues reveal her disappointment and sense of being out of place in their new surroundings. When they arrive in the Arkansas field, medium shots not only capture Monica's expressions but also her dialogue, clearly highlighting her discontent. Her frown, head-scratching gesture, and the question, "What is this place?" delivered with a tone of suspicion (Chung, 2020, 00:02:28), all underscore her discomfort. These immediate reactions foreshadow her skepticism about settling down in this new environment. Her subsequent expressions, such as "This is not what you promised" (Chung, 00:03:00) when Jacob invites her into the trailer home, and "It just gets worse and worse" (Chung, 00:03:28) when she sees the interior, further underscore Monica's deep disappointment and dissatisfaction. Both these emotions are often intertwined with expectations, arising when reality falls short of what was anticipated. Monica likely anticipated better living conditions, possibly influenced by Jacob's promises before their move from California or even Korea. Her reaction reflects the gap between her hopes and the harsh reality, which she perceives, of their new environment. The opening scene, lasting less than three minutes, effectively conveys Monica's feelings of being out of place and her dissatisfaction with both Jacob's decision and their new surroundings visually and verbally.

Following Monica's disappointment with the trailer home's interior, Jacob's contrasting response to their new environment is revealed in the upcoming scenes through his interactions with nature portrayed by sounds, visual angles, and verbal conversation with Monica. The tension in the scene, initially heightened by Monica's dissatisfaction, begins to ease when Jacob suggests showing something better in their surroundings to the kids and Monica. Immediately

after Jacob's suggestion, the mood changes through the use of postdubbed sounds. The chirping of cicadas, followed by the fade-in of calming ambient music of wind and rustling leaves, gradually fills the auditory space. These postdubbed sounds not only transform the atmosphere into one that feels more relaxed and refreshing, but they also guide the audience to perceive their new environment from Jacob's hopeful point of view. The visual elements that come together with these postdubbed sounds include panning shots and close-ups of nature. The camera pans across the field and sky, capturing the fluttering of butterflies, the warm sunshine, and the gentle breeze, while close-up shots focus on the swaying grasses, blooming flowers, and a bee. As the camera moves across the landscape, the broader view reveals the land as lively and fresh, reflecting Jacob's optimistic initial impression of it as full of potential and possibilities. Portrayed from Jacob's point of view, the close-up shots then bring the audience closer to nature. Not only do the close-up shots but also the sequence of panning followed by close-ups, immerse the audience in the beauty of the natural surroundings and emphasize Jacob's close and intimate relationship with nature in this new setting. Both the visual and auditory elements work together to vividly portray Jacob's bond with the land. With his attachment to the land clearly conveyed, the lively and fresh nature offers a glimpse into his optimistic view of their future in this environment.

Following the narrative, Monica plays a role in reinforcing Jacob's connection and desire to engage in their new environment. As Jacob leads Monica and the children to the field, their walking reveals their attitudes and emotions in response to the new environment. The camera captures Jacob and Monica walking one after another (Fig.3). Jacob moves freely and with ease, a smile on his face, reflecting his satisfaction and comfort in the surroundings. In contrast, Monica walks with hesitation and frustration, as if she has a limp. She lags behind, carefully navigating the meadow to avoid thorns – a sign of her discomfort in nature. This contrast in their movements underscores the growing distance between their perceptions and attitudes towards their new life. Jacob's optimism and satisfaction are further highlighted in comparison to Monica's unease.



Figure 3 *Chung*, 2020, 00:03:47

As the movie proceeds, Jacob kneels down to grasp a handful of soil, initiating a conversation with Monica to convince her of the land's perfection and potential. Framing from a low angle, this shot aligns the audience's perspective with Jacob's as he examines the earth. This viewpoint reinforces the narrative from Jacob's perspective, emphasizing his connection

to nature, both through his physical touch and actual distance to the land. We (2021, p.90) suggests that filming close to the ground, as exemplified by Jacob's touching the earth, conveys a sense of being "both knowledgeable about and pining for a communion with the earth" that sets him apart from others. This cinematic technique highlights Jacob's intimate relationship – or his desire to create one – with the land, further contrasting his positive first impressions with his wife's more skeptical view. As he grabs the soil, Jacob attempts to persuade Monica by saying, "Look. Take a look at this. Look at the dirt. Look at the color. This is why I picked this place... This is the best dirt in America" (Chung, 2020, 00:04:05-00:04:25). Jacob's exclamation about the land also highlights how he perceives America as a land of potential and opportunity. To him, owning this land is a crucial step toward fulfilling his American Dream. By presenting the scenery of the field and the interactions with Monica through Jacob's perspective, the audience gains insight into how Jacob perceives and values the land, highlighting his closeness and attachment to it. While the angles of the shots play an indispensable role in conveying such a connection, Jacob's cherishing the land further exemplifies his optimistic attitude. He sees the land as full of opportunities, the forefront of achieving his American Dream.

3.2 Priority: Family or Self?

Apart from Monica and Jacob's contrasting first impressions of their new environment, *Minari* also explores their differing life priorities, highlighted via various conflicts throughout the film. Ultimately, Monica's reconciliation is driven by her commitment to family. Many Korean immigrant couples experience significant marital conflict, often due to factors such as division of household labor, economic pressures, and traditional patriarchal ideology (Min, 2001, p.302-3). In the Yi family, the first major conflict arises over the division of household labor, in relation to work and caring for their children. On the way home after their first day working as chicken sexers at a hatchery, a small argument erupts in the car. Since the parents have to work during the daytime, Monica is concerned about the children's safety. She suggests moving to Rogers, where there is a larger Korean community, reasoning that they could "find a Korean grandmother to babysit" and benefit from amenities like "a big mall and a good school" (Chung, 2020, 00:09:56). Monica embodies the traditional role of an Asian woman, where children are her foremost concern (Tran-Nguyen and Nguyen, 2020, p.2). In response, Jacob reminds Monica of their previous deal. He emphasizes that his dream is to cultivate fifty acres of land, not just five. The "fifty acres" he dreams of echoes the historical promise of "forty acres and a mule", which was part of Union General William T. Sherman's Special Field Order of 1865 (We, 2021, p.87). By claiming "fifty acres" as the precise size of his ambition, he has a hope that dreams bigger but still related to land (We, p.87). This pastoral fantasy blinds him to realize the needs of his family. His dismissal of Monica's concern makes her shocked as he states, "We don't need a babysitter" (Chung, 2020, 00:10:31). Monica then raises "an even more legitimate concern": the closest hospital is an hour away, "a potentially fatal oversight" due to David's heart condition (K. Y. Kim, 2018). Jacob remains silent, but a medium shot captures his glance at David in the back seat. Jacob's disregard for Monica's concerns and his focus on his dream underscore the tension between his ambitions and the family's practical safety and health needs, with the family being Monica's bottom line.

With the escalated tension between Jacob and Monica, their conflict reaches a boiling point during the tornado night, highlighting their widely divergent priorities. The argument begins after Jacob insists they are safe from the tornado. Concerned about the family's safety, Monica accuses Jacob of being crazy and irrational in the face of danger. Though their argument

is briefly omitted from view, the camera focuses on the children's anxious reactions in their room. The sound of the confrontation then serves as a background noise with a lower volume. Afterwards, the camera shifts back to Jacob as he defends his actions, claiming that his efforts are for the family's benefit. He declares, "I worked for ten years. Ten years! Staring at chicken butts all day, working myself to the bone! Living in a tiny home with no money!" (Chung, 2020, 00:12:53). Monica disagrees and questions their financial situation, expressing doubt about where the money has gone. While Jacob avoids delving deeper into financial issues, he brings up another complaint, underlining the traditional patriarchal expectations. He states, "I'm the eldest son. I had to take care of my family", underscoring the cultural pressures he feels (Chung, 00:13:10). This reflects a Korean cultural ideology, where the eldest son is expected to shoulder the responsibility of the family's care. As K. Y. Kim (2018) explains, this expectation is so burdensome that Korean women are often cautioned against marrying first-born men. This cultural context highlights how Jacob became so single-minded in his pursuit of self-sufficiency and success (K. Y. Kim, 2018). The traditional patriarchal ideology might seem to contradict Monica's accusations, but Steven Yeun's interpretation of Jacob (the character he plays) clarifies this tension:

He's [a] very conflicted person, and I think he himself perhaps lives in a type of isolation... I think Jacob means well. I think Jacob really has a heart for his family and he loves his family, but he also doesn't have the language or the understanding to express that love. He thinks that that love is expressed through his duty and his function. (Yuen & The Upcoming, 03:50-04:30)

This perspective shows that Jacob equates love with fulfilling his duties, which leads to misunderstandings and overlooks the family's actual needs. Their conflict remains unsolved for the audience until, the next morning, Monica informs the children that they are staying and that grandma, Soonja, is coming to live with them. It becomes clear that Monica reconciles for the sake of her family. Her mother, a widow after the Korean War, is joining them and will look after the children. Once Monica's concerns about her family's needs are resolved, she expresses happiness, reinforcing that family is her ultimate priority.

Notwithstanding, Jacob seems to prioritize his dream over his family. A climactic event towards the end of *Minari*, following a serious conflict that nearly leads to divorce, triggers influential psychological development in both Monica and Jacob. Their argument at the hospital foreshadows a potential separation. Arguing about financial burdens, Jacob insists that his pursuit of success is for the sake of their children. Contrastingly, Monica emphasizes that their physical and emotional connection is more important, declaring, "Isn't it more important that we stay together?" (Chung, 2020, 01:35:18). The movie then progresses with David's heart condition improving thanks to the "Ozark water", according to the doctor (Chung, 01:37:01), and Jacob successfully finds a Korean grocery store to export his crops. With both David's health and Jacob's dream seemingly fulfilled, Monica remains irreconciled due to her loss of faith in Jacob. Outside the Korean grocery, Monica reveals her fear that their relationship is fragile and conditional. She argues that their bonding should endure through difficulties, not just grow during good times. She doubts their ability to withstand future hardships. The loss of faith signals that their relationship may not endure without significant change, which is yet to come.

The next scene, a final climactic event, features a destructive fire, symbolizing the ultimate test of their relationship. Soonja accidentally sets the barn ablaze. Upon arriving home, Jacob rushes into the spreading flames, desperate to save the crops stored inside. Monica, after ensuring her mother's safety, follows Jacob into the barn, joining him in the effort to salvage the crops. Observing the flames intensify at the rear of the barn, Jacob initially seems

determined not to leave. However, as the smoke thickens and engulfs the barn, Monica disappears into the dense cloud. Jacob panics as she is not visible anymore, causing him to search for her. When he finally finds Monica crawling on the ground, they clasp hands and escape together. The camera then captures a long shot of the burning barn, with the roaring flames and smoke in the background and Jacob and Monica's silhouettes in the foreground (Fig.4). With the flame as the only source of light, it glows on them like embers when the barn continues to blaze. As they catch their breaths, they collapse into each other's arms. Clinging to each other in tears, they reveal a level of weakness and mutual dependence that has never been seen in the previous plots, especially in Jacob. They finally realize the importance of one another after this life-threatening event. The ending, portraying their life after the fire, discloses the psychological shift in both Jacob and Monica, reflecting their changed attitudes and priorities as they continue to live in rural Arkansas.



Figure 4 Chung, 2020, 01:46:03

In the final scene where they appear together, it is only after Monica's words that Jacob marks the ground with a stone, symbolizing her approval and authority. He places the stone like a monument, representing their renewed beginning and a mutual commitment to this place and their future together. Chung also explains the aims of the last few shots:

I added the shot of the family sleeping together on the floor, and the grandmother looking toward the camera. I also added that when Jacob is looking for water with the dowser, he doesn't put the stone down right away and it's Monica who says, "Go ahead, put it down." It was all I needed to show that something had changed between them. (Chung, 2021d)

Throughout the story, Jacob and Monica have conflicting life priorities. Jacob is driven by his dream while Monica prioritizes family. These differing priorities provoke frequent conflicts, but ultimately, the fire accident becomes a turning point for them to reconcile, bringing the family back together.

4 Conclusion

The Yi family arrives in rural Arkansas with distinct expectations and motives; Jacob is driven by his pursuit of the American Dream, and Monica supports her husband but holds reservations. These differing motives shape their initial impressions of rural life. Monica feels out of place, expressing disappointment and dissatisfaction both visually and verbally, while Jacob eagerly looks forward to building a garden, conveyed via visual, auditory, and verbal cues. Beyond these contrasting first impressions, various conflicts throughout the film reveal their differing life priorities. Tensions gradually tighten as the couple frequently argues over the family's needs versus Jacob's ambitions, pushing the couple to the brink of divorce. Yet, a climactic fire accident shifts the narrative, allowing the couple to realize the importance of each other in sustaining their family and in their romantic relationship. After this turning point, they reconcile and commit to facing a brighter future together. The film underscores that while family is the source of many conflicts, it is also the force that ultimately brings the Yi family together. The love and commitment they have for one another will help them overcome their differences, allowing them to grow stronger and more united in the future. Just as Monica initially overlooks Jacob's love for the family, we, as the audience, might also focus only on his relentless pursuit of ambition, missing the deeper motivations behind his actions. Much like in our daily lives, we fail to notice the actual love that lies beneath the surface of many things – the love that drives the desire to sacrifice for those we care about. This film reminds us that love is not always expressed through words or actions but can also be found in the dedication and sacrifices secretly made for one another. While future scholars might delve into themes such as religion, gender, and languages in *Minari*, it is of the utmost importance to remember that *Minari* is not merely a film that is worth analyzing the above aspect; it is, indisputably, an immigrant family's story of love.

References

- Ahmad, D. (2019). Introduction. In *The Penguin Book of Migration Literature: Departures, Arrivals, Generations, Returns* (pp. 15–29). Penguin Books.
- Barringer, H. R., & Cho, S.-N. (1989). *Koreans in the United States: A Fact Book*. Center for Korean Studies, University of Hawaii.
- Chung, L. I. (Director). (2020). *Minari* [Film]. Plan B Entertainment.
- Chung, L. I. (2021a, February 2). 'Minari' director Lee Isaac Chung talks Korean pears, growing up in rural Arkansas and reimagining the protagonist (S. Eifling, Interviewer). *Arkansas Times*. <https://arktimes.com/entertainment/2021/02/02/Minari-director-lee-isaac-chung-talks-korean-pears-growing-up-in-rural-arkansas-and-reimagining-the-protagonist>
- Chung, L. I. (2021b, February 24). *Minari* Director Reflects on The Yi Family's Experience, and Parallels to His Own (A. Chang, Interviewer). *National Public Radio*. <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/24/971100339/a-korean-american-family-adapts-to-life-in-arkansas-in-minari>

Chung, L. I. (2021c, March 3). Lee Isaac Chung Jotted Down Some Family Memories – They Became “Minari” (A. Venugopal, Interviewer). *National Public Radio*.
<https://www.npr.org/transcripts/973262034>

Chung, L. I. (2021d, March 16). I wanted each character to be wrestling with what I wrestle with’: Lee Isaac Chung on *Minari* (V. Lucca, Interviewer). *British Film Institute*.
<https://www.bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound/interviews/lee-isaac-chung-minari-faith-farming-family-ties>

Chung, L. I. & The Upcoming. (2021, April 11). *Minari Interview Lee Isaac Chung and Steven Yeun* (S. Bradbury, Interviewer) [Video]. Youtube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nrmT6BXtBxA>

Confucianism. (2024). In *OED*.
https://www.oed.com/dictionary/confucianism_n?tab=meaning_and_use#1370964920

Corrigan, T. (1951). Chapter 3 Film Terms and Topics for Film Analysis and Writing. In *A Short Guide to Writing about Film* (pp. 39–76). Pearson/Longman.

Cuddon, J. A. (2013). *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (5th ed.). John Wiley and Sons Ltd. <https://gurukulmahilacollege.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/J.A.Cuddon.ADictionaryofLiteraryTermsandLiteraryTheory2013-1.pdf>

Hurh, W. M., & Kim, K. C. (1984). *1984 Korean Immigrants in America: Structural Analysis of Ethnic Confinement and Adhesive Adaption*. Fairleigh Dickinson UP.

Immigration and Nationality Act, Pub. L. No. 89-236, 79 Stat. 911- (1965).
<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-79/pdf/STATUTE-79-Pg911.pdf>

Ishii-Kuntz, M. (1997). Intergenerational Relationships among Chinese, Japanese, and Korean Americans. *Family Relations*, 46(1), 23–32. <https://doi.org/10.2307/585603>

Ito, R. (2021, February 26). A Director Returns to the Home He Longed to Leave. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/26/movies/lee-isaac-chung-minari.html>

Kim, G. (2019, November 5). The Hit Movie ‘Parasite’ Puts Basement Structures in Structural Inequality (N. Ulaby, Interviewer). *National Public Radio*.
<https://www.npr.org/2019/11/05/776388423/the-hit-movie-parasite-puts-basement-structures-in-structural-inequality>

Kim, I. (1976). Chapter 10: The Origin of the Character Structure of Korean Immigrants. In *New Urban Immigrants: The Korean Community in New York* (pp. 281–320). Princeton UP.

Kim, K. Y. (2018, March). *Minari* is a Landmark for Asian American Cinema. *The Nation*.
<https://www.thenation.com/article/culture/minari-review>

Kim, Y. S., & Naughton, F. (1993). Koreans in the United States: Economic Achievement and Assimilation. *Korea Journal of Population and Development*, 22(2), 181–195.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/43783289>

Light, I. H., & Bonacich, E. (1984). *Immigrant Entrepreneurs: Koreans in Los Angeles 1965-1982*. University of California Press.

Min, P. G. (2001). Changes in Korean Immigrants' Gender Role and Social Status, and Their Marital Conflicts. *Sociological Forum*, 16(2), 301–320. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/685067>

Min, P. G. (2011). The Immigration of Koreans to the United States: A Review of 45 Year (1965-2009) Trends. *Development and Society*, 40(2), 195–223. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/deveandsoci.40.2.195>

Myönggu, Y., & Douglas, W. A. (1967). Korean Confucianism Today. *Pacific Affairs*, 40(1/2), 43–59. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2754621>

Park, I. H. (1990). *Korean Immigrants and U.S. Immigration Policy: A Predeparture Perspective*. East-West Population Institute.

Rischin, M. (1972). Immigration, Migration, and Minorities in California: A Reassessment. *Pacific Historical Review*, 41(1), 71–90. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3638226>

Saloutos, T. (1975). The Immigrant in Pacific Coast Agriculture, 1880-1940. *Agricultural History*, 49(1), 182–201. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3742126>

Shin, J.-W. (2020). Changing Patterns of South Korean Social Movements, 1960s-2010s: Testimony, Firebombs, Lawsuit and Candlelight. In D. Chiavacci, S. Grano, & J. Obinger (Eds.), *Civil Society and the State in Democratic East Asia: Between Entanglement and Contention in Post High Growth* (pp. 239–268). Amsterdam University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv12sdvjk.12>

Solt, F. (2012). The Social Origins of Authoritarianism. *Political Research Quarterly*, 65(4), 703–713. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41759308>

Spurlock, J. E. (1960). California Agriculture. *Journal of ASFMRA*, 24(2), 5–8. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43756131>

Tran-Nguyen, A. L., & Nguyen, A. (2020). *Minari: The Concealed Asian Aspiration* Wrapped in the American Dream. *Markets Globalization and Development Review*, 6(2), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.23860/MGDR-2021-06-02-03>

U.S. Department of Commerce Bureau Of The Census. (1984a). *1982 Census of Agriculture: Volume I Geographic Area Series Part 4 Arkansas State and County Data* (No. AC82-A-4). U.S. Department of Agriculture. Retrieved August 7, 2025, from <https://agcensus.library.cornell.edu/wp-content/uploads/1982-Arkansas-1982-01-full.pdf>

U.S. Department of Commerce Bureau Of The Census. (1984b). *1982 Census of Agriculture: Volume I Geographic Area Series Part 4 California State and County Data* (No. AC82-A-5). U.S. Department of Agriculture. Retrieved August 7, 2025, from <https://agcensus.library.cornell.edu/wp-content/uploads/1982-California-1982-01-full.pdf>

Vanneman, R., & Cannon, L. W. (1987). The American Dream. In *The American Perception of Class* (pp. 257–282). Temple University Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv941wv0.17>

We, J. E. A. (2021). Minor Settler Grief: Korean Diaspora, Settler Colonialism, and the Pastoral Fantasy in *Minari* (2021). *American Quarterly*, 76(1), 83–101.

<https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/aq.2024.a921581>

Yang, K. P., & Henderson, G. (1958). An Outline History of Korean Confucianism: Part I: The Early Period and Yi Factionalism. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 18(1), 81–101.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/2941288>

Yuen, S. & The Upcoming. (2021, April 11). *Minari Interview Lee Isaac Chung and Steven Yeun* (S. Bradbury, Interviewer) [Video]. Youtube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nrmT6BXtBxA>