

## Minari

Being an immigrant nation, American movies have long featured immigrant stories and characters. The best of them combine a convincing vision of an individual's experience in adjusting to the US while also reflecting the universal experience of the ethnic group depicted. A fine recent example of that achievement comes with "Minari," an ode to [Korean-American](#) adaptation to American life.

The Yi family patriarch Jakob (Steven Yeun), his wife Monica (Han Ye-ri) and their two kids, David and Anne (Alan Kim and Noel Kate Cho), leave a precarious life in California in the 1980's to follow Jakob's dream of owning his own farm to grow Korean produce to sell to vendors in Texas. After he finds and purchases a plot of land in rural Arkansas, he is optimistic about the prospects ahead, especially for growing *minari*, (in English: dropwort) a leafy green vegetable popular in Asia. Jakob does receive some moral support from a kind, Christian neighbor Paul (Will Patton).

Monica is unhappy with their move, where all she can find is a grim job "sexing chickens" at a nearby hatchery, dead end employment that both she and Jakob take on for ready cash. Monica also worries about her son David's heart condition. The marriage has become shaky, and the couple bickers often.

To watch the kids during the day, the Yis arrange for Monica's mother, Soon-ja (Youn Yuh-jung), to travel from [Korea](#). The feisty grandma, who adds an outspoken and profane force to the household, clashes with David, who is forced to share a bedroom with her and resents her presence on the farm. Soon-ja struggles to adjust to American life and to a strange landscape, and she tries to help by taking the children to plant *minari* seeds by the nearby creek, hoping for a good crop and looking to bond with the children.

Unfortunately, hardships cascade on the Yis. A well that Jakob has dug runs dry, and he resents having to pay for county water, while Monica insists that they return to California. Then Soon-ja suffers a stroke overnight and, while she survives with timely medical care, she is left with impairments. Finally, things take a more positive turn: On a medical trip to Oklahoma City without Soon-ja, the family learns that David's heart condition has dramatically improved, while Jakob makes a deal to sell vegetables to a Korean grocer. But the couple still has issues and, after an argument, the two agree to separate.

Back home, Soon-ja accidentally sets the barn containing their produce on fire. The family, just returning home, tries to contain the fire, but it grows out of control and their barn is ruined. Then their luck turns again when Jakob and David visit the creek to find the *minari* has blossomed in the new soil, and the farmer realizes that Soon-ja knew just where to plant it.

Director-writer Lee Isaac Chung took elements of his own biography to create "Minari." A son of Korean immigrants himself, he also grew up in rural environment in Arkansas. Later, he studied at Yale University and Utah film

school and launched his first feature film in 2007. He has crafted this modest but fulfilling picture from local knowledge of the region, given it a precise and careful pacing and imparting appropriate weight to each member of his ensemble of five.

The movie makes an intriguing contrast to the recent “Coming Home Again,” (reviewed in the November 2020 *Hill Rag*) another finely underplayed Asian-American movie--though in the contemporary urban setting of San Francisco--from Chinese-American director Wayne Wang. (*The film, now streaming through local outlets, is rated “PG-13” and runs 115 minutes*).

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