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## Minari: The Invincible

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## Markets, Globalization & Development Review



## ***Guest Editorial***

# **Minari, the Invincible**

## **Introduction**

Minari is the dropwort plant, popularly used in Korean cuisine. Minari is also an American movie that won some major awards in 2021, including an Oscar. In my view, it is neither a Korean nor a Korean-American film. It was filmed in America and funded by an American streaming media company (Netflix). The director is American as well, of course with Korean heritage.



Minari or Dropwort Plant

Photo by Ryan Hodnett – Sep. 2020  
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This American movie delivers one crystal-clear message that seems rather simple but is ever-agonizing: The American dream (see Dholakia and Levy 1987), if it ever existed, has become illusory unless one becomes a responsible citizen-consumer and maintains a high moral standard (e.g., Coskuner-Balli 2020). It now must feel even more unattainable for immigrants. As such, while it is very convenient for the audience and critics to deduce that immigration issues are the focus of this movie, the film in fact cuts across multiple dimensions of our modern life, not just immigration. One such dimension is the “discretionary” cultural ignorance (leading to overt discrimination and hate crimes) as editors of the journal suggest (Dholakia and Atik 2021). What I take away the most from the movie, however, are social class issues that are overshadowed by the sheer presence and preponderance of the Koreans in the movie. I

have been awakened by the movie that leaves some unidentifiable after-effects. From a third-person point of view, the film presents the ever-lingering precarity that have-nots face in their lives. From an immigrant's point of view, it is a story of everyday "exodus," small and big. Immigration requires unending exits and entries. Together, the movie signifies "involuntary mobility," volatility in (and of) life, and the constant pursuit of the unachievable (see Bauman 1999). Without the ploys of a gun, a war, or an immediate death, the film still ultimately paints the tragedy of the contemporary American life.

In portraying the story of the Jacob and Monica family, the film does not share much about their history before and after what transpires on the screen. Admittedly, audiences – especially Americans –do not need to know why the family had to move from California because the first scene illustrating the family headed to Arkansas symbolizes every ordeal they underwent and also has omens about much more that is predestined. This very omission of their life story excruciatingly reminds the audience of the failed project of the American dream, which does not show any sign of full recovery yet.

Again, quite arguably, what the audience may miss is that the main motive of the movie appears to be centered on class issues, not necessarily immigration issues in an ethnicized context. There is no major conflict caused by politico-racial issues (except for only one occasion where American kids taunt with phrases that should not have been uttered to the Korean siblings) or struggles faced by immigrants due to their cultural identity seemingly at risk. Rather, it should be noted that what happened to the family in the movie does, can, and will continuously happen to large numbers of established American families rather than just to new immigrant families. It is a movie about an American working-class family – their Korean ethnicity adds cultural color, but is incidental – that moved to rural Arkansas. The story may seem like an epic that portrays an immigrant family's hardship before establishing their foothold in the land of opportunity. It is not. There is no "lived happily ever after" in the movie. If viewers decipher what the movie speaks to, as I do, they would not expect a happy ending. The film instead features a few general themes of modern life in reality: deprivation (of too many things), constant (familial) discord, and self-perpetuating illusion. The viewpoints of audiences and critics, therefore, might need to be adjusted accordingly.

## Media Reviews in this Issue

Not surprisingly, the first review of the movie, in this MGDR issue, by Tran-Nguyen and Nguyen (2021) poignantly dissects the ever-elusive American

dream that is not only for immigrants but also for established Americans. Chasing the American dream is illustrated as not only tenuous but also making everyday life more arduous without much hope. The dream held by immigrants is so fragile that it can be shattered into pieces, especially when other immigrants (even those ones who are from the same culture, in similar socioeconomic status) show no compassion or share nothing with the newcomers. In fact, it is not at all atypical for them to antagonize the vulnerable for a wrong conception of the already small pie to be shared in the immigrant community.

As an immigrant, I have similar experiences in Korean communities where I used to live. There tend to be jealousy, distancing, alienating, gossiping, backstabbing, and collusion. Such acts suggest that whatever dream the immigrant holds onto needs to be constantly reconfigured. Perhaps (hopefully) it is a Korean-specific phenomenon; however, these are practices that only make people human and are omnipresent in schools, workplaces, and communities. Theoretically, such behaviors are commonly predicted and well-documented (e.g., Luedicke 2015). Sharing, hierarchizing, equality matching, and market pricing (e.g., fair trading) are needed in ethnic groups and their relationships with locals to continuously pursue the American dream (c.f., Fiske 1991). In many cases, however, those virtuous practices turn into sources of conflict and contestation within the ethnic community, just as in my lived experiences. Then, it can feel like a betrayal by the very ethnicity of the immigrant to herself. When this happens, the self gets damaged. Consequently, the dream matters less and repairing and restoring the self becomes more important.

Tran-Nguyen and Nguyen accordingly discuss the concept of the torn self in the context of immigration. Immigrants are expected to face an enormous level of distress to maintain their home culture while adjusting to the host culture. The struggle is only natural but incessantly haunting throughout the entire life of the immigrant. Complete assimilation would be neither possible nor desirable; perfect maintenance of the Old-World values or an absolute rejection of the New World (resistance) would be unprecedented (c.f., Berry 1980). We, immigrants, vacillate between the two extremes – every moment, every day – which can further stretch thin, perforate, or eventually tear up the fabric of self-identity. This identity struggle is hardly static, linear (as in the progressive learning model), or predictably stabilizing. It is, instead, a highly reflexive and reiterative process in which immigrants negotiate their subject position in the new sociocultural context (e.g., Askegaard et al. 2005). Postassimilationist discourse informs about such aspects of trans-modern and trans-continental relocation of those allegedly fluid identities. Solid identities,

being brittle, can break more easily. What needs to (can) be problematized, however, is the acute reality where the fluidity of identity necessitates resources: material, spiritual, social, and cultural. Immigrants generally lack the material (financial) resources to stay fluid and even “commodify” their exotic identities (e.g., Veresiu and Giesler 2018), which often mar the other three types of resources they may possess. For example, many Korean immigrants – as they arrive and settle in the U.S. – become religious (either catholic or protestant), to seek to enhance the other resources. As they realize, however, that much more is needed to sustain their reluctantly “nomadic” life, churches become a luxury, as shown in this film. In many cases, the fear of missing out (FOMO) on more up-to-date, relevant, and critical information to achieve stability in their lives bring them to churches. Nonetheless, disengaging themselves from the ethnic community (churches) is an unintended practice to pay back to the aforementioned betrayal by their own ethnicity. For this particular reason, I chose to be as far away as possible from Korean communities early on. In reminiscence, I think I would have experienced the same level of isolation either way, which is a parallel sentiment most immigrants undergo.

Another review essay on *Minari*, by Uzuner (2021), is centered on the acculturation process by which immigrants’ values and practices are socioculturally (re)shaped and (re)adjusted to the institutional environment and consumer culture of the hosting country. Of course, undergoing the process is a prerequisite for all immigrants, and the Korean family was no exception. As Uzuner points out, the film provides some cues for the audience to visualize what acculturation or Americanization looks like in the family. The scene where David and Anne eat their cereal and fruit juice in the morning seems to signify the intricate and yet possibly cliched acculturation process. Many Koreans in contemporary Korea would have had cereals and fruits for breakfast today without picturing American life. I had the same items in Korea before moving to America. But they are different. Much different. Not the taste or the flavor but the simple ritual that is reinterpreted and recontextualized.

Global consumers or nomads now do not necessarily experience what many immigrants (including myself) in the 1990s would have. The Korean family in the 1980s may have experienced a “context shock” rather than a culture shock. Having the same cereal in the morning with the warm sunshine in California would have evoked quite different emotions for the family and the audience. It is, therefore, not necessarily a process of learning a new culture for the immigrant family. Instead, it is process of learning how to accept the universal deprivation of what was once dreamt of or possessed. My own immigration history has also taught me an

evident axiom: immigration does not always automatically provide an opportunity; but suspends the immigrant in the seemingly ever-existing vacuum between absence and presence. Acculturation of the immigrant may need a new (nick)name: “de-vacuumization.”

## **Acculturation and Globalization: Need for New Perspectives**

Arguably, there are, in most cases, some elements of the host culture that are obscure enough to be not easily internalized by immigrants. In other words, acculturation is never an all-encompassing process. Immigrant consumers can be nonchalant or even sarcastic about certain cultural items and practices. It is not that they do not want to assimilate but that they sometimes simply do not understand what some of the widely accepted practices in the host culture mean and how to engage with them. I would say Football and Halloween would be the two that would first come to the mind of most Asian immigrants. (Extra) Large pick-up trucks, Recreational Vehicle (RV) touring after retirement, and garages filled with countless unidentifiable items would could also join this list. While acculturation as a practice, process, and discourse is eloquent, demanding, and inevitable, it is also porous, equivocal, and emergent. All such characteristics of acculturation appear in the movie and in the literature, which may indicate that acculturation (in the reviews) may simply be the most convenient (albeit compelling) destination of all critiques. What needs to be underscored is that “de-vacuumization” – in the sense of acculturation challenges – is also a task for non-immigrants when their perceived social status goes “South.” That is precisely the reason why the movie may be more about social class, not immigration.

Minari is a movie that captures the life of a poor peasant family whose dream had never been to constantly battle with the stubborn, enervating reality that just keeps changing its texture and temperature in Arkansas. They were American and would stay American. The word American, however, is one of the most powerful, yet dreadful, discriminating concepts in the lexicons of immigration, ethnic, and racial discourses. To be an American is “inviting” but at the same time highly territorial without absolute lines drawn. The American family’s life in the movie lies on the fringe – in the treacherous gray zone – between American citizen-consumers and the Other. What must be noted here is that many non-immigrant Americans’ lives are not so distinguishable from the life of Jacob’s family. Globalization is an odd thing. While it absorbs many people from every corner of the world into the system through trade, immigration, and all kinds of screens more than ever, it relentlessly expels



most of them, centrifugally, to the periphery –from which a full return to the center of the system is highly improbable. It also encroaches upon the lives of people who did not intend to directly participate in the life-long game of dreaming and “de-vacuumization.” The movie painfully sketches a picture of wannabe global citizen-consumers who are ordained to immigrate without immigration, acculturate without acculturation, and dream without dream-fulfillment.

The realism in the movie takes a turn to a direction that is not often surprising in movies that deal with issues of resistance, class conflict, and exploitation; the plot evolves in non-alarming ways. Such issues (of class and conflict) are not problematized in the movie. The hatchery is not a metaphor for a miniaturized society filled with class wars or struggles for equal distribution of wealth. By the same token, the unfair treatment that Jacob faces in the movie by the food distributor does not point to injustice or unfairness in the market. To the audience, it should strike as just “another incident” or “another day” for individuals dreaming on the fringe. The underlying theme of this movie, however, still overlaps with the tenets of (arguably) class-conflicted socialist movies such as *The Grapes of Wrath* or *East of Eden*. Depending on the interpretation and perspectives taken, the messages we receive from the movie include the systematic neglect of the struggle of the working class in market capitalism, the absence of common goal in American society, the widespread sense of loss (of dream), and the (extremely) limited opportunities for self-improvement and self-governance. For those reasons, the movie seems exceptionally bleak. The audience (at least I) can envision more ordeals for this family in the future. Although they might be able to temporarily celebrate their victory over all kinds of hardship and institutional abstruseness, the corporate capitalist society would not allow the family to enjoy their life for too long. The global market system always finds a better way to extract wealth and dreams from the working class. Therefore, it is now more apparent that the only metaphor in the movie is not about the history of immigrants but also about the perceived social class chasms and struggles.

We can certainly find a more extreme case of the powerless and helpless lives of the working class in the movie *Nomadland*, directed by Chloe Zhao (Atanasova and Eckhardt 2021). The story parallels *Minari* in that Jacob and Monica are on the brink of what Fern in *Nomadland* experiences: unemployment, accidents, death, and more tragedy. The admittedly recognizable gap between the two movies is filled with purposeful silence, acquiescence, and sweeping denial in many societies

that pretend to be blind to what has been strikingly self-evident to too many.

### **Concluding Comments**

The grandmother in *Minari* brought the hardy dropwort plant from Korea, which is widely recognized as a symbol of adaptation, survival, and prosperity. The director also encourages the audience to believe in such values embedded in the mythologized plant in the movie. It would be only plain-speaking and candid to say, however, that such a view may be superficial and even Panglossian. Perhaps the director did not disclose what the minari plant would have to mean. The movement of the plant from Korea to Arkansas should sensitize the audience about the life of the working class that is never voluntarily withdrawable even after multiple collapses. The minari plant tends to grow very well in dirty and even contaminated water. Corporate capitalism and the current globalized economy are overwhelmingly toxic and probably even radioactive to the working class, but people will continue to strive and flourish with or without systematic overhaul as they have in the past. The most remarkable power inherent in the minari plant (working class) is the self-cleansing function hardly found in other plants. As a result, the water (the system) becomes more livable, inviting other species. The movie instills a significantly distinct dream – distinct from the mostly mythical American one – among the global audiences, in a markedly enchanting fashion, to seek solutions and ways of living/doing that not only thrive in adversity but even attempt to ‘cleanse’ the toxic elements out of the system that envelops us.

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