ACTS OF CULTURAL CITIZENSHIP:

ASIAN AMERICAN REPRESENTATION IN POPULAR FILMS

By

Luke McCarroll

Supervisor: Dr. Dilyana Mincheva

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Luke McCarrroll

Introduction

Since the release and widespread acclaim for John M. Chu's *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), Asian American filmmakers have pushed their way into the Hollywood spotlight producing critically acclaimed and financially successful films. This cultural shift has culminated in greater opportunities for Asian-American actors and filmmakers to represent narratives of the immigrant experience and life in the diaspora. These new and alternative depictions of the Asian American diasporic experience are essential in diminishing Orientalist stereotypes and in creating more nuanced representations of Asian American identities. Asian American directors are exploring themes related to Asian immigration and the Asian diaspora through a wide range of film genres, including historical dramas, dramatic comedies, romantic dramas, and science fiction action films.

This research study explores the dynamics of a cultural shift in Hollywood that has provided Asian American directors, writers, and actors with the opportunity to tell their stories in new ways that challenge Orientalist stereotypes. Through a detailed tracking of representation in select recent critically acclaimed films, this research highlights the significance of Asian American-led storytelling and direction. The analysis of these films identifies how the narrative and creative elements produce acts of cultural citizenship and establish a space for Asian American identities within the diaspora. Additionally, this research also provides a comparative and historical understanding of the representation of Asian Americans in Hollywood films. Specifically, the research study is interested in East Asian Americans (immigrants from China, Korea, Japan, etc.) and Southeast Asian Americans (immigrants from The Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia, etc.). Although the selected films are limited to narratives about East Asian Americans, these themes and concepts of identity also apply to understand Southeast Asian

Americans identities. Additionally, many of the texts contained in the literature review engage with both East Asian and Southeast Asian American identities and apply themes between both identities.

Research Question & Methods

This research study asks how recent films written and directed by Asian American filmmakers contributed to reshaping an imagined understanding of the Asian American immigrant and diasporic experience? To address this question, this research focuses on three selected films. The selected films are categorized as popular films and have been distributed by A24 between 2020 – 2023. The films include Lee Isaac Chung's *Minari* (2020), Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert's *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022), and Celine Song's *Past Lives* (2023). The rationale for the selection is the directors' pronounced engagement with themes related to immigration and the diaspora within a most recent timeframe. All three films have been released in the last three years and, in their own respective spaces, they have generated a vibrant discussion around diasporic representation of Asian Americans in Hollywood with *Everything Everywhere All at Once* taking significant space during the 2023 Academy Award season. More to the point, each film's central characters are deeply impacted by their membership in the Asian diaspora, presenting narrative arcs that challenge the audiences' understanding of an Asian American immigrant identity. Additional films that engage with these themes but will not be included in the research analysis include Kogonad's *Columbus* (2017), Lulu Wang's *The Farewell* (2019), Alan Yang's *Tigertail* (2020), and Anthony Shim's *Riceboy Sleeps* (2022).

The visual and narrative analysis offered below addresses how these films work to create a reshaped understanding of Asian American identity. I identify how visual representation and narrative arcs work to combat the model minority myth and the Orientalist stereotypes present in many popular films that came before 2020. I perform a detailed tracking of each film by identifying key narrative plot points and analyzing how specific scenes are significant for the characters' aspirations, but also instrumental in shaping the Asian American immigrant identity. Additionally, I address visual narratives through a careful dissection of characters and environments, cinematography, actors' performances, and editing. All these elements taken together work to build the audio-visual-affective components of the Asian American storytelling. Each filmmaker uses specific genres, visual motifs, metaphors, and character traits to convey their story about the Asian American diaspora.

Theoretical Framework

Introduction

A cultural citizenship framework grounds this research, drawing upon liberal concepts of citizenship, emphasizing the importance of citizenship rights, cultural representation, and a sense of belonging within the diaspora. This framework is supplemented by contemporary film scholars Andrei Tarkovsky, Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino and their emphasis on film's ability to represent nondominant ideologies and mobilize political change for oppressed and marginalized communities. These theories and frameworks are applied to understand the cultural relevance of Asian American identities in films.

Cultural Citizenship

Before defining cultural citizenship, it is important to understand notions of multicultural citizenship, the politics of defining citizenship, and nation-states' attitudes towards immigration and multiculturalism. Among liberal theorists, citizenship reaches beyond the scope of legal documentation and status. Citizenship encompasses a set of legal rights and responsibilities, expression in a political community including the right to participate in a democratic process, and one's civic identity (Kymlicka, 1995, p.192). The multicultural citizen is not only recognized as an individual, but through their active membership within multicultural groups as they continue to fight for recognition and justice within a liberal democracy (p. 174). It is important to recognize that for immigrants and other minority groups, the demands for polyethnic rights are primarily demands for inclusion in society and should not be perceived as threatening demands for self-governing rights (p. 192). This is often misinterpreted by nation-state bureaucrats, resulting in the absence of inclusive policies within liberal democracies.

Further, the assertions of citizens are frequently disputed or outright rejected due to paperwork or cultural status that assigns different levels of citizenship. This has led to the formation of a class system that unofficially categorizes immigrants and ethnic minorities as second-class citizens, devoid of the same rights and privileges as the dominant class. Such beliefs are typically reinforced by right-wing perspectives of citizenship, emphasizing self-centered individuals who champion civic participation through charity and philanthropy, while the nation states overlook policies and mechanisms that foster systemic change (Rosaldo, 1994, p. 60). These perspectives on citizenship are derived from Margaret Thatcher's agenda to centralize the nation's state power, while reducing welfare programs and civil rights (Hall & Held, 1990, p. 174). This rhetoric continues to be supported by political figures such as Donald Trump and Boris Johnson who perpetuate a nationalist perspective on citizenship.

The concept of cultural citizenship stems from a left-leaning perspective, which places emphasis on the expression within a political community and the formation of civic identity. This viewpoint also encompasses the politics of citizenship, spotlighting civic efforts aimed at fostering change and advancing political progress (Rosaldo, 1994, p. 61). In this context, culture is recognized as how communities envision their right to privileges and participation within society (p. 58). Considering these two definitions of culture and citizenship, according to Rosaldo, "cultural citizenship refers to the right to be different (in terms of race, ethnicity, or native language) with respect to the norms of the dominant national community, without compromising one's right to belong, in the sense of participating in the nation-state's democratic process" (p. 57). More simply, cultural citizenship is how immigrants and ethnic minorities envision their understanding of citizenship and belonging (Ramirez, 2007, p. 210).

For immigrant and other ethnic minority communities, it has become increasingly important to establish recognition for cultural citizenship when considering the rhetoric which often questions their right to citizenship. For these communities, this goes beyond participating in civil duties such as voting or paying taxes and includes multilayered acts that are ethical, cultural, sexual, and social (Isin & Nielsen, 2008, p. 2). These acts include social and political struggles for representation and policy change, acts that represent minority communities in art, film, and literature, and individual acts that establish one's place within a community (p. 11). The performance of these acts not only assists communities in their social claims to citizenship, but also disrupts hegemonic behaviour, and establishes new possibilities for representation, creative expression, and political change (p. 10).

Rosaldo's studies focus on American Latino communities, but the concepts of cultural citizenship continue to apply to immigrant and ethnic minority groups fighting for recognition in

the diaspora. This research study is particularly interested in contemporary popular films written, directed by, and starring Asian Americans and how they operate as acts of cultural citizenship which celebrate and recognize the right to be different.

Acts of Citizenship in Film

As identified by Isin & Nielsen, art (including film) possesses the ability to assist citizenship claims and create new possibilities for minority communities. Although films may not be answering the most pressing political questions, they do however offer interpretations of an alternative version of society (whether that be past, present, or future) that ruptures totalitarian ideologies and promotes an alternative understanding of citizenship.

Acclaimed Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky, well known as an iconographer of film for his use of dramatic pacing and extensive long takes, published written works about the relationship between film and citizenship. His written work aids in understanding his films that explore spiritual and metaphysical themes such as *Andrei Rublev* (1966), *Solaris* (1972) and *Stalker* (1977). For Tarkovsky (1989) personal experience is essential for art that reflects a true interpretation of the world (p. 90). Tarkovsky's approach to filmmaking is to create a window into life itself. Through this window, he often implements a metaphysical world to convey the transcendental and spiritual qualities of life (Matilda, 2012, p. 112-113). His films often convey acts of citizenship that create possibilities of freedom through symbolic meaning. Considering film's ability to recreate life, represent personal experiences and events, convey spiritual qualities of our world, it therefore possesses the ability to produce acts of citizenship that disrupt hegemony and create new possibilities. It is within the creative use of editing, lighting, cinematography, sound design, etc. that accompanies actors' performance, setting, script, etc. that filmmakers can represent true personal experience and emotions.

In addition to Tarkovsky's understanding of film as a reflection of reality, filmmakers have also recognized film's ability to create new realities that disrupt structures established by the political elite. Argentinian filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino (1970) coined the term third cinema in their manifesto *Towards Third Cinema*. The third cinema movement arose in Latin America during the 1960s. Solanas and Getino's three-part documentary series *The Hours of the Furnaces* (1968) is recognized as one of the most striking examples of third cinema for its revisionist perspective of Argentinian history. Third cinema seeks to oppose imperialism, neo-colonialism, and capitalism through the adoption of film aesthetics that intend to mobilize audiences and advocate for social and political change (Radović, 2017, p. 54). Additionally, third cinema seeks to challenge the capitalist model of Hollywood films that upholds ideologies of imperialism, neo-colonialism, and capitalism (Solanas and Getino, 1970, p. 4). Solanas and Getinos look to create films that envision realities that are liberated from oppressive ideologies, thus establishing themselves as filmmakers who are actively participating in acts of citizenship. They identify film's ability to alter collective understandings of institutional systems and thus mobilize communities to enact political change. This is accomplished through a filmmaking process that does not fixate on financial success, recognition in popular culture, and critical acclaim, but instead prioritizes political messaging and oppressed ideologies.

Tarkovsky, Solanas, and Getinos' film theories have provided profound interpretations of film's ability to challenge perspective and create new possibilities for its audiences. They approach film theory from alternative perspectives but nevertheless, establish film's ability to create acts of citizenship. Filmmakers from immigrant communities find special meaning in this, as acts of citizenship become a powerful way to affirm their cultural identity within their diasporas. This connection allows them to embrace and celebrate their heritage while

contributing to the art of filmmaking. I apply here a cultural citizenship framework derived from Tarkovsky's notion of transcendental portrayal of personal experience which disrupts hegemonic reality. I do this through a detailed analysis of filmmaking techniques. This framework is specifically pertinent with regards to Daniel Kwan's and Daniel Scheinert's *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, a film which explores personal identity and relationships through a multiversal hero's journey. Additionally, an application of Solanas, and Getinos' theories demonstrates how Lee Issac Chung's *Minari* and Celine Song's *Past Lives* are actively envisioning realities which disrupt oppressive ideologies and create new possibilities for Asian Americans.

Literature Review

Introduction

A comprehensive literature review is conducted to encapsulate key themes such as the formulation of cultural identity, dynamics of race relations, patterns of migration, and representation within film and media. Focused on Asian American communications and politics, much of the scholarly literature in social analysis and ethnography emphasizes the historical construction and reinforcement of the 'model minority' trope. Additionally, scholars document how Asian American's cultural citizenship is produced through performative and literary examples. Finally, scholarship encompasses representations of Asian Americans in North American films addressing Orientalism, the whitewashing of Asian culture, and shifting cultural dynamics. This literature review captures a well-rounded understanding of Asian American cultural identity through Asian American communications and political studies. Furthermore, a comprehensive review of the current body of film analysis literature reveals the gaps that exist,

thus shedding light on significant films that deserve a meticulous examination within the framework of Asian American cultural identity.

Economic Construction of the Asian American Identity

Asian American authors such as Tran (2021) and Nguyen (2002) discuss the relationship between capitalism and its construction of Asian American racial identity. Both authors argue against the prevailing understanding that racial identity in America might be discussed without considerations of class and political economy. Both authors stress that racializing of identity is primarily a function of racial capitalism. Racial capitalism can be defined as a colonial construction of race which categorizes people to facilitate dominant exploitation (Tran, 2021, p. 9). For example, Tran identifies how Asian Americans are forced into the systems of racial capitalism through extreme market demands. She highlights how many Asian immigrant-operated grocery stores and other essential services rely on the cheap labour of Black Americans and service to wealthy white Americans (p. 70). This is just one of the many examples of how race is socially constructed through the American political economy. For Tran, it is important to recognize that capitalism is an economic system controlled by a few individuals who possess dominance over many individuals. Capitalism requires several political, social, and ideological tools to divide the majority, including racism and discrimination (p. 17). A primary function of this dominant exploitation, specifically how it applied to Asian Americans, is the exploitation of labour markets. More specifically, Nguyen (2002) identifies that dominant exploitation occurs not only through the capitalist structures of labour, but also through the population's ability to acquire capital, resources, and assets and their ability to mobilize throughout the United States (p. 21). These political and social structures have contributed toward a system which limited racial minorities' access to capital. Consequentially, these limitations on capital gain have

constructed stereotypes which place Asian American immigrants in low-paying occupations thus limiting their visibility as lawyers, political representatives, and corporate managers.

Through their analysis of American economic systems and their construction of racial identity, Tran (2021) and Nguyen (2002) deduce similar conclusions. Nguyen argues that Asian American intellectuals and scholars fail to recognize how Asian Americans have become ingrained in the American capitalist society, thus failing to acknowledge the true nature of Asian American cultural identity. Tran (2021) adds to Nguyen's claims by addressing the image of the United States on a global scale. She argues that racial capitalism became the driving force behind the United States' global dominance, and the construction of the Asian American identity became a product of the American political economy. Each author adopts alternative approaches to supporting their claims. Nguyen (2021) addresses how Asian American literature works against dominant ideologies that are projected by Asian American intellectuals and scholars. On the other hand, Tran (2021) examines two case studies which bring to light the impact that racial capitalism has on both individuals and communities. These case studies address how specific Asian American communities are forced into the systems of racial capitalism through the political economic structures of the United States. Nonetheless, these scholars have identified how broadening our understanding of racial capitalism can aid Asian communities in addressing the complexities and conflicts of the Asian American identity. As well, these texts emphasize the importance of cultural citizenship and Asian American representation which break away from the stereotypes constructed by the dominant American economic system. Acts of cultural citizenship can expose these oppressive structures for mass audiences and display futures where Asian Americans possess the ability to break away from these oppressive systems.

The 'Model Minority'

Through his analysis of Asian American cultural politics, Nguyen (2002) concluded that the trope of the ‘model minority’ reinforces Asian Americans into the dominant ideology which fails to recognize the correlation between capitalism and the construction of racial identity (p. 144). Authors Hartlep & Scott (2016) and Rivera (2022) continue academic discussion and analyses of the ‘model minority’ trope in their respective works.

Hartlep & Scott (2016) further extend Nguyen’s critique of the ‘model minority’ stereotype by offering a thorough analysis that underscores the pervasive reinforcement of this trope in American society. They argue that the trope is not merely sustained by the economic ascension and integration of Asian Americans but is also deeply embedded in the American public education system, as elucidated by Hartlep & Scott (2016). Their analysis critiques American public-school history and how it is selected, constructed, and moulded into specific narratives. They examine the Westernization of Chinese and Japanese immigration and multiculturalism narratives communicated in public education. The authors identify how American Exceptionalism narratives fail to recognize the racist systems that Asian immigrants have historically faced and continue to face today (p. 82). These narratives of American Exceptionalism continue to prop up Asian American as the ‘model minority’, further indoctrinating Asian Americans into the racial capitalism structures and stereotypes understood by Nguyen (2002) and Tran (2021).

Additionally, Rivera (2022) highlights the gendered politics of the ‘model minority’. More specifically, he outlines how economic success and achievement are deeply tied to the masculine Asian American (p. 24). Themes of gender and sexual politics amongst the Asian American identity are explored further by Chou (2012).

Chou conducts in-depth interviews with Asian Americans highlighting their attitudes towards racial and gendered identity within the United States. In agreeance with Rivera, Chou demonstrates how the 'model minority' trope is specifically gendered and sexualized. Additionally, the myth of the model minority discusses a double consciousness possessed by Asian Americans where they are aware of racist implications or the 'model minority' trope, however, feel social pressure to conform to the popular image of the highly achieving Asian American (p. 23). Chou's analysis of Asian women finds that the white male gaze constructs a hyper-sexualized Asian female body. Tropes such as the 'submissive servant' and 'the kink' are commonly associated with Asian women and reinforced in popular media and pornography (p. 90). On the contrary, Asian American males lay victim to an opposite sexualized gaze. They are racially castrated and represented as sexless and undesirable. Formerly, Asian American men were represented as sexual predators, however, the image of the 'model minority' shifted this trope, and thus media representation began to reinforce the racially castrated Asian American man.

Additional ethnographic studies have addressed the limitations of the model minority and attitudes of invisibility within the diaspora. Kim-Bossard's (2022) autoethnography coins the term 'silenced space' which encompasses her experience working as an educator and feeling like her teaching is often misread, avoided, or even shamed because of her identity as a Korean American (p. 364-5). She emphasizes that American culture has categorized Asian Americans into radicalized groups of the model minority, perpetual foreigners, and threatening Asian perils (p. 357-8). These radicalized groups have created depictions of Asian Americans that have erased individuality and diminished their credibility to provide authentic perspectives outside of the socially constructed paramotors. Batac (2022) provides similar claims related to limited

space in her autoethnography as a Filipina Canadian diasporic scholar. She tracks her experience as a PhD student and identifies her limited position in finding a sense of intellectual and scholarly ‘home’ (p. 63). She identifies how the colonial structures of university education lack representation for Asian scholars and discourse and thus create barriers to Asian American sense of place and belonging.

The experiences of Kim-Bossard and Batac as academic scholars vividly illustrate the challenges of Asian identity and the obstacles encountered in the pursuit of belonging. Their insights not only shed light on the academic sphere but also on other areas that inadequately represent Asian communities, perpetuating the ‘model minority’ stereotype. Their ethnographic works emphasize the pivotal role of cultural citizenship and representation across academia, professional settings, and creative domains. When examining the landscape of Hollywood films, it becomes apparent that colonial structures present significant barriers for Asian American filmmakers. This underscores the crucial role of filmmakers in crafting narratives that cultivate a sense of belonging and space for Asian Americans.

Resistance and Mobilization Against Prejudice

Recognizing the pervasive discrimination, stereotypes, historical erasure, and other harmful experiences Asian Americans face, scholars have underscored the critical need for assertive action and mobilization against these destructive concepts. Resistance takes many forms, extending beyond social or activist groups, and manifests in literary and academic works, performance art, and media content. These manifestations serve as tangible instances of cultural citizenship in operation, forging new narratives that reflect the diversity and complexity of the Asian American identity.

Valverde & Dariotis (2020) provide a collection of essays which engage with the 'Fight the Tower' movement which pushed back against academic institutions that possess shockingly low rates of tenure and promotions for Asian women. These personal essays demonstrate the stories and experiences of Asian women in academia, and their forms of resistance, and comradery in achieving higher levels of representation and tenure for Asian women in academics. These women aim to resist the hierarchical notions of gender and race introduced by Chou & Feagin (2016), through their presence in academia and their support of one another.

Similarly, Tang (2016) outlines the importance of literary texts and the important presence of Asian Americans within the field. Her books include several analyses of authors such as Theresa Cha, Susan Choi, and Karen Tei Yamashita, demonstrating these authors' ability to contradict American Exceptionalism narratives which express a triumphant multiculturalism society. Tang (2016) argues for the importance of repetition and exposure in minority discourse to combat the harmful notion of American Exceptionalism, as expressed by Hartlep & Scott (2016).

Finally, Ahlgren (2018) identifies how the performance art of Japanese taiko drumming challenges and creates a new understanding of the Asian American identity. Her analysis combines ethnographic and historical approaches with performance descriptions and analysis to understand how taiko drumming has impacted Asian American cultural politics. Ahlgren (2018) stresses the importance that representation plays in diminishing tropes like the 'model minority' and the 'sinister foreigner'.

Asian Americans in American Films

In the twenty-first century, Asian Americans continue to face employment discrimination in the Hollywood film industry. Even within recent films, there has been an endless stream of

poor Hollywood casting decisions which have whitewashed Asian culture, creating a palatable yet discriminatory experience for Western audiences. The North American film industry proves to be another space constructed by racial capitalism, thus limiting opportunities for Asian American filmmakers, directors, actors, etc. Chong (2017) highlights several whitewashing examples, such as Tilda Swinton portraying a Tibetan monk in the comic book adaption of *Doctor Strange* (2016), Scarlett Johansson as Major Kusanagi in the live-action remake of the anime *Ghost in the Shell* (2017), and Matt Damon as the white saviour in *The Great Wall* (2016).

Scholars have also challenged the twenty-first-century triumphant discourse which celebrates the representation of Asian Americans in popular films. Orientalist stereotypes create a limiting presence for Asian American actors casting them into stereotypical roles as deliverymen, dry cleaners, prostitutes, martial artists, or dictators (Chong, 2017). This analysis provides further reflections of the construction of racial capitalism and the limitations on Asian American employment. Contrary to popular media, Diaspora Literature and Visual Culture present a full embodiment of Asian diaspora media which works to combat orientalist stereotypes. Ma (2010) argues that diasporic media must go beyond the presence of visual representation, and address themes related to alienation, paradoxical identities, and challenges orientalism while maintaining a distinctly Asian flavour. This is highlighted by several literature and film examples which contribute to shaping the Asian diasporic culture, such as *Journey to the West* and *The Puppet Master*. At the same time, Lopez (2016) recognizes the absence of Asian representation in mainstream film and television, while also recognizing the acceptance of Asian Americans on user-generated content platforms such as YouTube.

Considering the limited space for Asian media in North America, there continues to be unfair expectations and assumptions made about Asian American creative works. In *Words*

Matter, Cheung (2000) recognizes the relatively small number of Asian American writers means their work is often viewed as embodying the perspective of the entire Asian diaspora and labelled as an ethnography, even when it is not intended to serve an ethnographic purpose. Asian American authors must combat the stereotypes that associate Asian Americans as the 'model minority', placing themes in roles like top-of-the-line engineering and not creative poets, filmmakers, or novelists. All these assumptions and expectations are challenging dynamics that Asian American artists must grapple with while publishing media texts. Similarly, Chong (2017) refers to Asian filmmakers as possessing an investment in socially committed cinema because they occupy a limited space within the industry.

Nonetheless, the presence of Asian American representation not only serves to fight for cultural citizenship, acceptance and belonging, but also contributes to redefining Asian American identity, and highlights the injustices that Asian Americans face in the media industries (Lopez, 2016). Recently, scholars have focused on how representation in media affects identity development, works to condemn violence toward targeted groups, and can facilitate activist dialogue. Pham (2004) identifies the mark beginning of the 'Asian Invasion' in Hollywood that was generated in the late 1990s and has continued to push for Asian multicultural representations. She recognizes significant contributions to Asian multicultural success such as Jackie Chan's leading role opposite Chris Tucker in the action-comedy *Rush Hour* (1998) and the overwhelming American box office success for the Mandarin language martial arts film directed by Ang Lee, *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* (2000). These films mark the beginning of the Asian invasion in Hollywood as Asian representation has continued to progress since Pham published her work in 2004. Notable films which continue the relevancy of the Asian invasion include Wayne Wang's *The Joy Luck Club* (1993), one of the first films to address

themes related to the Asian American diaspora. Additionally, foreign language films have also generated mainstream and critical success. Hayao Miyazaki's anime film *Spirited Away* (2001) is widely considered one of the best-animated films of all time and received the Academy Award for best-animated feature. Bong Joon Ho's *Parasite* (2019) is considered by many to be a modern classic and was the recipient of the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival and four Academy Awards including Best Picture. Asian American films such as John M. Chu's *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) and Nahnatchka Khan's *Always Be My Maybe* (2019) continue the diasporic discussion. Besena et al (2019) performed an analysis of these films addressing how the wide, diverse representations of Asian characters from all walks of life and in all kinds of existential situations, promotes positive identity development for Asian Americans. They indicate that non-Asian writers and directors tend to reinforce stereotypical roles and character traits, thus noting the importance of Asian American writers and directors and their ability to provide representation narratives and characters that illustrate an alternative depiction of the Asian American identity.

Asian American film studies have captured a thorough understanding of the cultural shift in Hollywood that has resulted in a higher representation of Asian American actors, writers, and directors. These studies have tracked films from the early 1990s until the release and widespread acclaim of *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018). However, there is seemingly a research gap that has yet to address more recent films released between 2020-2023. This is where I posit the intervention of my own research. Several Asian American films released during this period have received widespread critical acclaim, received box-office success, and have provided more nuanced interpretations of the diasporic experience. My study below continues the discussion on Asian American film representation through the analysis of Lee Isaac Chung's *Minari* (2020), Daniel

Kwan and Daniel Scheinert's *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022), and Celine Song's *Past Lives* (2023).

Film Analysis: *Minari*

Introduction

Writer-director Lee Isaac Chung's semiautobiographical film *Minari* captures the trials and tribulations of a Korean immigrant family during the 1980s as they move to rural Arkansas and attempt to seize the American dream. Although the family encounters several hardships, their undeniable resilience and strength proves to create a sense of home within the diaspora.

Although *Minari's* depictions of the Yi family shows them moving to a new home in rural Arkansas, the film does not capture the family's initial immigration into the United States. The family was previously located in California where Jacob (Steven Yeun) and Monica (Han Yeri) worked as chicken sexers. The film marks a new beginning for the family who is chasing the American dream and looking to provide a safe home for their children David (Allan Kim) and Anne (Noel Kate Cho). As Jacob and Monica continue to work as chicken sexers, Jacob embarks on a journey to create a farm on untapped soil and sell traditional Korean vegetables. However, Jacob's aspirations possess high financial uncertainties, and as David's heart conditions poses a significant threat, Monica questions if the family should return to California. For Jacob, the film captures the conflict between protecting the immediate care of his family and chasing his dream of achieving stable financial success.

The majority of *Minari* is told through the perspective of David, the character based on writer-director Lee Issac Chung's childhood. The film showcases his attitudes toward the diaspora and the homeland when his grandma, Soonja (Youn Yuh-jung) arrives from Korea.

Although initially unwilling to accept her presence and cultural practices in their family home, David and his grandmother build a relationship as strong as the minari they planted together.

Minari engages with the Asian American immigrant experience in a unique way. The film does not fixate on the family's experience of direct racism and discovering their sense of place within a community. Although the film includes scenes that point to both racism and belonging, none of these topics are the primary focus of the film. Instead, the film portrays the financial and family hardships associated with immigration and the diaspora. This narrative provides audiences with an opportunity to visualize the internal dynamics of a struggling immigrant family and the barrier of success placed on Asian American immigrants. The film provides an act of cultural citizenship which displays the ways that Asian American families struggle and succeed in the diaspora. It is important to mention that the film inhabits the precarious balance where the structural limitations are at play with the intimate portrayal of the family's pursuit of the American dream, and their gradual self-discovery as Asian Americans. Direct, personal racism is not portrayed, yet structural barriers are. The struggle is not exploitatively melodramatic, yet the agency and resilience of the family presents a grounding of the visual storytelling. *Minari* demonstrates to audiences the possibilities of achievement in the diaspora, and thus actively diminishes oppressive anti-immigration rhetoric. Lee Isaac Chung prioritizes observatory visual storytelling to accurately capture the lived experience of many Asian American immigrants. Additionally, his creative use of minari as a metaphor for the family demonstrates the power of their resilience and ability to adapt to their new home.

Depictions of the Diaspora: Chasing the American Dream

At its core, *Minari* is a family drama about finding opportunities and providing for future generations. This is evident from the opening scene when the Yis arrive in Arkansas and each

family member expresses their attitude towards their new home. Jacob is ecstatic upon arrival as he begins to envision his future farm. Monica however is hesitant as she steps out of the car. She tells Jacob that the home is not what he promised and when she first glances at the living room and kitchen she mutters under her breath that things are just getting worse and worse. Her hesitations with the new property derive from her protection of David, the family's son. Considering David's heart condition, Monica is anxious that if he needs emergency medical assistance, they would be too far away while in the rural Arkansas home. These opposing perspectives from Jacob and Monica proceed throughout the film and question Jacob's ability to manage his farm and protect his family simultaneously.

The film contains several references to Korean cultural practices that are essential to the plot of the film. The most important being the planting of minari by Grandma and David. As David and Grandma begin to bond with one another, one day Grandma brings David on an adventure to pick the minari she had planted beside the creek. She describes minari's versatility as an ingredient in kimchi, stew, and soup. She emphasizes its medicine properties, but most importantly she identifies the strength of its roots and its ability to grow anywhere. This scene which takes place in the middle of the film forecasts the strength and resilience of the Yis as they continue to grow in their new home. Despite all the hardship they have faced and the obstacles that lie ahead, the minari plant serves as a reminder that the family will possess the strength and resilience to persevere. Minari acts as a direct metaphor for the Yi family and the countless number of immigrant families who are resilient to find their place within the diaspora.

As the Yi family continue to financially struggle, tensions between Jacob and Monica culminate in a heated discussion when they bring David to the hospital to evaluate his heart. Jacob makes it clear his priorities are with the farm, as he simultaneously uses this hospital trip

to visit a nearby grocery vendor in hopes of selling his produce. In their discussion Jacob remembers the difficulties of living in Korea, he then vocalizes his expectations that he and Monica would save each other within the diaspora. However, their experience is exactly the opposite as they constantly fight over family priorities. Monica then confesses to Jacob her intention to move back to California with the children if David's heart condition worsen. Jacob response with his intention to remain with the farm and the two sit in silence. Although David's heart condition has significantly improved, and Jacob has found a buyer for his produce, Monica has lost her faith in Jacob. She doubts his ability to protect the family when things go badly.

However, this faith is quickly restored, and the Yi family demonstrated their resilience to overcome adversity upon their arrival home. While the family was away Soon-ja who was recovering from a stroke, accidentally set the barn and much of the saved produce on fire. Anne and David save their grandmother from wandering off into the darkness and Jacob and Monica work to save some of the salvageable produce. In the following scene, their trust, strength, and kinship to one another is symbolized as they all spend the night sleeping on the living room floor. In this scene Chung employs visual narrative to demonstrate the family's bond and ability to overcome adversity. As the family is sleeping on the living room floor together, they demonstrate a traditional Korean practice and show the importance of comforting one another after such a traumatic experience. Moreover, this same visual trope of family togetherness is found in Bong Jung-Ho's *Parasite* (2019) and in Kore-eda Hirokazu's plethora of films, the most recent among them, *Broker* (2022), based in Korea. The visual language of Chung's film deliberately places the cinematography within a tradition of original Asian storytelling thus blending a distinctly American topic – the pursuit of the American dream – with Korean cinematographic language.

The film concluded with a return to the minari plants by the creek. As Jacob and David pick the minari, hopeful piano music plays as the screen cuts to black and the credits role. This return to the minari serves as a reminder of the Yi family's strength, resilience, and ability to overcome hardships. Although several questions about the family's future were left unanswered, this scene assures the audience that the family was able to overcome this difficult and emotional incident. The metaphor of the minari provides hope and suggests that the family will find continued health and success within the diaspora.

Minari provides audiences with a realistic interpretation of a Korean American family looking to capture the American dream in the diaspora. As if echoing the film scholarship of Solanas and Getino, Chung demonstrates the possibilities of a reality that diminishes oppressive ideologies and narratives. As the film's conclusion envisions a successful immigrant family experience, it encourages audiences to chase their diasporic dreams and resist structures of oppression. Additionally, the film shows how immigrants are thrown into the American economic system that is reliant on their labour and promises them the American dream. *Minari* demonstrates how this system actively exploits the labour of immigrants placing barriers on their ability to achieve financial success. Nonetheless, the film also demonstrates how Asian American immigrant families possess the ability to overcome these systems of oppression through their strength and resilience.

Depictions of the Diaspora: Connections with the Homeland

One of the most significant narrative aspects of the film is the growing relationship between David and his grandma. They bond through the act of planting minari and thus create the primary metaphor for the film. They share a unique kinship with one another and

demonstrate the importance of connecting with family and engaging in cultural practice within the diaspora.

When Grandma first arrives at the family home in Arkansas David is apprehensive towards her and disapproves of her presence in his room. For David, his grandma represents the homeland, a concept he is unwilling to understand as he is attempting to find his place in the diaspora. At first, he does not enjoy the cultural practices that she introduced to him. He shows no gratitude for her Korean gifts and doesn't enjoy drinking the Hanyak that she prepares. David goes on to disrespect his grandma by asking why he can't have a grandma that bakes cookies and making remarks like "she smells like Korea". To conclude his misbehaviour, David tricks his grandmother into drinking his pee after he convinces her she will be drinking Mountain Dew. Grandma is reluctant to punish David much to his parents' disapproval.

After this moment Grandma and David begin to bond with one another. David begins to realise that accepting the homeland will help him discover his sense of place within the diaspora. She teaches him how to play hwatu cards, encourages him to test his endurance despite his heart condition, and teaches him about the resilient properties of minari. David begins to appreciate the cultural practice introduced by his grandma and they begin to strengthen their multigenerational bond.

Towards the end of the film when Grandma has burnt the barn and begins to wander into the dark forest David comes to her rescue. Despite still having a threatening heart condition, David pushes himself to run towards his grandma to retrieve her from wandering too far. It was her initial encouragement which began to test his endurance and now he is using that strength to save her. This scene encompasses David's acceptance of his grandma and demonstrates his ability to channel his strength and perseverance.

In the film, David's acceptance of his grandma coincides with his acceptance of several traditional Korean cultural practices. The relationship between David and Grandma serves as a reminder of the importance of implementing cultural practices of the homeland into the diasporic experience. Chung intentionally provides this narrative arc between the two characters to demonstrate how the adoption of cultural practices can be beneficial to finding a sense of belonging. Through the relationship between the two characters, Chung provides his understanding of cultural citizenship and the importance of maintaining culture and traditional practices within the diaspora.

Visual Narratives: The Silent Space

Stylistically, *Minari* heavily relies on visual narratives as a plot driver. Visual narratives can be defined as the visual components essential in crafting the story. This included the presence of story and engaged actors performing the narrative pieces (Pimenta & Poovaiah, 2010, p.30). In film, visual narratives consider shot composition, camera movement, lighting, colour, performance, and other visual aspects which contribute to the narrative of the film.

Minari is driven by a visual narrative, reinforced by carefully orchestrated silent soundscape. Silence adds weight and significance to the moments of dialogue and action which proceed them. This is evident in scenes involving difficult conversations between David and Monica as the scenes linger in their silence to capture the weight of their discussions. Additionally, it provides the audience with a fly-on-the-wall perspective as the audiences observes the family as they attempt to navigate hardship. The silence that director Lee Isaac Chung crafts also responds to the silent space referenced described by Kim-Bossard's (2022) ethnographic research. This silent space signifies in scholarship the Asian Americans' fear of speaking up because they often feel unheard and disoriented about their place of belonging

within the diaspora. Chung evokes the silent space to demonstrate the Yi family's hesitations to vocalize themselves while in public. This is clear when they first appear at church and are hesitant to introduce themselves to the community. Strategically utilizing silence throughout the film actively works to make visible to non-Asian viewers this shared experience amongst Asian Americans. The film relies on framing and the body language and facial expressions of its actors.

One scene during the second half of the film perfectly demonstrates and establishes Chung's creative use of visual narratives and silence. Before the film enters this scene, Jacob is struggling to grow produce on his farm and has thus cut off water to the house to prioritize its distribution to his crops. Monica's complaints leave Jacob at a crossroads, and he must decide if he wants to prioritize the farm or the family. Additionally, David has just been informed by his friend's father that the previous owner of the farm was not able to find success and eventually killed himself. The following shot begins the scene that actives visual narratives. It consists of five shots, no dialogue, and is only accompanied by the sound of the film score. The scene opens with a medium shot of Jacob as he lights a cigarette. As the second shot shows him dropping down to his knees while smoking, it becomes clear the stress and anxiety that Jacob is feeling at this moment. The camera pans up to follow the movement of the cigarette towards his mouth and in a close-up shot, the camera showcases the distress on Jacob's face. The third shot returns to a medium shot that captures Jacob staring at the ground as if he is contemplating a difficult decision. In the fourth shot the film provides delivery, capturing the results of Jacob's decision. As the camera slowly zooms into a shot of the bathroom sink to create tension, the sink suddenly turns on delivering the first diegetic sound of the scene.

Chung's use of setup and delivery creates tension and exemplifies the emotional weight of Jacob's decision. Although he prioritizes the family in this instant, he is torn between the farm

and the family placing doubt on his ability to successfully protect both. The dramatic use of visual storytelling helps the audience feel the emotional weight of his decision to turn the house taps back on and the conflict within Jacob. These dramatic moments of visual narrative and silence can be witnessed throughout the film. Collectively, they contribute to emphasizing the emotional weight of living in the diaspora and chasing the American dream. Visual narratives and the silent spaces continue to demonstrate themselves in the other two Asian American films that I embark on analyzing below.

Film Analysis: *Everything Everywhere All at Once*

Introduction

Everything Everywhere All at Once written and directed by Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert, collectively known as 'The Daniels', beautifully blends filmmaking elements from several film genres, including dramatic comedy, science fiction, martial arts films, and immigrant narrative films to deliver a masterpiece which grapples with the beautiful mundanity of middle-class immigrant life.

The 2022 Academy Award Best Picture recipient follows Evelyn (Michelle Yeoh), a middle-class Chinese American immigrant who operates a struggling laundromat with her husband Waymond (Ke Huy Quan). The film picks up on the eve of the Chinese New Year, and Evelyn's business and personal problems all begin to surface creating a heightened sense of anxiety. Within the fast-paced twelve minutes introduction, we learn that Evelyn's laundromat business is being audited by the IRS, Waymond is planning to serve her divorce papers, her recently widowed father has just immigrated from China and has moved in with her family, her struggling daughter Joy (Stephanie Hsu) is seeking her approval of her white girlfriend much to

Evelyn's dismissal, and she is planning to host a Chinese New Year's party for the laundromat's loyal customers. All these problems are quickly interrupted by an alternative dimension version of Waymond who recruits Evelyn on a multidimensional adventure to save the multiverse.

Everything Everywhere All at Once exemplifies cultural citizenship through its exploration of themes related to personal identity, relationships and finding a place within the diaspora. By the end of the film, Evelyn discovers that within the multiverse of possibilities she is living the least exceptional life. Within this discovery, she embraces the beautiful mundanity of the working-class immigrant life of doing laundry and taxes. She mends the relationship with her husband, daughter, and father and can feel content with her life in the diaspora. The Daniels explore these themes through creative filmmaking and narrative techniques which utilize the metaphysical properties of the multiverse to capture the immense weight of the Asian American immigrant experience. Additionally, the Daniels pay homage and provide exposure to Asian Cinema through ironic hybridization which blends several film genres and aesthetics to deliver a truly unique film.

Depictions of the Diaspora: A Journey Across the Multiverse

Everything Everywhere All at Once opening shot encompasses the American dream. Uplifting piano music plays as the camera slowly zooms into a small circular mirror capturing the reflection of Evelyn, Waymond, and Joy singing karaoke. Beside the mirror are small items which reflect the family's life including Polaroid pictures, trophies, mail, boxes of tea, books, and more. This joyful family moment is quickly interrupted. The music stops, the lights turn on and the audience is brought into Evelyn's world of laundry and taxes. As the camera zooms into the mirror, its frame disappears, and a reflection is no longer captured. What was momentarily captured in reflection was just a dream. Much like the American dream for many Asian

American families, what was promised in the diaspora is not the lived reality. Instead, Asian Americans are catapulted into the American capitalist system as part of the racialized economy reliant on their labour. That is exactly what we see with Evelyn as she stresses over organizing tax forms in preparation for her meeting with the IRS.

The exploitative nature of the American political economy continues to be demonstrated through the overbearing presence of the IRS throughout the film. The IRS serves as a reminder that Asian American independent business is subject to high surveillance from government institutions. When Waymond, Evelyn and her father meet with the IRS agent Dierdre (Jamie Lee Curtis) to discuss the laundromat's tax liability they are met with several threats and condescending comments. Towards the end of their meeting, Dierdre's frustrations boil over, and she makes the condescending suggestion that Evelyn requires a translator even though she is fluent in English. This scene captures the microaggressions and condescending comments experienced by many Asian Americans. Aggressive comments which question Asian Americans' English language skills actively diminish their right to citizenship and contribute to the sense of silent space. Within the first thirty minutes of the film, the Daniels have carefully crafted a portrayal of the Asian American immigrant experience which emphasizes the restrictive nature of the United States political economy.

Although faced with several existential problems and the IRS praying for her downfall, Evelyn travels across the multiverse to mend the relationships with her family and find her sense of place within the diaspora. When it appears that all hope has been lost and Evelyn is on the verge of submitting to the pessimistic worldview of the imposing threat of Jobu Tupaki (an alternative version of her daughter attempting to destroy the multiverse) Waymond teaches her about the beautiful mundanity of laundry and taxes. In an alternative universe where Evelyn and

Waymond are not married, they live extremely successful but lonely lives. In this universe, Evelyn does not immigrate with Waymond to the United States leading to a chain of events where Evelyn becomes an action movie star and Waymond becomes a Fortune 500 CEO. In a heartbreaking scene between these two characters, Waymond confesses his affection for Evelyn, telling her, “In another life, I would have really liked just doing laundry and taxes with you”. Although he lives an extremely successful life, he fantasizes about enjoying a simpler life with Evelyn.

From this point on, Evelyn grasps a clear understanding of her identity in the diaspora. She comes to accept her imperfections and begins to appreciate the people that surround her life. After experiencing this moment in the alternative universe, she comes back to her own to embrace Waymond. At first, surprised by the affection, a brief montage sequence demonstrates the rekindling of their relationship. Additionally, Evelyn finds a way to forgive her father for sending her to the United States at a young age. Although she possessed years of frustration with his decision, she forgives him by ensuring she will not make a similar mistake with her daughter Joy. Evelyn then becomes fixated on mending the difficult relationship with her daughter and embracing her for all her unique qualities, even the ones that she disapproves of. In the dramatic conclusion of Evelyn’s multiverse journey, she tells Joy that she intends to cherish the few specs of time they share, instead of being anywhere else in the world. It is the appreciation for the small insignificant moments of their life that Evelyn recognizes to be the most important. Instead of fixating on the oppressive structures of the American political economy, Evelyn has promised her family a commitment to prioritizing her relationships with them. This is exemplified by the final shot of the film when Evelyn sits in the IRS follow-up meeting without a care in the world. As Dierdre begins to lecture the family about their tax forms, Evelyn tunes out all the noise and

smiles as she admires her family around her. She is filled with complete bliss as her sense of home is complete when she is surrounded by her family.

Everything Everywhere All at Once possesses several narrative similarities to Lana & Lily Wachowski's *The Matrix* (1999) as Evelyn and Neo's stories follow similar monomythic arcs. However, instead of fixating on saving the fate of the universe in the film's climax, the Daniels prioritize Evelyn repairing her relationship with Joy. This narrative choice makes the film distinctly Asian American, as it demonstrates the need for breaking the cycle of generational trauma to discover one's sense of belonging.

Evelyn's story provides audiences with an interpretation of the Asian American immigrant experience which captures the weight of living in the diaspora. The conclusion of the film serves as an act of cultural citizenship which establishes a place for Asian American immigrants within the diaspora. The Daniels captures this through their depiction of the beautiful mundanity of everyday immigrant life and labour. They also stress the importance of not fixating on potential lived experiences filled with more fame, success, money, etc. Instead, the characters within the film embrace their present lives and come to appreciate the people who surround them. The film signifies the importance of connecting and embracing family to discover her sense of place within the diaspora.

Visual Narratives: Ironic Hybridization

In today's Hollywood landscape filled with sequels, reboots, and remakes it seems like large Hollywood studios are rarely ever supporting original stories, as familiar franchises prove to be the most lucrative at the international box office. In 2022, the top eight highest-grossing worldwide movies were all sequels or remakes of preestablished Hollywood franchises. This included a sequel to the highest-grossing film of all time with *Avatar: The Way of Water* (2022),

a sequel to a 1980s action blockbuster with *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022), and ever more instalments into the Marvel Cinematic Universe with *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (2022), *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* (2022), and *Thor: Love and Thunder* (2022).

Due to the lack of representation and access for Asian American filmmakers, directors like Daniel Kwan have not been provided the opportunity to pick up a major studio sequel that is sure to be a box-office hit. Aside from two Marvel Cinematic Universe instalments including Destine Daniel Cretton's *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (2021) and Chloé Zhao's *Eternals* (2021), Asian filmmakers are limited to making independent films that do not possess the same familiarity among audiences compared to major franchise films. However, the Daniels have created this familiarity with audiences in *Everything Everywhere All at Once* through the creative use of ironic hybridization.

Ironic hybridization is a postmodern form of hybridity that blends genres incorporating self-aware dialogue, images, and motifs from the film's influences. This clever self-conscious approach to filmmaking provides audiences with familiar reference points based upon pop culture knowledge and understanding of film motifs (Stadler & McWilliam, 2009, p. 307). Popular examples of ironic hybridization include *Scream* (1996) as the film continuously references ironic horror tropes while also fulfilling those same tropes in its own comedic way and *Kill Bill* (2003/2004) for its direct reference in characterizations and costumes to Kung Fu and Samurai films such as *Game of Death* (1978), *Yojimbo* (1961), and *Lady Snowblood* (1973).

The multiverse world of *Everything Everywhere All at Once* is filled with ironic hybridization which borrows visual and narrative components from several popular films. When Evelyn first discovers the power to channel abilities from alternative dimensions, she awakens a Kung Fu action star version of herself inspired by Michelle Yeoh's career. This alternative

dimension of Evelyn evokes iconic Michelle Yeoh performances such as her leading roles in Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* (2000) and David Chung's *Magnificent Warriors* (1987). Additionally, this scene shows her physical body download these abilities in a fraction of a second as her consciousness travels across the multiverse to retrieve this knowledge and skillset. This moment draws parallels with Lilly and Lana Wachowski's *The Matrix (*1999) when Neo downloads albites from a supercomputer and utters the infamous line, "I know Fung Fu". Several other popular films are referenced throughout. When Evelyn needs to channel the powers of a teppanyaki chef she travels to a universe where her colleague's cooking is controlled by a racoon hiding under his chef's hat named 'raccacoonie'. This is not only a direct reference to the Disney Pixar film *Ratatouille* (2007), but this moment also pokes fun at Asian immigrant parents' inability to pronounce names of pop culture references.

Additionally, the Daniels reference iconic Chinese films such as Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love* (2000). The scene where CEO Waymond confesses his affection for movie star Evelyn mimics the stylized aesthetics of *In the Mood for Love,* with the use of medium-wide shots which capture the two characters sharing an intimate moment while they cover themselves from the rain in a back alleyway. This scene also mimics Kar-wai's dramatic use of colour. Close-up shots of Waymond cover his face with bright green hues from the nearby neon sign. He then steps out of the green light and his face is illumined with yellow hues when he delivers his triumphant confession. Here, the yellow hue symbolizes 'idealization', and supports Waymond's fantasy of a life doing laundry and taxes. This scene and its adoption of dramatic colour emphasize the film's claim of enjoying the wonders of middle-class immigrant life.

These are just some of the many examples of ironic hybridization employed by the Daniels throughout the film. Their creative use of these genre-blending techniques provides

audiences with an accessible reference point where they can use their familiar film knowledge to anticipate character traits and narrative events. Additionally, the Daniels emphasize the importance of paying homage to Asian filmmakers and Asian actors. As they provide audiences with a valuable interpretation of the Asian American Immigrant experience, they supplement the film with references which provide exposure to foreign language Asian films like *In the Mood for Love* and *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon*. This is extremely valuable as it makes viewing these films more accessible for audiences that have already witnessed similar visuals, themes, and motifs explored in *Everything Everywhere All at Once*.

As access to streaming films has increased American audiences' likelihood to watch foreign language films and television, it has become increasingly valuable to remind audiences about the rich film histories of China, Japan, Korea, and Hong Kong. Asian films have not only inspired The Daniels but also other American filmmakers. Martin Scorsese's *The Departed* (2006) is a direct adaptation of the Hong Kong film *Infernal Affairs* (2002). The film Japanese action thriller *Battle Royale* (2000) inspired Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* book and film franchises.

Visual Narratives: Exploring The Metaphysical

A journey of self-discovery through the multiverse was made popular by DC and Marvel comics and brought to the big screen with films like *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse* (2023) and *The Flash* (2023). *Everything Everywhere All at Once* strategically employs visual narratives in the multiverse to tell Evelyn's story of self-discovery. Additionally, the magnitude of the multiverse and the imposing threat of Jobu Tupaki destroying everything everywhere capture the immense weight of the Asian American immigrant experience.

Acclaimed filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky theorized that film possesses the ability to portray life's transcendental and spiritual qualities through metaphysical realms which often obscure reality (Matilda, 2012, p. 112-113). This is evident through Tarkovsky's use of 'the zone' in *Stalker* (1979) which allowed him to explore and convey themes related to human consciousness and desire. Several popular science fiction films have used metaphysical worlds to explore themes related to human consciousness, identity, and the nature of restrictive systems. Some popular examples include *The Matrix* (1999), *Fight Club* (1999), and *Inception* (2010). These films tend to explore the restive worlds and identities through the perspective of a white male protagonist.

What makes *Everything Everywhere All at Once* so unique, is its use of a metaphysical world to explore identity within the diaspora. The multiverse also demonstrates alternative lives Evelyn may have experienced if she made different life choices. For many immigrants, the question of what would my life be if I had not immigrated to a new country? overshadows their diasporic experience for better or for worse. For Evelyn, the film portrays a fantasy world where her decision not to immigrate leads to her becoming an action movie star. This world captures Evelyn's strongest desires but also demonstrates her insecurities about her life as a laundromat owner. Here, the multiverse functions as a means of communicating the immense weight of the diasporic experience. It emphasizes the pressure that Evelyn places on herself to achieve the American dream and find her sense of belonging within the diaspora. It is however within this universe where Evelyn learns to appreciate the beautiful mundanity of her life. Evelyn's exploration into these alternative lives and possibilities demonstrates the value of her life doing laundry and taxes with her loved ones.

Film Analysis: *Past Lives*

Introduction

South Korean-Canadian Celine Song's directorial debut *Past Lives* takes audiences through an emotional twenty-four-year journey as childhood friends Nora (Greta Lee) and Hae Sung (Teo Yoo) continue to find new ways of reconnecting as their natural attraction to one another contends with several obstacles including immigration, their professional careers, and their romantic relationships. The film introduces the leitmotif of In-Yun, a Korean term meaning fate that connects people and thus questions the meaning of their past and future lives.

Past Lives captures three moments in time where Nora and Hae Sung share an emotional bond with one another. The film begins when they are twelve-year-old classmates and share their first date arranged by their parents. Their natural attraction to one another is clear, however, the relationship cannot progress any further when Nora's family immigrates to Toronto Canada. The story then picks up twelve years later in 2012. Hae Sung has just completed his mandatory Korean military service and Nora has moved to New York City to pursue a career as a playwriter. The two reconnect over Facebook and quickly rekindle their relationship over video calls. They update each other on their lives, discuss their day-to-day, reminisce about their time together and share intimate moments. However, Nora realizes that pursuing an intimate relationship is unrealistic and decides to cut off their connection to focus on pursuing her career. The film picks up once again in 2023. Nora is now married to a white man named Arthur (John Magro) and after breaking up with his girlfriend Hae Sung travels to New York City to reconnect with Nora.

Past Lives explores Nora's sense of place and belonging within the diaspora through her romantic relationships. When she reconnects with Hae Sung in 2023, she also reconnects with

her Korean heritage and questions her place within the diaspora. The film repackages a question for many Asian American immigrants, what path would someone's life take if they had not immigrated? A question proposed and explored in *Everything Everywhere All at Once*. For Nora, her reconnection with Hae Sung prompts her to consider what a life living in Korea with Hae Sung would have looked like. Although she intends to stay faithful to her husband and doesn't intend on uprooting her entire life to pursue this potential relationship, she still bears the emotional weight of the 'past life' that was lost when she immigrated.

Past Lives is a unique contribution to Asian American cinema because it captures the diasporic experience of someone who immigrated at a young age. Nora's assimilation into Canadian and United States culture came while she was a child, and her discovery of a sense of place in the diaspora coincided with her discovering her sense of place while growing up. This creates an interesting dynamic as Nora cannot imagine a lived experience in the homeland as accurately as an Asian American who immigrated as an adult. For Nora, this makes a relationship with Hae Sung both enticing (what would her life be had her family stayed) and terrifying (what kind of loss she might sustain if she decides in favour of her childhood crush). When Hae Sung arrives in New York City and Nora becomes increasingly aware of her residual romantic feelings for him, she is confronted by the ambiguity of these two options. By being forced to choose between them Nora discovers her sense of place in the diaspora.

Additionally, *Past Lives* is unique contribution to the genre of romance films that is distinctly Asian American. The film does not fulfill the fairy tale ending witnessed in many American romance films such as Rob Reiner's *When Harry Met Sally…* (1989) and Paul Thomas Anderson's *Punch Drunk Love* (2002). Additionally, the film does not fit into the ambiguous 'will they or won't they' narrative ending witnessed in Michel Gondry's *Eternal Sunshine of the*

Spotless Mind (2004) and Richard Linklater's *Before Sunrise* (1995). Instead, *Past Lives* subverts American audience expectations with its melancholic depiction of romance that is more akin to Asian films like Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love* (2000) and Hong Sang-soo's *Right Now, Wrong Then* (2015). This narrative subversion introduces new and alternative romantic themes to American audiences, while also providing unique interpretations of the diasporic experience.

Depictions of the Diaspora: In-Yun

The opening shot of the film captures Nora, Hae Sung, and Arthur in 2023. They share in conversation as they sit in a New York City bar at 4 AM. Two offscreen narrators gaze upon the three characters and provide assumptions about the nature of their relationships. The male narrator assumes Nora and Arthur are a couple and Hae Sung is Nora's brother. The female narrator assumes Nora and Hae Sung are a couple and Arthur is their American friend. These narrators reinforce the gendered and sexual politics of the Asian American identity through their analysis which is primarily concerned with the romantic relationships of the three main characters. Instead of providing assumptions about their careers, interests, or other factors which make up their identity, they specifically are interested in the romantic relationship dynamics. Yet in somewhat weird way this initial shot does capture the undecided relationships in the love triangle and the fraught choices impeding upon all three characters. Nora, torn between various types of loyalty and love; Hae Sung realizing that this encounter with Nora might be a fleeting moment from a love that has missed its chance; Arthur gradually easing into the truth of being his wife's second-best choice of a life partner. In a brilliant, perfectly visual mode, the initial scene reveals the ambiguous workings of the Korean in-yun. The blabber of the outside observers reinforces the silent, unspoken ways in which in-yun will unfold cinematically in the film that follows.

As the scene continues the camera slowly zooms into Nora as she is positioned in-between the two men. Director Celine Song is indicating that this story will be about Nora, as the camera fixates on her face. Nora looks directly into the camera to break the fourth wall. As the narrators encourage audience participation with their assumptions, Nora's return of the gaze creates this level of discomfort. As she gazes into the camera lens the stern look on her face tells the audience to not jump to rapid assumptions about her life and romantic relationships. It becomes clear that Nora's story and relationships are more complex than the assumptions provided by the narrators. The film then cuts to an establishing shot of Seoul Korea with the text '24 years earlier' displayed across the screen.

A recurring leitmotif throughout the film is the Korean belief of in-yun. In 2013 when Nora and Arthur meet at a writer's retreat Nora introduces the belief to Arthur in an act of seduction. She says that in-yun is the Korean word for providence or fate specifically referring to the relationships between people. An in-yun occurs when two strangers walk by each other in the street and their clothes accidentally brush, this means that there was a special connection between the two of them in their past lives. She goes on to say that it takes 8,000 layers of in-yun for two people to get married. Although Nora tells Arthur she does not believe in in-yun and admits to using it as a seduction tactic, the concept of in-yun continues to be relevant to her life in the diaspora.

In-yun is what makes her connections with Hae-Sung so intriguing. As she begins to reconnect with her old friend, she fantasizes about a life spent in Korea with Hae Sung. Although she is not seriously considering uprooting her life to live out this fantasy, she possesses the emotional loss of the past life that may have been lived with him. When Nora is describing the dynamics between her and Hae Sung to Arthur she repeatedly mentions how 'Korean' he is. She

vocalizes her insecurities of not feeling 'Korean' enough as a member of the diaspora, but also how she feels more Korean when she is around him. She makes the connection between her relationship with Hae Sung and her desire for the homeland clear when she simultaneously says she misses him and misses Seoul.

As Nora and Hae Sung's brief time together in New York City approaches its end, the two stand on the sidewalk in silence awaiting Hae Sung's Uber to arrive. Before Hae Sung steps into the Uber, he asks Nora if they are currently living in one of their past lives and then suggests that they might mean something more to each other in a future life. He asks, "What then?" Nora responds with a hopeful smile and tells him that she does not know. Hae Sung agrees and reciprocates Nora's hope when he tells her "See you then". The two go their separate ways as the film draws to its conclusion. Nora's response in these moments demonstrates her content with her life in the diaspora. Although she would have loved a life with Hae Sung, she is comfortable letting go of one of her past lives.

Past Lives contributes to the discussion which asks what would life look like for an Asian American who did not immigrate? Celine Song employs the use of the leitmotif in-yun to beautifully capture this question through a Korean concept. The film establishes cultural citizenship through its depiction of Nora's narrative act. For audiences, Nora's story demonstrates the complexities of living in the diaspora and possessing a desire for a past life in the homeland. The film demonstrates how many immigrants do not feel closure with leaving their homeland, especially those who immigrated at a young age just like Nora.

Additionally, *Past Lives* provides audiences with an interpretation of Asian American identities that do not conform to the traditional gendered and sexualized stereotypes associated with the model minority. Through the production of a nuanced love story with complex

characters, Song is actively diminishing stereotypes such as hyper-sexualized submissive Asian females and the sexually castrated Asian males. It is especially important for Song to contribute to diminishing these stereotypes in her film when considering the lack of romantic movies involving Asian Americans.

Visual Narratives: Stairs and Sculptures

Similar to the filmmaking techniques utilized by Lee Isaac Chung, Celine Song makes significant use of visual narratives and silence. Song's use of silence often conveys speechless characters who cannot possess the appropriate works for their emotions. For Nora, this silence contributes to her search for a sense of space in the diaspora. This is evident in the final scene when Nora and Hae Sung stand in silence while they await the Uber to arrive. As the two characters stand in silence the two contemplate their past lives together. For Nora, her understanding of a past life with Hae Sung frames her life in the diaspora and provides her with a clear understanding of the impact of immigration.

Additionally, visual narratives are explored through several visual motifs in the film. These visual motifs establish the emotional bond between Nora and Hae Sung and demonstrate the current state of their relationship. One of the first visual motifs in *Past Lives* is captured when Nora and Hae Sung say goodbye to one another at the age of twelve. At this moment, they believe this will be the last time they see each other, as Nora's family is immigrating to Canada. As the two characters say goodbye a medium shot captures them walking their separate ways. The characters are divided by a staircase that Nora walks up. In this scene, the staircase captures the new possibilities of immigrant life for Nora's family in Canada. As Nora's framing is lifted higher in the scene, it becomes clear that her relationship with Hae Sung has ended as she moves on to new possibilities.

Song uses a visual motif once again when Nora and Hae Sung are reunited with one another in New York City. In this scene, the public art sculptures frame the audience's understanding of Hae Sung's relationship with Nora. As Nora approaches him, the film flashes back to a scene when the two were children. This scene shows them playing on a public art sculpture in Seoul. The sculpture captures two faces looking at one another symbolizing the shared connection between the two twelve-year-old kids. However, when the scene returns to the present day, the carved mural behind the two characters shows two figures sitting with their backs to one another. This sculpture signifies Hae Sung's feeling of disconnect and uncertainty since he has not seen Nora for over twenty years. These emotions are also captured by the sombre expression on his face. Nora quickly diminished these emotions with an energetic embrace.

Discussion

Each film selected for this study offers a unique perspective on the Asian American immigrant journey, shedding light on the systematic oppression and preconceived notions faced by the community. Furthermore, each film goes on to demonstrate the strength and resilience of Asian American immigrants and their ability to create new possibilities within the diaspora. Each filmmaker engages with themes about Asian American identity through different film genres, narrative arcs, and creative lenses, thus showcasing the different ways that Asian American visualize identities and paths to success. Additionally, each film's use of visual narratives demonstrates how Asian American filmmakers are implementing themes related to the diasporic experience through creative visual components. This encompasses the use of metaphors,

leitmotifs, and ironic hybridization which reflect the diaspora and emphasize the narrative arcs of each film.

My research analysis contributes to the field of Asian American popular film studies by applying a cultural citizenship framework to the medium. Previous studies have also acknowledged the cultural importance of Asian American representation; however, there are very few studies that engage with the newest available films in Hollywood. Unlike older pictures, the works of Asian American directors working in Hollywood today express profound and unfiltered interpretations of the immigrant experience across genres, visual styles, and narratives. Scholarship on films prior to 2020 primarily focuses on Asian American actors; however, the diasporic experience is not essential to the plots of the films in which these actors play. This is primarily because the emergence of popular films that engage with the Asian American immigrant experience had not occurred until very recently. *Minari*, released in 2020, can be credited as one of the first films written and directed by an Asian American that provides audiences with a profound interpretation of the Asian American immigrant experience and identity. As Asian American filmmakers are provided with greater opportunities to tell their stories on the big screen, there will hopefully be more academic work which engages with their contributions to shaping the Asian America immigrant identity.

Finally, I conclude my research by the assertion that three films analyzed here contribute to reshaping the Asian American immigrant identity through their nuanced and gritty portrayal of the diaspora. Greater opportunities for Asian American filmmakers have allowed them to discuss themes related to Asian American identity and discover a sense of place within the diaspora. Additionally, these filmmakers provide exposure to Asian American cultural practices, diminish harmful stereotypes, and provide exposure for Asian cinema and Asian American actors.

Evidence of these films' impact on audiences can be observed through their critical and mainstream success. At the Academy Awards, *Minari* received nominations in six categories with Youn Yuh-jung becoming the first South Korean actor to receive the award for Best Supporting Actress. *Everything Everywhere All at Once* is one of the most successful films at the Academy Awards in recent history. The film took home seven awards out of its eleven nominations including Best Picture, Best Original Screenplay, Best Director, Best Actress (Michelle Yeoh), Best Supporting Actor (Ke Huy Quan), Best Supporting Actress (Jamie Lee Curtis), and Best Film Editing. As of November 2023, the yearly Academy Awards nominations have yet to be released, however, it is highly speculated that *Past Lives* will receive several nominations. Additionally, these films have received mainstream success and praise from audiences. On the popular user-rated website Letterboxd primarily used by self-proclaimed film nerds, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* and *Past Lives* are listed in the top 250 Narrative Feature Films each with a score of 4.3/5. *Minari* is placed just off the list with a score of 4.1/5 sitting one decimal point behind the 250th-ranked film.

Conclusion

Writer directors Lee Isaac Chung, Daniel Kwan, Daniel Scheinert, and Celine Song produce incredibly profound acts of cultural citizenship which establish a place for Asian American immigrants within the diaspora. Collectively, their films address the immigrant experience through family dynamics, personal relationships, financial insecurities, and questions of fate and reality. These films have thus contributed to establishing a sense of place and belonging for Asian Americans who can now visualize their lived experiences and discussions regarding their identity. Additionally, these filmmakers have utilized filmmaking techniques,

motifs, and metaphors that reflect the Asian American immigrant experience contributing to the possession of Asian American identity contained in each film.

Not only have these films received widespread acclaim from Asian American communities but have also been well-received by mass audiences. These films mark a significant moment in American cinema history where Asian American filmmakers have possessed the ability to address themes related to the diaspora and immigrant identity. As these films have proven to be popular amongst audiences and considering the four mentioned directors are all at the beginning of their filmmaking careers, audiences should expect even more significant contributions to the genre of Asian American film.

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