

For a Film About Korean Adoptees, a Group Effort

In “Return to Seoul,” a Parisian repeatedly visits her birth country. Neither the filmmaker nor the star were adopted, but they got help from friends.



By Matt Stevens

Feb. 19, 2023

Her biological father insists on buying her ballet shoes she does not want. She is repulsed by a tortured relative’s overzealous dinner prayer and insistence on physical touching. When she visits her adoption agency, her eyes linger on pictures of smiling, happy parents and children.

But Freddie, a 25-year-old adoptee born in South Korea and raised in France, also grows up. She realizes that South Korea is “toxic” for her. And she goes back anyway — with mixed results.

“Return to Seoul,” a critically acclaimed drama that earned a place on the Oscars shortlist, has drawn praise for bringing forward a story that feels authentic to many adoptees and at the same time resonates with anyone who has ever felt a little lost.

The film tracks Freddie as she repeatedly returns to her birth country in a series of vignettes that play out over roughly eight years. Neither the film’s writer-director, Davy Chou, nor its star, Park Ji-Min, were themselves adopted. Instead Freddie’s journey is based on that of Laure Badufle, a friend of Chou’s who is adopted. And Chou found Park — an artist making her acting debut here — through Erwan Ha Kyoon Larcher, a friend of Park’s who is also adopted and gave input that helped shape the feature.

The director, actress and the friends who guided them recently gathered for a virtual discussion with me just days before “Return to Seoul” was released in theaters in New York and Los Angeles.

Here are edited excerpts from our conversation:

Tell us a little bit about the origin story of the film.

LAURE BADUFLE Davy met my biological Korean father in 2011 when we were together in Korea. I asked if Davy could come because I was uncomfortable to meet him on my own. And we also had another friend do translation because I really needed to have a buffer. I always had this love-hate feeling about Korea and my biological family, especially on my father’s side. There was this impulse and repulsion at the same time. I didn’t talk to my adoptive family about it.

DAVY CHOU I was so naïve and light about it [the meeting]. It was kind of an adventure at first. Then, suddenly, to be at that table and see them — I was being transported. It was a real thing, not an adventure. I didn’t say anything. I was just observing. The friend was trying to translate, but I think it was a bit difficult because she had to figure out how to translate anger into Korean politeness.



A scene from “Return to Seoul.” An artist, Park hesitated to commit to acting in the film.
Thomas Favel/Aurora Films, via Sony Pictures Classics

I never told Laure that I had an idea of making a film. Just to be there was very different than what I would have expected of such a reunion. It was the mix of so many different things in the same time: sad, heavy, but also a bit funny — in the way a tragedy can be funny.

BADUFLE It was quite unpleasant. I was expecting something much nicer. Deep down I think there was anger, and Davy was always soothing.

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Then [about six years later] Davy came to me and said he wanted to work on the idea for his next movie. I was living in London. I just had this very crazy car accident where I almost lost my legs and I was recovering. When Davy asked me to do this, I looked into the documents. I wrote 30 pages. And I remember I was physically kind of emptying myself. I was crying. It was this kind of purge. There had been something inside. And I worried that if I let it out, it was going to destroy me. But because I was going to give this to him, who would have the distance to make something, I felt OK.

How did you get involved, Erwan?

ERWAN HA KYOON LARCHER Davy and I have a common friend who is also a movie director. We met maybe in 2012. He asked me some questions and talked about the movie he wanted to do. Then I spoke about Ji-Min. You know what happens next.

CHOU I wanted to listen to his experience. He told me a lot of his own story and a lot about his relationship with South Korea.

LARCHER Even if the film is based on your story, Laure, I just realized how much the situation is quite the same. The stories are different because we are all unique. But I went through the same steps. When I saw the movie, I could write maybe 90 percent of the dialogue. It was the same questions of communication and parents trying to reconnect through gifts and money or food. It was the same kind of time spent with Koreans — drinking more than anything.

Ji-Min, what were your initial thoughts when Davy asked if you'd consider acting in a movie?

PARK JI-MIN My first thought was, "No way." The only thing I was interested in was actually the story of the movie. I am not adopted. I'm Korean, born in Korea and moved to France. But I also have some understanding of Freddie and what she feels. That was the only thing I was thinking was interesting. Acting in the movie was not at all in my ideas.

You are a fine artist by training, right?

PARK Yes. I do sculptures, installations. Paintings also.

So how did you finally agree to act?

PARK The moment I decided that I would give 100 percent of myself to the movie was the day Davy and I had a very long conversation. I told Davy I had some problems with some things in his script: the male gaze about a female Asian character and the image that a female Asian character has had in a movie. So we did change some things.

Laure, how did it feel to put what is ostensibly your story in the hands of two other people?

BADUFLE I was bit confused. Is this fiction? A documentary? And I was talking about something very painful. I went through some different stages: feeling like my story was used for some other purpose. But I trusted that Davy understood enough about what had happened with my biological family. I was sure he would make a beautiful movie.

It wasn't like you were texting him every day?

BADUFLE We had exchanges. But at some point I had to let go.

CHOU You had some feeling of fear.

BADUFLE I think only when I accepted the fact that the movie was the way it was, then I started to really enjoy and feel grateful and also take my place in this by organizing events with adoptees.

This movie process is helping me to grow with my adoption story. Like many other adoptees, I used to victimize myself and isolate. I didn't want to talk to others because they wouldn't understand. With time, I learned this is not the right approach. I have to say what I want to say. With the movie, I felt more legitimate.



“Making film is not only talking about yourself, but trying to make film about another experience,” Chou, top, said. Understanding that the film was an artistic creation helped Park get over her reservations. Benjamin Malapris for The New York Times

Davy, Ji-Min, did either of you have reservations about making a film about adoption and not being adopted yourselves?

CHOU Doubt is always there. There is always the feeling that you might not make the film for good reasons or not be happy about it in the end because you haven't been faithful to the reality — or the fear that people like Laure or Erwan will be disappointed. But I believe it's because of that doubt that you push yourself to try your best.

PARK The question of illegitimacy, I had it so, so strongly from the beginning and still now. There is another actress in the movie, Émeline Briffaud; she plays [a friend of Freddie's] and is adopted in real life. I met her twice before the shooting, and I was really, really afraid of her feelings. I felt so illegitimate in front of her. Why am I doing this? It's not my story or my life.

Laure, you were talking about how it felt like a purge. For me, it was also a purge, for my life, my history. It's really personal, but it was a motivation for why I did this.

CHOU There is dialogue where an adoption agency employees tells Freddie, "Maybe we have employees who understand the feeling of being an adoptee." For me, that says a lot. Making film is not only talking about yourself, but trying to make film about another experience. There is always a risk that you might miss it. But how close can I get to something, even if I will never be sure to touch it?

PARK It was a little bit easier for me when I understood that this was an artistic creation.

So, then, how was it possible to make a movie that is this authentic feeling?

CHOU For me, the authenticity has a lot to do with the details Laure shared with me. I couldn't invent the grandma touching Freddie's hair; the ballet shoes that the father offered. Also, with a lot of the Korean team, including Ji-Min, I was always asking about cultural details. [Chou is Cambodian and French.] How is the food served? How do people sit at the table? I also met adoptees and listened to their stories.



From left, Larcher, Park, Badufle and Chou. The adoption experiences of Larcher and Badufle tracked so closely that the director considered changing the main character to a man. Benjamin Malapris for The New York Times

A lot of Korean adoptees were born in the '70s and '80s, so many of us have now come of age and are making art about our experience. To what extent, Davy, were you familiar with other movies or memoirs on Korean adoption?

CHOU I didn't know anything before meeting Laure. Even before deciding to make the film. I watched a lot of stuff on YouTube actually, small documentaries following an adoptee going to Korea for the first time. There are some reality TV shows — crazy things that were very famous in the '90s — where kids would come on and a smiley M.C. would say, "Hi, Do you want to meet your mother?" I read an amazing comic book; I read research by some scholars. But I also just like to hang out with Korean adoptees when I am in Seoul.

I kind of wrote this film in resistance to the classical story that was too simplified, a bit overwhelmed by good feelings. The stories were always sad of course, but at the end there is this call for easy reconciliation and peace. The story of Laure, the story of Erwan and the stories of the people I met were so different.

The film takes a longitudinal approach to Freddie, who we get to see in at least three stages of life. And, it's true, her life story does not tie itself up neatly.

PARK It is an individual story, but the power in it is that it becomes like a collective history even if, of course, all the stories are not the same.

Freddie is a lot of things and, like everybody, full of paradoxes and contradictions. Freddie is a real fighter. She fights every day in her life. And I fight. I fight as an Asian woman living in a French society. It was important to keep that fight in this movie.

For me, it was really important to show that Freddie is also a lost soul. But it's not at all a negative. I am a lost soul. I think we all have some questions that maybe we will never have the answers to. And the most important thing is the way we question ourselves about the world — not find the final answers. The power of Freddie is that she keeps going on and on, even if she doesn't find the right answer or the answer that she would love to have.

Let me just ask this plainly: Laure, Erwan, did you like the film?

LARCHER The first time I watched the movie, it was too intense. I could recognize so many things about my own story. And to see Ji-Min, and to know Davy — there were different layers. The second time it was a totally different movie. Of course I liked it, and I still like because it's very — I don't know if it's the right word — helpful for adopted people. I have other friends who recognize themselves. But it is much wider than just one story.

BADUFLE It's on this fine line of not saying but suggesting. It's beautiful.

I live with a sense of shame. For me, being adopted was a disability. I think adoptees feel proud of this movie — that it exists, that they can talk about and that they can explain to others how it is to be an adoptee.

Matt Stevens is an arts and culture reporter for The Times based in New York. He previously covered national politics and breaking news. @ByMattStevens