

Film Review:

Past Lives (2023): A Moment for East Asian American Cinema

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In her debut film *Past Lives* (2023), director Celine Song expertly crafts a tender, unconventional and semi-autobiographical love story spanning twenty-four years that speaks so well to the lasting effects of immigration and the feeling of longing. Her experience as a playwright is echoed in the emotion expressed through the dialogue and subtle actions in between. The film frames characters' dynamics as being inherently influenced by themes of immigration as the film's lead, Nora (Greta Lee), is examining her identity and how she has changed over time, thus affecting how she navigates and perceives the relationships in her life. The exploration of this conflict contributes to a larger portrayal of the East Asian American experience reflected in recent cinema.



Na Young (Moon Seung-ah) and Hae Sung (Leem Seung-min) as children. A24, 2023.

Na Young and Hae Sung (Teo Yoo) grow up together in South Korea as best friends who have a bond that even their mothers can't ignore. When they are twelve years old, the two grow apart as Na Young, now Nora, moves with her family to Canada. Twelve years later, Nora now lives in New York City with aspirations of becoming a professional playwright. One day she reminisces and searches online for Hae Sung and finds that he too has also been searching for her on Facebook. It's as if it was fate that they had been looking for each other around the same time. She reaches out and the former friends reconnect, having consistent video calls filled with blushing, honesty, and bashful yearning. This communication comes to an end when Nora laments how neither of them will be able to visit each other anytime soon as she is trying to be a successful writer in New York and Hae Sung has to be in South Korea to finish university. She elaborates that they shouldn't spend all this time thinking about a possible life together when it is unlikely to happen.

After another twelve years, Hae Sung visits Nora, who he still calls Na Young, and her husband, Arthur (John Magaro), in New York City. Hae Sung's arrival spurs conversations about his and Nora's past and all the complicated what-ifs that are entwined within it. The three of their interactions keep viewers unwavering attention for the rest of the movie as they attempt to decipher the genuineness of their words and their slight facial movements. A glance a character gives could be interpreted as a deep lust or concern for another, yet the dialogue they say presents as more of a shallow statement of their feelings. Thus, we rely on those subtle looks or faint smiles actors perform to determine the authentic motives of their characters. Even when Hae Sung and Nora talk about their current lives and their own respective partners, there is an

implication of a deeper history that is evident through the unwavering stares they give to each other, probing for answers to what their current dynamic is in the present. Nora tells Arthur, regarding Hae Sung, that “He’s so Korean...I feel not so Korean when I’m with him, but also in some way more Korean?” There’s an underlying guilt Nora expresses when talking about Hae Sung with Arthur because they have a connection through their past and culture. Hae Sung’s presence makes Nora feel both more and less Korean when she’s with him, displaying an internal guilt as well, as she is examining her identity and is unsure about the exact state of it.

The notion of “inyun” is brought up continually throughout the film, inyun being the Korean idea of fates that intertwine throughout different lifetimes. Song writes and directs inyun regarding relationships and how they could exist in another life, but not this one. The characters develop heightened emotions as they contemplate what they were to each other in their past lives, what they could have been in this life, and what they will be in their next life. The film emphasizes the subtle lessons of learning how to accept fate and how to go through the fulfilling journey of receiving closure. Every conversation expresses slow heartbreak and the difficult attempt of trying to understand someone you thought you knew so well. The dynamic differences between Hae Sung and Nora versus Arthur and Nora reveal the complex nature of reconnecting with someone from your past and how that can impact your present. Hae Sung and Nora spend most of their time reminiscing whereas Arthur and Nora talk about the state of their own love and relationship now that Hae Sung has arrived. When Nora first left Korea, her mother said, “if you leave something behind, you gain something too.” This notion guides the conclusion the characters come to. With intense eye contact and honesty, Hae Sung eventually tells Nora that it

was good for her to have immigrated because Korea was too small of a country to have fulfilled her ambitions. It is something he has come to appreciate about her: “You had to leave because you’re you. And the reason I liked you is because you’re you. And who you are is someone who leaves.” Nora affirms his statement by saying that she left the little girl she was in Korea behind with him. She yearned for the life she could have had if she stayed in Korea, but now she accepts the reality of the life she has now. Much is left unsaid between characters, such as what Hae Sung’s true motive for coming to New York was and how he and Nora exactly feel about each other now, but that makes the film more rooted in reality. Every day, people leave words unsaid because of the fear of confrontation or the consequences of the truth, and *Past Lives* ultimately expresses that bittersweet experience.



Nora (Greta Lee) and Hae Sung (Teo Yoo) reconnected. A24, 2023.

It is beautifully coincidental that “tender” is such a fitting word to describe many East Asian American films such as *Past Lives*, which now joins *The Farewell* (2019), *Minari* (2020), *Everything Everywhere All At Once* (2022), and others in investigating how to deal with leaving

a potential life behind for an alternate life to come into fruition. *Past Lives* presents this idea in more of an understated way grounded in the sense of gentle melancholy that immigration produces. Nora feels conflicted between her Eastern and Western identities, but the film ultimately concludes in her wholly embracing the uncertainties in how life ends up the way it does. She takes on this perspective just through having conversations, not necessarily experiencing huge catalyst moments of realization like having to lie to your grandmother about her terminal disease, struggling to establish your family farm, or the responsibility of saving the multiverse (although all these instances are also products of great Asian American films about immigration).

There is power in the simplicity of *Past Lives* in how it expresses the theme of the Asian diaspora. As Nora is navigating her relationships with these men, as stated previously, she is also reminded of the version of herself she left behind if she had stayed in Korea and reflects on the slight loss of her Korean side as she now resides in America. New York City itself becomes its own character as it is shown in beautiful deeply staged long shots, reflecting how pervasive and transformative a location can be upon one's life. It is a distressing truth—realizing you are losing or have lost a part of yourself simply due to circumstance—and this film conveys the idea of a fleeting self. It serves as a reminder that change, though a constant part of life, can be elusive until you truly take the time to reflect. The groundedness of the film allows for its emotional impact to permeate more deeply.

To tell this story through the life of an immigrant and during a tense period of her life where the different sides of herself and cultures are manifested in the dichotomy of each of her

relationships with these two men, makes the universal feeling of longing for what once was more enriched. It is a narrative that many immigrants experience, thus there is actuality in the film's themes. This authentic Asian American story expresses the notion of sacrifice as a necessary act for us to do in order to become who we are, but it also reminds us that making that decision does not stop us from being reminded of who we once were. Although *Past Lives* will likely leave viewers in a somber state, there is an optimistic curiosity ingrained in us after watching: possibly in another life we could explore the looming what-ifs of our current one. It is ultimately a hopeful and endearing outlook on the lives we choose to make for ourselves.