

**DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY**  
**2023/24 SEASON**



**RETURN TO SEOUL**

(Language: Korean, French, English)

Director: Davy Chou, 2022. Running time: 119 minutes.

Presented by Dorchester Film Society, 20 September 2023.

“South Korea was one of the world’s largest exporters of adopted children between the ’50s and the early noughties. Many of those two hundred thousand or so children were brought into white American and European families, the fallout of which is still being unpacked. Frédérique, or ‘Freddie’, played by newcomer Park Ji-Min, was one such child: born in Korea but adopted and raised by French parents. In this naturalist drama, director Davy Chou charts Freddie’s attempts to come to terms with her tumultuous feelings towards her background, something that only becomes more complicated the more she finds out about her biological parents.

The emotional challenge of reconnecting with a place that you haven’t really been to is felt throughout *Return to Seoul*. A photo of Freddie’s birth mother – or the person she assumes is her mother – is her only memento of a country with which she has no familiarity. She doesn’t even speak the language and is treated like a foreigner – but also not, because she has an ‘ancestral and ancient Korean face’, as a group of drunk restaurant patrons speculate. Not long after a one-night stand, she begins a whirlwind reunion with her biological father.

Chou charts Freddie’s long, uneasy journey of reconciling her dual heritage with close-up camerawork and patient writing. The French-Cambodian filmmaker gracefully charts her thorny near decade-long journey through broken relationships and a morally murky career. He leaves room for the captivating Park to express the full range of that experience, so that by the film’s end a small tremble of the lip lands with seismic impact. Jérémie Arcache and Christophe Musset’s eclectic score, full of off-kilter percussion, punctuates the observational drama with electrifying interludes.

Freddie remains compellingly a chaotic protagonist, bristling at her biological family’s probings and the way they project their lingering heartbreak over her adoption onto her. Chou’s psychologically acute script shows how she protects herself through her erratic behaviour. ‘I could wipe you from my life with a snap of my fingers,’ she mutters in one of the film’s most uncomfortable scenes, as if pushing her loved ones away helps her regain a sense of control over herself – however toxic that may be.

It’s one of the many emotional contradictions at the heart of *Return to Seoul*. The impossibility of bridging the gap with her would-be family and estranged

birthplace is shown with bittersweet insight. This captivating story of diaspora is a quiet gem.”

**Kambole Campbell, *Time Out*, 25 April 2023.**

“The implacable forces of nature, nurture and destiny are what this movie grapples with; it is a really emotional and absorbing drama about adoption with terrific performances (many from nonprofessional first-timers) and compelling soundtrack musical cues. Franco-Cambodian film-maker Davy Chou directs, co-writing the screenplay with artist Laure Badufle, a Korean adoptee brought up in France whose personal story inspired the film.

Park Ji-min makes her acting debut in a role that mirrors her own life as well as Badufle’s: a Korean with adoptive French parents. She plays Freddie Benoît, a footloose twentysomething who on a whim comes on a trip to Seoul, checks into a hostel for foreigners and imperiously decides that the polite, French-speaking receptionist Tena, subtly played by author Guka Han, will be her submissive best friend. Freddie is smart, stylish, a badass and force of nature who impulsively invites everyone in a local cafe to join her at her table where she is holding court with Tena and Tena’s shy friend Jiwan (Kim Dong-Seok); she later seduces and then airily rejects him when the poor infatuated guy pathetically declares his eternal love.

But Freddie’s confidence wobbles when Tena tells her she could, if she wanted, contact her biological mother and father in **South Korea**, and the film allows us to realise that this of course was what Freddie always intended at some subconscious level. Through an adoption agency, she discovers that her Korean mum and dad are divorced; she finds her father easily enough, a heartbreakingly sweet-natured guy played by veteran actor Oh Kwang-rok, now remarried with teen children and devastated with the suppressed guilt at the abandonment which her reappearance has brought back to the surface. Boozy and maudlin, the dad piteously asks her to stay with his family, starts almost stalking her, begging for forgiveness, virtually as pathetic as Jiwan.

But just as she refuses to be part of her father’s life, her mother refuses to see her, and a terrible question permeates the entire film: could Freddie have inherited from this absent woman her egotism and creativity, her talent for seduction, disruption and moving like a whirlwind through people’s lives? And if she can’t track down her mother, now a ghost beyond reach, does this mean she will never understand her own identity and the meaning of her own existence? It is a piercingly strange and indeed tragic predicament which the

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film coolly tracks through eight years of Freddie's life; this is gripping storytelling, and a great performance from Park Ji-min."

**Peter Bradshaw, *The Guardian*, 23 May 2023.**

"Go back to your roots, we're always told, and you'll find your heart's true home. But in Davy Chou's daring and mesmeric *Return to Seoul*, an adoptee's search for her birth parents tears open wounds and unearths neither meaning nor resolution. Freddie (Park Ji-Min) is in her mid-twenties, a French woman adopted from South Korea at birth. She finds herself in Seoul after a trip to Tokyo is disrupted by a typhoon. That's the excuse she gives to her adoptive mother back home, at least, having kept her entirely in the dark about this unforeseen odyssey.

Freddie insists to all, in fact, that she isn't even here to track down her birth parents. She's happy to wander, to draw strangers into her orbit with bottles of soju and a charming recalcitrance when it comes to local customs. They tell her it's rude to fill up her own glass. She pauses, chews over the request, and then gleefully ignores it. Yet, soon enough, Freddie walks through the door of the adoption agency that processed her through their system over two decades ago. Requests to meet are issued to her birth parents. Her father (Oh Kwang-rok) responds. Her mother does not. He's a drink-addled wreck, too desperate in his regrets to consider Freddie's own discomforts. He wants her to move in with his family, marry a Korean man, and learn the language.

Park, in a phenomenal debut performance, presents Freddie's manufactured indifference as if it were a steel helm – a protection she wears against the forces of honesty and sincerity. When she speaks, her eyes burn with a lifetime's worth of grievances. "He has to understand that I'm French now," she says of her father. "I have my family and friends over there. I am not going to live in Korea." When she stays silent, you can almost hear the glass-like shattering of her soul. She seduces young men and women with abandon. She dances like there's electricity frying her muscles. She moves through the city as if she's hell-bent on causing it pain.

Chou, inspired by a real-life friend's reunion with her birth father, resists every temptation to soothe Freddie's soul-sickness by simple means. She's never defined by what she finds, but by what she still lacks. As the film returns to her, at several points over the course of eight years, we discover that she's trapped in a cycle of constant reinvention. She turns into a femme fatale with blood-red

lips. She sheds her dignity to chase a dictatorial sense of control in the arms manufacturing industry. She cuts her hair and hikes across Europe.

Chou's camera does its best to keep up with her, as she barrels through clubs and down alleyways, her steps hastened by a Bauhaus-like, post-punk score. Seoul's buzzy, neon nightlife frequently turns cold and hostile. But it's clear where Freddie's mind keeps going; at one point she confesses to a date, "Did my mother think about me? Somewhere?" For Freddie, and for so many living with an unstable sense of their own identity, it's hard to live beyond those unanswered questions."

**Clarisse Loughrey, *The Independent*, 4 May 2023.**

### **DAVY CHOU INTERVIEW** **(DIRECTOR)**

"*Return to Seoul* premiered at last year's Cannes Film Festival and received rave reviews for its story of an adoptee's impulsive journey back to South Korea in search of her birth parents. Ahead of the film joining our Booking Scheme on 04/09/23, Cinema For All sat down with the film's [sic.] director to discuss its origins, his collaboration with the film's [sic.] composers and the power of seeing your films [sic.] with an audience.

**'Could tell us about where this project came from and what drew you to tell this particular story?'**

'It came from an episode in my life in 2011 when I accompanied a friend of mine in the moment when she was meeting her biological father and grandma. I was just there witnessing that scene, it felt so special and so different to what I would have imagined of such a moment. So, I tried to recreate that in the film; the dryness, the frustration, the anger... Very different from the easier reconciliation that I was naively imagining, influenced by the prejudice and bias I had about such preconceived stories, that made me want to make the film. Also, just the emotional response I had to it. About six years later I was open to my friend about making something around this thing we experienced together, and she was very positive and started sharing some anecdotes and details of her relationship with South Korea and her journey. So that's how the film started.'

**'I think that complexity really comes through. I saw the film as somewhat of a journey for the character of Freddie, discovering herself, her history and this country; I wondered if when you wrote the film you felt you went on that same journey of discovery with Freddie?'**

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‘Yeah, I think so. I don’t see the film as being specifically about adoption. I see the film as a portrait of a woman, accompanying her on a specific journey to dig more and more throughout the years through questions of who she is, where she belongs, what does it take to be happy, and what can she call home. That then had to dig into so many aspects of her life. I then also had this constraint that I made for myself that the film only takes place in South Korea, with the exception of the epilogue scene. So, I didn’t want to show any aspect of her life in France, it would only be when she goes back there, we will see what is happening in her life in Korea. It was interesting to make this story with those constraints.’

**‘That structure is really interesting, you drop in on her at these crucial moments in her life. Was that structure there from the beginning?’**

‘The three-part structure with the big time gaps was there from the beginning. I have to say, at the beginning I was thinking of a film that would be even more radical; the film would only be lunch and dinners with her biological family through the years, and you don’t see anything other than that, just the dinners. Maybe I was too influenced by Hou Hsiao-hsien. I thought that I needed to give more than that, show more aspects of her life.’

**‘I wanted to talk about the music in the film, because it plays a really big part narratively and thematically. At times it sounds almost like a thriller and at others it’s very expressive, almost like it could burst into a musical. Could you talk about that collaboration with your two composers?’**

‘For everything to do with the music, I talk a lot with my sound designer Vincent Villa, a French guy I’ve worked with for a long time, who conceived the sound of the film and music is of course part of it. My composers are Jérémie Arache and Christophe Musset, who I worked with on my last film *Diamond Island*, they are great people. There’s so much to say about the music! I’ll try to summarise... First, I wanted to be playful with my use of music. I get bored sometimes in art house film [sic.] when I see this philosophy and ideology of, I would say, politeness. The music is always something that should not be too present because of the risk of being too vulgar, it should be hidden behind the image. I feel frustrated with that. I grew up with the films of Scorsese and Tarantino and their iconic use of music. I’m not comparing myself the them, but it allowed me to use music in a more playful way.

Secondly, I wanted to be playful in the film, like you say, in the progression of the music. It shows the evolution of the character but also the origin of the music. It’s a film about meeting different worlds, and filming this almost

chemical reaction of the meeting of these different worlds; whether it's Korea and France, or professional actors and non-professional actors. The music is the same. You have all Korean music, contemporary, cool Korean music that was composed by the singer featured in the part scene, and you have composed music by French people, you have German techno music at one point. So it was very cool to have this kind of maelstrom thing and see how it reacts and talks to the story. At one point I decided that the music would be a kind of ally for Freddie. I don't like to think that the music is a character, it's a bit of a cliché to say that, but it's some kind of a friend that can push her to follow her instincts of rebellion and action and refusing to be laboured and pressurised when she needs to. I think it's a lonely process for her, and at the end of the film you can see how lonely she is, she needs to fight against everybody by herself and I think that requires a lot of courage and I think Freddie is very courageous and sometimes the music is helping her. For example, at the beginning of the film, before she stands up on the table and invites herself to the table of the boys, the music starts before, as if the music is giving her the energy to say "Okay, don't let them pressurise you, do your thing and take control of the night". In the scene when she dances in the vintage bar, I think it's the same, there's this kind of old, vintage Korean music, she says she loves it, but at the same time, this music was played in the car of her father, so also somehow this is the past of Korea, this story that is hers but she doesn't understand, with a mix of familiarity and distance. Then she decides to put on her own music with English lyrics by a French composer. Suddenly it gives her the possibility of inventing her own space, her own temporality, liberating herself from all this pressure, making her own utopia for the three minutes of music.

The last thing I will say, from witnessing that scene with my friend, incommunicability is so strong. You feel that people so strongly want to share something, which is the normal desire of people, they wanted it so much, they waited for it so much, that when the moment arrives, you can't do it. It's so frustrating and violent and brutal somehow. So, the music in the film is sometimes that vehicle for even when you can't express yourself, for so many different reasons, not just the barrier of language, at least music can be that thing that can bring people together. Of course, I think of that final scene when the father is showing some of the music he has made for his daughter, and he's definitely a character who has difficulty expressing himself when he's not super drunk, so that less than one minute moment, there is a moment of connection and grace that they can share. I don't know what that is, but there is a moment they can share.'

**'You spoke there about finding commonality through music and art, and I think the films [sic.] themes of identity and acceptance are things a lot of people find in cinema and through the shared experience of storytelling. Is**

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**it important for you to see people have that collective experience watching your work?’**

‘It’s definitely important in my life, in what constitutes me as a man who became a cinephile when he was a teenager, and although I was first watching films alone that I rented in my town in France, having the experience of watching a film in a movie theatre and having those emotional connections together is definitely something that constitutes me. I’d be very sad if we’re about to abandon that collective experience. We had a very specific screenings that we organised in France, and also outside of France, with Korean adoptee communities, in which many adoptees would come to watch the film. They are some of the most special moments I experienced with the film, sharing that and feeling very, very deep, strong connections with the audience. As you say, the importance for them to have watched the film together, and also after, to be able to speak about it and relate to it. If film can do that, it’s pretty incredible.’”

**Cinema for All, 2023.**

[DFS]

**Worth noting:**

**Davy Chou does not mention the profound impact that the actress Park Ji-Min had on both the script and the film. Mark Kermode observes:**

“[Davy Chou] was looking for somebody who was French but from Korea. And he couldn’t find an actor and then somebody said ‘I have a visual artist who is a friend called Park Ji-Min, who was born in Korea and moved to France as a child. She has no acting experience at all, but you might want to talk to her because she is very like the character you are talking about’. They then had this intense period of collaboration and they made this film which ended up being Cambodia’s entry for the 95<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards.”

**Mark Kermode, *Kermode and Mayo’s Take*, 5 May 2023.**