



Good Luck Soup

Matthew Hashiguchi (director), Donald Young, Davin Agatep (producers)
Transmedia Documentary Duration 70 mins, colour, in Kazakh, 35 mm, 16:9
HD, stereo, 2016

Alex Jong-Seok Lee

To cite this article: Alex Jong-Seok Lee (2020): Good Luck Soup, The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology, DOI: [10.1080/14442213.2020.1726257](https://doi.org/10.1080/14442213.2020.1726257)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14442213.2020.1726257>



Published online: 10 Mar 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Multimedia Review

Good Luck Soup

MATTHEW HASHIGUCHI (director), DONALD YOUNG, DAVIN AGATEP (producers)

Transmedia Documentary

Duration 70 mins, colour, in Kazakh, 35 mm, 16:9 HD, stereo, 2016

Employing a *verité* style somewhere in between experimental home videos and gorilla filmmaking, *Good Luck Soup* is Matthew Hashiguchi's complex love letter to family, identity and tradition in the celebrated heartland of America. The documentary's main theme of immigrant identity in the United States (US) is presented with admirable degrees of artistic and pedagogical success. Despite presenting a remarkably rich portrait of racialised difference and individualised struggle, however, Hashiguchi falls somewhat short of illuminating how his film's central theme would make more sense if situated within larger historical and contemporary contexts of Asian exclusion in the putative West. Methodologically, the film utilises home video images, personal interviews with family and archival footage to interrogate belonging and exclusion through questions of US citizenship, previously legal and currently 'cultural' (Rosaldo 1994).

Immediately, the film sets a tone of matter-of-frank intimacy. In this way, *Good Luck Soup* is a highly personal exploration of Japanese American life in a region frequently overlooked: the Midwestern US. Viewers are introduced to Cleveland-based Japanese Americans through the vision of one self-described 'half-Japanese and half-white' American man, Hashiguchi (and his extended family). The film's opening scene sets this tone with home video scenes of Hashiguchi as a child accompanied by his narration:

I have this memory from my childhood. I was yelling at my dad. I don't want to be Japanese. I don't want to be Japanese. I'm not sure what triggered that specific outburst. But throughout my life I've struggled with the experience of being Asian and different. And in my twelve-year old mind, he was responsible for that difference.

Throughout the film, Hashiguchi describes his struggles being raised biracial in a majority white Irish Catholic neighbourhood in Northern Ohio alongside a growing post-World War II Japanese American community. In voiceover—Hashiguchi never directly addresses the viewer except in photographs—the director describes how he did not want his family to know that for him experiencing bigotry as a racialised

minority in the Midwest was a regular occurrence. ‘I’ve never been able to admit to my family how much I struggled as an Asian American’, he confesses. In a statement of uncommon depth, Hashiguchi speculates that part of the reason may have been because he was ‘afraid of hearing similar stories from them—that they also experienced racism because they were Asian’.

Herein lies *Good Luck Soup*’s most consequential filmic contribution: its focus on how the collective trauma of a uniquely marginalised ethnic (Japanese) and racial group (Asian American) has affected multiple generations and individuals within a single family. Hashiguchi drives home this point by devoting much of the documentary on the family’s matriarch, 89-year old Eva. Hashiguchi’s grandma’s pluckiness, candour, and humour belie her experience as one of 120,000 Japanese Americans forcibly relocated and incarcerated in internment camps in the aftermath of post-Pearl Harbor anti-Japanese hysteria. The daughter of a strawberry farmer in northern California, Eva tells us about her experience being betrayed by her country and government: ‘I wanted to forget it. I wanted to erase it from my mind completely’. Despite this admission, Eva is shown later playing an active role in building awareness about Japanese American internment. In an early scene, she is seen delivering a talk on the issue to a group of mostly elderly, white Midwestern women. Asked by an audience member if she is angry, Eva responds with a laugh, ‘Oh no, I don’t have time to be bitter. I was in the beginning. But it’s not worth it’. The rest of the film is an indirect meditation on this sentiment, including the emotional impact of social and juridical exclusion among various Hashiguchi family members across time.

The director captures family views around race, racism, and belonging ranging from indifference to indignation. Hashiguchi’s Italian American mother, Roslyn, matter of factly declares that she never thought of her husband’s racial difference. That he was not a Catholic was more unsettling, she claims. Curiously, Eva echoes a similarly problematic colorblind racial logic. Concealing a broader post-Civil Rights racial ‘whitening’ of Asian (particularly Japanese) American communities (disproportionate out marriage with whites, political passivity, etc.) vis-à-vis that of other racialised minorities (chiefly African Americans), Eva remarks: ‘Now I think it’s very good. It’s all mixed up that pretty soon there’s not going to be any race at all. It’s just going to be a mixture of everything like the Europeans are—all mixed up’. In contrast, the younger generation, of which Hashiguchi himself hails, are less optimistic of a post-racial future, many also claim varying struggles with being ‘full’ or ‘half’ Asian American in the US. Such reflections on alterity—regional, generational, and bodily—traffic within the binaristic language of culture: American/Japanese or Western/Eastern, among others. For example, food is not featured much in Hashiguchi’s film. Instead, it appears almost entirely as *ethnic* food—Japanese sushi rolls, etc.—or a symbolic shorthand for ‘Japanese culture’. Tellingly, as with other ritual performances like Japanese traditional fashion and dance, these practices of culture are displayed almost entirely by women like Eva. Hashiguchi’s cousin, Kathleen, spells it out, ‘In my family, the females were the Japanese part of the culture because my dad is not Japanese. I learned a lot of the cultural customs from my mom because she taught us Japanese

dancing'. Here, Japan (and by proxy, Asia) is knowable through its culture: dance, food, etc. Yet, at least in the case of food, as Sonia Ryang states citing Sidney Mintz's seminal study (1985) on sugar, 'the entire notion of "national cuisine"' is a problematic one, as cuisines are by definition regional, not national (2015, 1). In this regard, the film is less a portrait of Japanese American life as a fixed and knowable cultural identity form than a filmic marriage between auteurist identity exploration and anthropological concerns with place-specific alterity.

Not surprisingly, soup—'good luck' or otherwise—is not mentioned until the final ten minutes of *Good Luck Soup*. When the titular 'good luck soup' finally does appear, Hashiguchi's brother, Luke, explains how Eva always makes the soup during Japanese New Year's family celebrations. Luke explains how the luck-giving soup is one of many rare Japanese dishes prepared by Eva that the entire family can eat. Those looking for deeper narrative elucidation on this soup's meanings, however—for example, obvious analogies of disparate 'foreign' ingredients 'melting' into a unifying 'pot' as the American assimilationist Dream—may be disappointed. Instead, the arbitrariness of the last-minute scene and its obscured significance speak to the film's many powerful but also, sometimes, problematic aspects. On the one hand, the odd inclusion of the film's namesake so late in the film speaks to Hashiguchi's apparent allegiance to post-modern accounts of identity and their formations as fragmented, heterogeneous and plural, especially those related to race talk in the US. On the other hand, that the scene appears so suddenly highlights the film's unfortunate tendency to introduce weighty topics like Japanese American internment, white supremacy and multiracial subjectivity (among many others), minus ample sociohistorical context. These omissions challenge the viewer to discern the full meaning behind the engaging footage on display.

Other Asian American documentarians like Deann Borshay Liem and Renee Tajima-Peña adeptly have explored similar themes of citizenship and belonging, racialised injustice and family intimacies. Had Hashiguchi adopted some of their narrative techniques, such as more sociohistorical contextualisation of onscreen personal intimacies, his film's impact could have been stronger. For example, Eva's seeming apoliticality might make more sense to the viewer had the director briefly explained other Japanese American responses to internment, including radical forms of anti-American activism (e.g. so-called No-no boys). Likewise, the Hashiguchi family's diverse struggles with biracial/multiracial identity might have been clearer by foregrounding the role of the model minority myth stereotype in obscuring the invisible role of Asian Americans (including white-Asian interracial pairings) in frequently fortifying white supremacist logics, particularly in a historically African American city like Cleveland. Nevertheless, the film remains commendable. At a lean 70 min, the plainspoken but personal style of the piece serves as an effective introduction to minoritised life in the Midwest. More substantive, as a complex window into Japanese America, *Good Luck Soup* reminds viewers that past events of devastating import inescapably play out into the present.

References

- Mintz, Sidney. 1985. *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*. New York: Penguin.
- Rosaldo, Renato. 1994. "Cultural Citizenship and Educational Democracy." *Cultural Anthropology* 9 (3): 402–411.
- Ryang, Sonia. 2015. *Eating Korean in America: Gastronomic Ethnography of Authenticity*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

ALEX JONG-SEOK LEE

*Annette and Hugh Gragg Postdoctoral Fellow in Transnational Asian Studies,
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University*

alex81lee@gmail.com

© 2020 Alex Jong-Seok Lee

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14442213.2020.1726257>

