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AN APPALACHIAN SUMMER FESTIVAL

WEICHOLZ GLOBAL FILM SERIES

WRITTEN PRE-FILM LECTURE BY DR. JOHN PFEIFER

COMPLICITY Japan/China (2018)

WEDNESDAY, JULY 28 AT 7PM



When it comes to food, the Japanese consider the preparation, cooking, presentation, and even the manner of how it is eaten to be deeply embedded in their culture. Careful preparation and meticulous presentation are crucial elements of Japanese cuisine. Food is an art form, and even the simplest dishes are often prepared by chefs who have trained for many years.

Therefore, it stands to reason that there are countless Japanese films that revolve around food. Some of my favorite Japanese films highlight food as a backdrop to the underlying theme of the screenplay. These films celebrate the art of cooking as well as Japanese culture and the cinema itself. Three of these films, including this selection, deserve your attention and a place on your “must watch” list.

Sweet Bean (2016) is a film about an elderly woman whose skill and more than 50 years of experience in making “dorayaki” gives her a newfound sense of purpose as she goes about teaching a young shopkeeper the importance of making and selling a quality product. Dorayaki is a sandwich-like Japanese treat made of two small pancakes held together with a large dollop of sweet bean paste. In teaching him her craft, she awakens in him Japan’s tradition of respecting their elders. Japan is the only country to celebrate “Keiro-no-HI” (Respect for the Aged Day) as a national holiday. Through their relationship, the young shop owner develops a passion and pride for product over profit that brings him greater happiness than he could have imagined.

Tampopo (1985) is perhaps the most iconic example of these Japanese food films. The story revolves around Goro, a truck driver who helps noodle shop owner Tampopo improve her techniques in making ramen in order to save her business from dying. In the process, the film explores the struggle between personal fulfillment and the constraints placed upon the individual by social class and Japanese society. Simply put, just because you are a truck driver, it doesn’t mean you can’t teach someone how to make great ramen noodles — or anything else! Tampopo is one of Japan’s best-loved comedies that will be enjoyed by many generations of cinephiles to come.

Even the most sensitive topic, such as illegal immigration, may be explored through the context of food within Japanese cinema. *Complicity*, a 2021 Weicholz Global Film Series selection, is an intimate, highly personal reflection on the immigrant experience in rural Japan. Ensnared in the traps of illegal immigration, Chen Liang, a Chinese emigrant, assumes a false identity, as Liu Pei, to start a new life in Japan. Under the tutelage of a wise old soba chef, he immerses himself in the painstaking and oh-so-Japanese way of making buckwheat soba noodles. In the process, he learns about loyalty, trust, and the cost of hiding one’s true identity.

In order to thoroughly understand and enjoy this film, I think it is important to know more about the ancient art of making soba noodles, the Japanese attitudes toward immigration and immigrants, and a few facts about Kei Chikaura and his directorial debut.

THE ART OF MAKING SOBA NOODLES

Soba is a type of noodle that most Japanese people regard as a staple of their diet. Soba noodles are served either chilled with a dipping sauce or hot in a noodle soup. The noodles can also be used in an assortment of dishes, as well as a nutritional compliment to other grains like rice and wheat noodles.

Soba noodles are made from buckwheat. Despite its name, buckwheat is not a type of wheat at all. In fact, it is not technically even a grain. The triangular brown seeds of the buckwheat plant are more closely related to rhubarb and sorrel. Buckwheat is one of the six pseudo grains that are not part of the Poaceae family (cereal grasses including wheat, rice, barley, rye, bamboo, etc.) but are considered grains due to their similar uses from a culinary perspective.

Buckwheat is high in thiamine (missing from rice), lysine (missing from wheat), and eight other essential amino acids. These missing nutrients have been found to ward off beriberi (a thiamine deficiency that can cause circulation problems and heart failure) and lysine deficiency symptoms such as fatigue, poor concentration, inhibited growth, hair loss, anemia and infertility. (Zara Risoldi Cochran, “What are the health benefits of lysine?,” medicalnewstoday.com, Dec. 17, 2018)

Buckwheat flour is produced by grinding the triangular seeds into a fine powder. The inside of the seeds is white, but if the skin of the seed is also used, the flour takes on a unique flavor and turns a grayish color which the Japanese prefer. In America, buckwheat flour is usually white, as the people of this country find the gray color less appealing. Unfortunately, it is also less nutritious and bland.

There are many different recipes for making soba. In commercial restaurants in the major Japanese cities like Tokyo, soba is made with 20% wheat and 80% buckwheat, but traditional soba made in restaurants like the one in tonight’s film is made from 100% buckwheat. It is very difficult to make 100% buckwheat soba, as legendary Japanese actor Tatsuya Fuji (chef) learned in the making of *Complicity*.

“Within the soba community, there is a popular motto that influences the way soba makers conduct their work. The motto is ‘soba no san-tate’ which in English translates to the three elements of freshness: freshly ground, freshly kneaded, and freshly cooked.” (Exploring the History of Soba Noodles, Google Arts and Culture, Soba Arts and Culture)

The process of making soba is uniquely Japanese. Unlike Ramen noodles, which originated in China, soba is a Japanese creation. According to Sonoko Sakai, a Japanese-born Los Angeles woman who teaches classes in soba making, “Soba came to Japan as a porridge, and

the Buddhist monks who studied in China had it during their long meditative journeys. And they brought it back to Japan, and the people in Japan turned it into noodles. ... Soba is my favorite food and finding genuine versions in the U.S. is difficult. The packaged noodles available in grocery stores are made mostly of wheat flour. And only a handful of restaurants stateside serve it up in the traditional way, meaning the chefs make the dough and cut and boil the noodles in front of customers. If you live in Japan, you can just go to a really good soba place. But here in L.A., there's nowhere to go. You get so desperate, you have to make it yourself." ("Soba: More Than Just Noodles, It's a Cultural Heritage...and an Art Form," NPR's "Morning Edition," Jan. 21, 2014).

JAPANESE ATTITUDES TOWARD IMMIGRATION AND IMMIGRANTS

Like many other advanced countries, Japan is facing a rapidly aging population combined with a dwindling birthrate. Demographers suggest that by the year 2050, Japan will be home to more than one million 100-year-olds and a population of 30% fewer people. "By century's end, the United Nations estimates, the present population of 120 million will be cut in half." (Howard W. French, *New York Times*, July 24, 2003)

Economists and population experts say the only answer to Japan's rapid population decline is a large-scale immigration policy sustained over many decades. Without a surge in younger workers, Japan may face a long-term continuation of its sagging economy, as well as a possible collapse of the country's pension system as the tax base shrinks and the elderly population explodes. According to a recent United Nations report, Japan would need more than 33 million new immigrants from 1995 to 2050 to stave off an economic disaster. (UN Population Division, *Replacement Migration*, 2001)

However, Japan has strict immigration rules, making it difficult to get a work visa or to settle permanently. Surveys show that as much as one-third of the population does not want more foreigners in the country, even as tourists. The news media in Japan carry sensational reports giving the perception of an exploding crime rate caused by foreigners. Right-wing politicians make xenophobic comments about visitors who are Chinese, Korean and Black. Some businesses have signs saying "No Chinese" or "Japanese Only." ("Voice of America," Dec. 12, 2008)

Under the second administration of Shinzo Abe (2012-2020), Japan shifted immigration practices to accept more low- and semi-skilled foreign workers, as well as measures to recruit more skilled workers. However, the immigration rates are still well below what is needed. Professor Hiroshi Komai, a population expert at Tsukuba University, says "the country can probably absorb no more than 200,000 newcomers over the next decade — a far cry from what the experts claim is needed." Furthermore, he concludes that this shortfall is due to nativism and social limitations, including those of Japan's workplace culture and educational systems. (*New York Times*, July 24, 2003)

"Superficially, Japanese people are very friendly to foreigners, especially in the context

of hospitality or ‘omotenashi.’ On the other hand, many policies of the Japanese government are unfair or even hostile toward foreigners and immigrants.” (“Is Japan a Racist Country?,” japan-startshere.com, May 9, 2020) In fact, Japan is considered to be one of the most insular societies in the world, and Japanese politics and policy have demonstrated a long history of xenophobia, misogyny, and racism.

“Despite domestic constitutional provisions and international treaty promises, Japan has no law against racial discrimination. Consequently, businesses around Japan display “Japanese Only” signs, denying entry to all ‘foreigners’ on sight. Employers and landlords routinely refuse jobs and apartments to foreign applicants. Japanese police racially profile ‘foreign-looking’ bystanders for invasive questioning on the street. Legislators, administrators, and pundits portray foreigners as a national security threat and call for their segregation and expulsion. Nevertheless, Japan’s government and media claim there is no discrimination by race in Japan, therefore no laws are necessary.” (Debito Arudou, “Embedded Racism,” November 2015)

These long-held discriminatory beliefs and practices have a detrimental impact on Japan. Low- and semi-skilled workers are treated badly and often deported for little or no reason, and highly skilled foreign talent do not even want to move to Japan. According to the Institute for Management Development, Japan is the Asian country least appealing for foreign talent and ranks 31st worldwide. (IMD World Competitiveness Ranking 2021, June 17, 2021) Given the fact that Japan is a clean, safe, modern country with distinctive foods, it must be embarrassing to be beaten out as a work destination by countries plagued with pollution, over-crowding, authoritarian dictatorships, and terrible culinary options.

FACTS ABOUT KEI CHIKAURA AND HIS FILM COMPLICITY

The title of this film implies that a crime has been committed, and while that may be true, the conspiracy is well-intentioned, heartfelt, and inspirational. The film is the directorial debut of Kei Chikaura. *Complicity* is a quiet, thoughtful look at the hardships and human toll of illegal immigration. Unlike other films that explore this topic by focusing on the unseemly side of survival, e.g. drug-dealing, violence, crime, and corruption, *Complicity* examines the relationship between an elderly Japanese soba chef and his young Chinese apprentice with welcome restraint and true-to-life complexity.

The film premiered at the 2018 Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), where it was nominated for the Discovery Award given to first-time filmmakers. Although it did not win the award, the successful premiere resulted in invitations to several international film festivals in Busan, Berlin, and Tokyo Filmex, where it won the Audience Award. In the United States, the film was screened at The New York Asian Film Festival on June 29, 2019 and virtually at the Japan Society in New York City on Feb. 5, 2021.

The film opened for theatrical release in Japan on Jan. 17, 2020, but COVID restrictions negated international sales, and the film was not released for theatrical screenings anywhere in the world. Film Movement (FM) bought the U.S. screening rights, and the film has been available only on DVD and streaming to FM members.

Kei Chikaura was born in Japan in 1977 and was raised in Germany during his childhood years. He moved back to Japan to attend school at Osaka University. Before he got into filmmaking, Kei majored in economics at the University of Osaka, while also studying film history. Having no experience in the actual process of making a film, he learned the filmmaking trade while working for various production companies.

In 2006, Chikaura founded a media production company based in Tokyo. In 2012, he started his career as a filmmaker directing short films. His first narrative short film, *Empty House* (2013), was invited to 10 international film festivals in different countries. His second film, *The Lasting Persimmon* (2015), was equally successful, earning several best short film nominations at major festivals throughout the world, including Best Short Film (Bronze Award) at WorldFest Houston.

When asked the following question at the Berlin International Film Festival, Chikaura responded in a thoughtful and deliberate manner: “*Complicity* is being shown in the Culinary Cinema category. How important is the food in your film?”

*“The first time I heard *Complicity* was selected to compete in the Culinary Cinema category, I did not feel that my film was so centered on food. It was not just about the food. But when I saw it again, with an audience, I saw the key role of the food in the film. So, I opened my own director’s notebook and went through the notes where I described how I intended to use food as the catalyst for relationships between the characters. For example, when the protagonist first enters the soba restaurant, the restaurant master welcomed him with sukiyaki, which has its special place in Japanese tradition and is usually reserved for very important guests and special days. In that way, I wanted to show how much the soba master is different from the ‘regular’ Japanese people who do not like the Chinese. So, yes, the food plays a really important role in the film.”*

Many of the plot turns in this film may seem predictable, but the ending is not a foregone conclusion. Unlike Americans who prefer to have happy endings with all the loose ends tied up in a pretty bow, *Complicity* is a film grounded in situational realities. The process of making soba is a metaphor for how lives should be lived, and the relationship between teacher and student is definitely not a crime. I hope you all appreciate Kei Chikaura’s *Complicity*.