

Ode To Happy Life:  
“Happy Cleaners” (2019)

*“This is what the LORD Almighty said: ‘Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other. ’” - Zechariah 7:9-10*

I am not a film critic or a writer. But my personal experience, being a 1.5 generation son of Korean immigrant parents who own a dry cleaner, might be considered as a valuable insight into the movie, “Happy Cleaners” (2019), directed by Peter Lee and Julian Kim.

As I have watched the movie, I immediately connected to Korean-American generational conflict. Even though every family has its own difficulties and pains, there is something about sharing a similar experience as a Korean-American. I was moved by the portrayal of the Choi family in the movie in their own unique story of conflict, agony, and oppression weaved in a complex web of difficult life choices and relationships.

The movie is trying to portray a very valuable idea of family, an immigrant family, whose parents are sacrificing their life to build a better future for their children in spite of language barriers, socio-economical disadvantages, and racism. But the price of that sacrifice comes at the expense of their children of witnessing their parents’ experience of being ignored, exploited, discriminated against, and even violated. Is this worth it for an unstable, unpredictable, and unguaranteed future? Is it worth fighting for being an American?

This is the dilemma and deep anguish of immigrants’ life finding identity, purpose, and will to lay roots in the foreign land. The movie answered this question delicately with Korean food, the source of the Korean spirit of *Jeong*, that is affection, not losing one’s identity and purpose even though they “become” Americans.

My family immigrated to San Francisco in 1994. There is a joke about immigrants that you would probably end up choosing the occupation of the person who picks you up at the airport. This was not a joke for my parents. Since my father’s siblings who settled here first were working in the dry-cleaning business, they introduced my parents to the cleaning business. From the next day of our arrival in the state, my father never stopped working. Now, even though my parents own their own dry-cleaning business, they could not take any break from work, putting in 12 hours every day, 6 days a week.

I started helping them at the cleaner when I became a college student. I was able to speak English better than my parents, so I had to take care of their business problems. Because of my parents’ inability to speak English fluently, many a time, they had to endure personal attacks of mockery, denigration, and ignorance. In those instances, they are blamed for the clothes damages that they didn’t make. But they compensated the complaining customers blindly because they were afraid of being marked as a bad cleaner in the neighborhood. Also, being an Asian-owned business, they often became a target for looting and robbery. Just last year alone, they were looted 3 times during the Black Lives Matter protests. Every time they fall, they pick up their pieces and build again, over and over.

As a son, looking at my parent’s hardship and struggles was not easy. This was very hard to bear when I was young because it felt like an obligation to take care of them. I wanted to evade my filial duty. All of their hard work at the cleaner, their emotional labors and hurt, seemed like a burdensome debt I had to pay back.

As I have reached middle age, looking at my parents whose retirement is long overdue, I see my parents' commitment as the love that doesn't demand anything in return or as burdensome responsibility I have to take on. Their lived example of diligence and commitment whips my motivation to live better.

I thought coming to the state was to have a "better" life: more money, more security, more comfort. Having nicer things and moving up the social stair was the reason for immigration. During the journey our family had taken on here in this foreign land, I finally realized that the goal for a better life is not having more or having a secure future. A happy life comes from valuing the dignity of life and caring for life as a conscientious, honest, and diligent person to do good, fight for what is right and just. This is what my parents have taught me through the years of hardship, and this is what I recognize in *Happy Cleaners*.

Joseph Kwon

---

Also, check out the link below for a proper movie review on Happy Cleaners.

<https://www.umnews.org/en/news/film-puts-korean-americans-center-stage>