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COMING HOME AGAIN
A FILM BY WAYNE WANG

# SYNOPSIS

Based on a personal essay by Chang-rae Lee that was published in *The New Yorker,* Coming Home Again is an intimate family drama about a mother, a son, and the burden of family expectations.

Chang-rae, a first generation Korean-American, has returned to his family home in San Francisco to care for his ailing mother.  Wanting nothing more than to fulfill his role as the supportive son, Chang-rae must come to terms with his own conflicted emotions towards his mother.

The film takes place over the course of one full day. During this day, he attempts to prepare a traditional Korean New Year's Eve dinner. The one she always cooked for the family. The care and precision that goes into preparing this meal gives him time to reflect on the intense relationship between them. Memories about their relationship become a doorway into a woman who was so much more than the mother he thought he knew.  Chang-rae is now faced with the dilemma of living with the permanent scars of family sacrifice unresolved, or the risk of opening new wounds with his mother dying.

# DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Last year marked the 25th anniversary of "The Joy Luck Club", and from my perspective, the portrayal of Chinese-American characters over those 25 years has not changed for the better as much as many people today might wish they had. In fact, until very recently, the portrayal of Chinese-American characters on screen has become more stereotypical than ever.  This made me decide to focus on doing something authentic with flesh and blood Asian-American characters who have real histories and real problems. I was determined to make "Coming Home Again", and make it as authentic as possible.

"Coming Home Again" is about a middle-class Korean-American family. Many people around the world think all Asians are the same. They cannot tell the difference between the Chinese, Japanese, or Koreans, let alone born-and-raised-in Korea-Koreans versus born-and-raised-in-America-Koreans who are equally American and at the same time equally Korean as the Korea-born Koreans. Before I shot the film, I spent some time understanding the subtle differentiating characteristics between the Chinese and Korean cultures, and also between the Korean and Korean-American cultures. Justin Chon, my lead actor, was particularly helpful in these regards. Even our food consultant, Corey Lee gave us details on how to make the kitchen more Korean and less Chinese.

I started with Korean-American author Chang-rae Lee's short story published in *The New Yorker* in 1995 about his personal experience of taking care of his mother when she was dying from stomach cancer. I could personally identify with what Chang-rae wrote because of watching my own mother struggle with Parkinson's and dementia in the last years of her life; a lot of the mise-en-scene resonated with my own experience coping with my mother's illnesses during her sunset years. I also had a similar love hate relationship with her. She was my mother. She was very good to me but she was also a demanding and manipulative person.

Filmmaking-wise, I wanted to take this opportunity to pay homage to Ozu, Akerman, and Haneke. The visual structure of the apartment, the technical procedures of taking care of a sick patient, the unspoken emotional conflicts within the family, the obsessive relationship between a mother and son were all similar elements these great directors often worked with. Additionally, I was inspired to use the simplicity of the narrative, the emptiness of the frame, the authentic medical procedures, and the restraining of emotions of the characters to create my own kind of language for this film.

The act of cooking was also a key element. Korean children, like most Asians, were often raised in the kitchen. In this film, the main character used cooking as a way to remember and honor his mother. The son wanted to cook dinner for his mother in the same way she had cooked for him all his life. Ultimately, the irony of making a special New Year's Eve dinner for his mother when she could not swallow any part of the meal became a way for me to push through any predetermined expectations on the part of the audience into a realm of raw emotionality, something that would not be easy to explain or resolve.

The mother has always been there, like the bone that the flesh is attached to. Then there is a sudden absence, and she's just gone.

*- Wayne Wang, 2019*

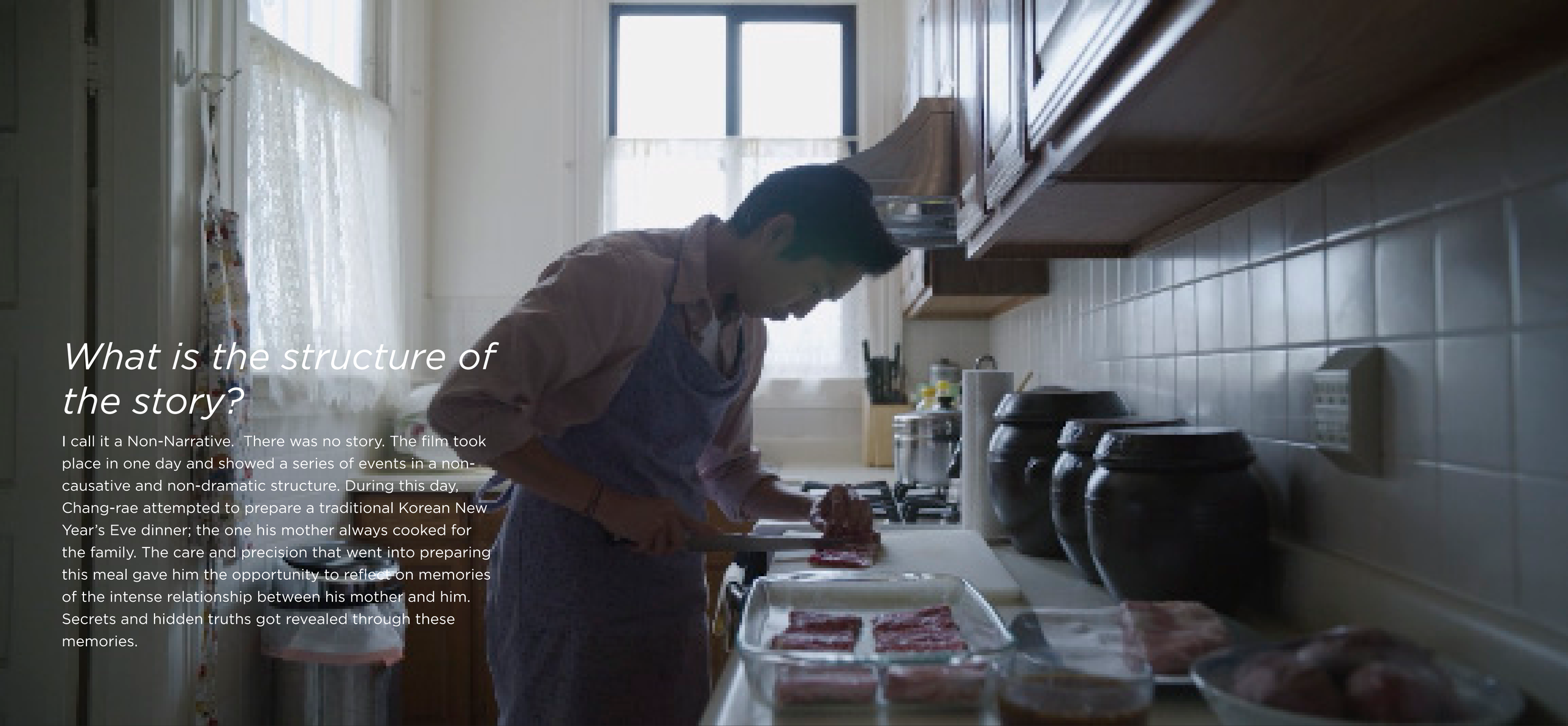
# A BRIEF CONVERSATION WITH WAYNE WANG

## *How did you find the home you shot in?*

Our producer's maternal grandmother, Edna Owyeong, had lived at this address since the 50's. Since her passing in 2017, the home had been left exactly the way she had lived there, and it was this authentic ambience that provided the irreplaceable setting for the home in the film. The set dressing team only had to update some items and change some of the Chinese furniture and artifacts to Korean. Many of the other details in the home: paint cracks in the walls, drawings made by the great-grandchildren, the ancestors' altar, and some of the cook wares were used on the set the way she left them. The location became a spiritual tribute to Edna.

# *What did you want to express with the film?*

“Mono no aware”, a Japanese phrase commonly used to cultivate an increased awareness of the individual in relation to the surrounding environment, with the ultimate goal of developing a sensitivity to the impermanence of things; that the sadness of this transience as being the reality of life. That problems in life are unresolved and we have to go on with a certain melancholic acceptance. I wanted to express this concept through our main character when he is confronted with the death of his mother. Cherry trees are highly valued in Japan because of their transience. The cherry blossoms fall off after a week or so after their first budding. It is the evanescence of this beauty that makes us appreciate them more.



## *What is the structure of the story?*

I call it a Non-Narrative.  There was no story. The film took place in one day and showed a series of events in a non-causative and non-dramatic structure. During this day, Chang-rae attempted to prepare a traditional Korean New Year's Eve dinner; the one his mother always cooked for the family. The care and precision that went into preparing this meal gave him the opportunity to reflect on memories of the intense relationship between his mother and him. Secrets and hidden truths got revealed through these memories.

# *How was this film shot?*

The film used a classic film language yet specifically emphasized 3 different modes of “looking”:

“looking of objectivity”...present time dialogue scenes were all shot with unedited static wide shots

“looking into memories” ...flashbacks were shot
in hand-held moving closeups

”looking into empty spaces and objects”...This film used this “looking” to express emotions of the moment, and never through the characters’ facial expressions. The Japanese director, Yasujiro Ozu, often used these shots, and he called them “the tears of things”.

## *Can you describe the son's emotional journey?*

Through most of the film, the main character tried to dissolve his personal self, held back overt emotions to make himself open to encounter the complexity of life and death. It was not until the end of the film, during the New Year's Eve dinner that Chang-rae finally broke through this restraint and broke into a powerful instinctive anger that defied all logic. Only through this anger, Chang-rae was able to "accept change and appreciate the moment" because he realized that nothing will ever stay the same. And as his mother passes on, something different will come into his life.

## *Can you talk about the role of food in the film?*

Food is an important currency of communication throughout the film. The dinner that Chang-rae cooked for his mother had to be authentic and very precise. It was designed by Corey Lee of San Francisco's famed Michelin three-star restaurant Benu. The dinner was not presented as a fancy restaurant meal, but as an authentic home-style one. During rehearsals, Corey taught both Justin Chon and Jackie Chung the proper traditional cooking techniques so that they themselves could make the dinner on camera.

## *Can you share one thing you have learned over the past four decades of filmmaking?*

I made a series of Hollywood features back in the late 90s and early 2000 such as “The Joy Luck Club,” “Maid in Manhattan,” “Last Holiday” etc. I was constantly stressed out because the studio executives were insistently demanding that I cut out every shot or every frame of the film that they deemed unnecessary and slowed down the pacing. Meanwhile my physician warned me that my health was turning for the worse because I was not breathing properly. I quit making studio films and began to relearn how to breathe. With all my later independent films I also relearned how to let my films breathe. I wanted the audience to breathe properly watching my films; have the time to think for themselves without being rushed, and figure out their own meaning to the film.

# ABOUT THE CAST

## JUSTIN CHON

Justin Chon was born in Orange County, California where he learned to drag race Honda Civics. He most recently wrote and directed “Ms. Purple,” a film that premiered at the 2019 Sundance Film Festival in the US Dramatic Competition and will be released by Oscilloscope Laboratories in September. His previous film “Gook” won the NEXT Audience Award at the 2017 Sundance Film Festival and he was also the winner of the Kiehl’s Someone to Watch Award at the 2018 Film Independent Spirit Awards. He loves long walks on the beach and reading romance novels by candlelight.

## JACKIE CHUNG

Jackie Chung is an accomplished stage actor who has performed with Center Theatre Group, Actor’s Theatre of Louisville and Berkeley Repertory Theatre among others. She has appeared on “Grey’s Anatomy,” “Station 19,” “Deadbeat,” and in the feature film “Someone Else.” Jackie is a graduate of Stanford University.

# ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

## WAYNE WANG

Born and raised in Hong Kong, Wang moved to Los Altos, California in 1967. For two years he lived on a Quaker ranch, surrounded by the unique counterculture of America in the late 60s, and attended college nearby. He initially majored in Biological Sciences. Then after taking some inspirational art classes, he decided to study painting at the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland, an education he augmented by avidly watching the films of the French New Wave, German New Cinema, Asian Post-war Cinema at the Pacific Film Archive, specifically becoming an admirer of Asian directors such as Yasujiro Ozu, and Satyajit Ray. For graduate studies, he changed his major to Film.

After getting a Master of Fine Arts degree in Film, he returned to Hong Kong and got a job as one of the trainees to direct a popular TV series, “Below the Lion Rock”, for RTHK-TV (the Hong Kong equivalent of PBS). He soon found that he did not fit in the very formulated series and the government financed media bureaucracy. He returned to the U.S. where he got involved with teaching English to immigrants in San Francisco’s Chinatown.

In 1982, with grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the American Film Institute, Wang made the low budget and completely independent “Chan Is Missing”, in which two cabbies search through San Francisco’s Chinatown for the mysterious Chan, a friend who’s made off with their hard-earned dough. “Although the character of Chan is never seen through the film,” says Wang, “I wanted to show the many varied personalities and their perspectives of Chinatown. I wanted to represent this through the disappearance of a recent immigrant in Chinatown.” Wang also wanted to show another Chinatown not represented by

# ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS (continued)

Hollywood – the one behind the scenes with its temperamental chefs, stingy businessmen, mobsters and the people manipulating the internal politics that represented the divide between the two different Chinas--Taiwan and the People's Republic. "Unlike Hollywood filmmakers, I didn't use Chinatown as a signifier of mysterious Oriental superficiality," he says. "I took my characters and audience into its very real streets and people who lived and worked there." This and the next film he made, "Dim Sum: A Little Bit of Heart" (1985), a family comedy about a Chinese-American mother and daughter relationship, was nominated for Best Foreign Language Film by the British Academy Awards, and established Wang's reputation as a Chinese-American storyteller.

Given his upbringing in Hong Kong by traditional Chinese parents and schooled by Irish Jesuit teachers, Wang is often identified with films about the Chinese Diaspora, including the film adaptation of "Eat a Bowl of Tea" (1989), and "The Joy Luck Club" (1993), the iconic Chinese-American film that crossed over to a mainstream American audience.

However, Wang has also made such independent features as "Smoke" (1995) and "Blue in the Face" (1995), both starring Harvey Keitel and William Hurt; written by Paul Auster and set in Brooklyn. In 2002, Wang made the romantic comedy of a Puerto Rican hotel maid who falls in love with a Kennedy-like politician. "Maid in Manhattan" (2002) starring Ralph Fiennes and Jennifer Lopez and the movie became a surprise box office hit that year. Wang has also worked with Jeremy Irons in "Chinese Box" (1997), Susan Sarandon and Natalie Portman in "Anywhere But Here" (1999), and Queen Latifah in "Last Holiday" (2006).

At the 2007 Toronto International Film Festival, Wang returned to his Chinese roots and premiered a double feature about two women from two different periods of New China; one middle-aged who is from the late cultural revolution era and one barely 18 post revolution. Their respective stories in America were titled "A Thousand Years of Good Prayers" and "The Princess of Nebraska." Wang won the Golden Shell for Best Film at the 2007 San Sebastian Film Festival for "A Thousand Years of Good Prayers."

His feature film "Snow Flower and the Secret Fan," based on the bestselling novel by Lisa See, was released by Fox Searchlight in 2011, and his "Soul of a Banquet," a documentary about a 93 year old female chef who cooked a traditional Chinese banquet to celebrate Alice Waters' Chez Panisse 40th anniversary, was released in fall 2014 via streaming and online downloads.

In 2016/2017 he went to Japan and made a film loosely based on Javier Marias' short story "While the Women Are Sleeping" with Beat Takeshi.

## SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY:

While the Women Are Sleeping (2016-2017)
Soul of a Banquet (2014)
Snow Flower and the Secret Fan (2011)
A Thousand Years of Good Prayers (2007)
Princess of Nebraska (2007)
Last Holiday (2006)
Because of Winn-Dixie (2005)
Maid in Manhattan (2002)
The Center of the World (2001)
Anywhere But Here (1999)
Chinese Box (1997)
Blue in the Face (1995)
Smoke (1995)
The Joy Luck Club (1993)
Life Is Cheap... But Toilet Paper Is Expensive (1989)
Eat a Bowl of Tea (1989)
Dim Sum Take Out (1988)
Slam Dance (1987)
Dim Sum: A Little Bit of Heart (1985)
Chan Is Missing (1982)
A Man, a Woman, and a Killer (1975)

# ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS (continued)

## CHANG-RAE LEE (Writer)

Chang-rae Lee is the author of five novels: *Native Speaker* (1995); *A Gesture Life* (1999); *Aloft* (2004); *The Surrendered* (2010) which was a Finalist for the Pulitzer Prize; and *On Such a Full Sea* (2014) which was a Finalist for the NBCC and won the Heartland Fiction Prize. His novels have won numerous awards and citations, including the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award, the American Book Award, the Barnes & Noble Discover Award, ALA Notable Book of the Year Award, the Anisfield-Wolf Literary Award, the Gustavus Myers Outstanding Book Award, and the NAIBA Book Award for Fiction. He has also written stories and articles for *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *Time* (Asia), *Granta*, *Conde Nast Traveler*, *Food & Wine*, and many other publications. In the fall of 2016, acclaimed author Chang-rae Lee joined Stanford University as the Ward W. and Priscilla B. Woods Professor in the English Department and Creative Writing Program.

## DONALD YOUNG (Producer)

Donald Young is the Director of Programs for CAAM. For nearly 25 years, Donald has developed many documentaries for PBS and independent feature films. He has produced two features for Wayne Wang including "Coming Home Again" and "The Princess of Nebraska." Recent projects include "Off the Menu: Asian America" by Grace Lee, "Jake Shimabukuro: Life on Four Strings" by Tadashi Nakamura, and "Muslim Youth Voices" by Musa Syeed. Upcoming projects include the epic five-hour history series *Asian Americans*, a co-production with WETA, series produced by Renee Tajima-Peña; and *Family Pictures, USA* by Thomas Allen Harris.

## COREY LEE (Chef)

Corey Lee's career has spanned over 20 years of working at some of the most acclaimed restaurants in the world, including a tenure as head chef at The French Laundry where his work was recognized with a James Beard Award. He then opened Benu in August 2010. The restaurant has gone on to receive three Michelin stars, four stars from the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and the AAA Five Diamond Award. In 2015, he authored the Phaidon-published cookbook *Benu*, an archive documenting the restaurant's food, inspirations, and people who make it possible. In recognition of his work and influence, he also became a goodwill ambassador for his hometown of Seoul, Korea, an honor given to leaders in various fields.

## CAAM (Production Company)

CAAM (Center for Asian American Media) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to presenting stories that convey the richness and diversity of Asian American experiences to the broadest audience possible. CAAM does this by funding, producing, distributing, and exhibiting works in film, television, and digital media.

Since 1980, CAAM has exposed audiences to new voices and communities, advancing our collective understanding of the American experience through programs specifically designed to engage the Asian American community and the public at large. For more information on CAAM, please visit www.caamedia.org.

# CREDITS

## STARRING

Justin Chon
Jackie Chung
John Lie
Christina July Kim

## DIRECTED BY

Wayne Wang

## PRODUCED BY

Donald Young
Naja Pham Lockwood

## EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS

Justin Chon
Stephen Gong
Eunei Lee
Heidi Levitt
Jean Noh
Susan Weeks

## BASED ON AN ESSAY BY

Chang-rae Lee

## WRITERS

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Chang-rae Lee

## DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Richard Wong

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Ashley Pagán

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## CULINARY CONSULTANT

Corey Lee

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Chris Quilty

## FUNDED BY

National Endowment for the Arts

## EPK DESIGNED BY

Darlene Portades

## EPK IMAGES BY

Richard Wong

Elyse Wang