RESOURCES

TEACHING RESOURCES ESSAYS

Editor's Note: Authors of the following teaching resources essays review documentaries and supplemental teacher materials from the Global Environmental Justice Documentaries Project (https://gej.docuseek2.com/). The documentaries and teacher guides discussed in these essays are freely available via the collection's website through many university libraries. To learn more about the Global Environmental Justice Documentaries Project, which won the 2020 Franklin R. Buchanan Prize from AAS, please see an interview with the project's creators from our winter 2020 issue at https://tinyurl.com/93p4h6wu.

Final Straw

Food, Earth, Happiness

Produced and Directed By Suhee Kang and Patrick M. Lydon

A City as Nature production, 2015, Color

70 minutes, English/Japanese/Korean

To access the film at Global Environmental Justice Documentaries, visit https://tinyurl.com/45h3j62u.

For a teacher's guide for the film, visit https://tinyurl.com/58u8yj8e.

Reviewed by Franklin D. Rausch

Butterfly on a spring blossom. Source: Screen capture from *Final Straw* on the GEJ website at https://tinyurl.com/45h3j62u.

Final Straw: Food, Earth, Happiness (seventy minutes), directed by Suhee Kang and Patrick Lydon, is an exploration of the natural farming movement conducted primarily through interviews with practitioners based in Japan, Korea, and the United States. The late Larry Korn, translator of Masanobu Fukuoka's *The One-Straw Revolution* (first published in 1975), the germ of this manifestation of the movement, is featured throughout, his explanations of the principles of natural farming providing structure to the documentary.

The first section, titled "Modern Life" according to the teacher's guide for the documentary (found at https://tinyurl.com/58u8yj8e), begins with a black screen in which a Japanese voice, with the sound of children laughing and playing in the background, explains that humans are animals and that "so long as we are allowed to live in this universe and to live within the nature of this earth," it is important to set aside time in one's daily life to realize this. However, this voice is slowly drowned out by urban sounds, particularly that of commercials attempting to convince people to buy particular products. Two American-based practitioners of natural farming, Larry Korn and Kristn Leach, subsequently offer a critique of modern society, which is based on capitalism and consumerism that led to farming practices such as mechanization that damaged the environment. This economic critique is accompanied by a philosophical one that rejects the idea of a humanity separated from nature and that human beings are more important than other species.

In addition to this intellectual, macro-level critique of modern society, individual practitioners of natural farming are provided the opportunity to explain their dissatisfaction with it. For instance, Kenji Murakami explains how his job, particularly his working on the forty-sixth floor of an office building with no openable windows, became a heavy burden, leading him to eventually quit his job to undertake natural farming (a decision that ultimately took him five years to make). From a rather different background, Yoshikazu Kawaguchi describes how while he was growing up his family farmed without considering the environment, using chemicals and machines, which took a significant mental toll on him, leading to a deep sense of depression.

Having provided macro- and micro-views of the problems that natural farming is meant to address, *Final Straw* shifts to a more in-depth discussion of the ideas behind it. An important part of this is Korn's explanation of Fukuoka's ideas regarding "not doing," that is, ceasing to engage in practices commonly thought necessary for farming, such as using chemical fertilizers and plowing. Korn goes on to explain that the principles of natural farming are the same everywhere: do not plow, weeds and insects are not our enemies, there is no need for fertilizers, and the foods being grown should be chosen in accordance with the environment in which a natural farm is located. Underlying this is the idea that human beings should let nature take the lead and act in accordance with it, rather than attempting to control it. The ideas of natural farming are illustrated through specific examples. For instance, one Japanese farmer explains that fields that had been farmed mechanically and then abandoned led not to the end of life, but to its thriving in more diverse ways—lightning bugs and fish returning to the area. Likewise, Kenji Murakami, referred to above, emphasizes the importance of such biodiversity, as it will ensure that life can develop in a way to make it resilient to disaster.

This documentary is beautiful, thought-provoking, and, with proper preparation and guidance, can be used fruitfully in a wide variety of courses.

The final section, titled "In Practice and Life," further examines the benefits of natural farming from a personal perspective. One practitioner explains that engaging in natural farming allows for the feeding and clothing of one's family in a way that enriches the earth. At the same time, there is a sense of belonging to a community beyond the family through building relationships with other people in the movement. Here, one can most clearly see the connection between the ecological and social, as Lynch explains that as she has learned to be mindful of the fungus in the soil, she can better consider the situation of other human beings. At the same time, the practitioners recognize that not everyone can be a natural farmer, but urge that all people should take the opportunity to be in nature when they are able.

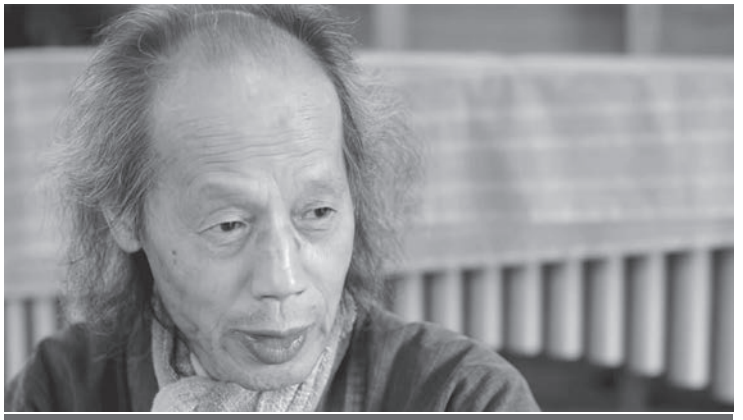
The documentary itself is beautiful. There are many scenes of nature, and true to the principles of natural farming, it is not always possible to determine what space is a "field" and what is "wild." There are some

wonderful images of insects and plants that are carefully located so as to support the overall message of the film. There are many interviews, which typically (though not always) lock in tightly on the face of the interviewee, who is usually out on a field or engaging in some sort of farm work. There are also some group scenes of people engaged in such activities as well. The sound quality is excellent, as are the English subtitles for those speaking in Korean or Japanese. Overall, one has the sense that the interviewees are speaking sincerely from their hearts, and the overall presentation is one that gives a sense of their dignity and worth. There is no narrator, though interviews with Korn in particular help provide structure. Music is utilized well to support the points being made, as are transitions, which are typically urban or rural scenes.

In every review it is necessary to offer a critique, and this reviewer will do so from the perspective of using this documentary within a college (or upper-level high school) class. This documentary makes its points subtly and intuitively. Unfortunately, this can make it difficult to follow at times. For instance, after Murakami describes the importance of biodiversity, there is a rather lengthy sped-up scene of Japanese and Korean food markets with lively music playing as the audience is treated to scenes of lots of different kinds of food (including not only farm products like vegetables, but highly processed chocolates). It is not clear what the purpose of this scene is. Generally, such urban scenes in this documentary are negative, but here, the message is not clear to the reviewer, as the crowds of people present more of a friendly bustle than anything oppressive. Instructors should therefore carefully watch this documentary before presenting it to the students and be ready to help guide them should they have trouble understanding the points being made.

Likewise, there are certain tensions within the ideas being presented. There is a sense, especially in the promotional material, that current agricultural practices are unsustainable and something urgent must be done to address environmental degradation. At the same time, the interviewees generally explain their interest in natural farming as arising from a desire to be closer to nature and live a simpler life. Similarly, there is criticism of market forces and an expressed desire for self-sufficiency, but farmers are pictured wearing rubber boots and using objects made of plastic, items that they cannot produce themselves and must depend on the market to obtain. There are also some historical issues that require deeper examination. For instance, one interviewee explains that people traditionally farmed focusing on subsistence and the community, but then there was a shift to industrial modes that created the issues we see today. This is problematic, as there were many intervening economic stages—even in ancient civilizations people specialized and engaged in trade, which provided them with access to high-quality goods they could not produce themselves. Likewise, if we take the history of Japan, for instance, the shift to industrial modes of production was to a great extent mandated by the threat presented by Western imperialism. Finally, it would have been helpful to include more practical information about how these natural farms "work" (some were family-run; others appeared to be communal). In particular, how can they function economically in a capitalist and consumer-oriented economy? One objection that could be raised is whether natural farming could sustain the large populations that exist today (it's my understanding that practitioners argue that it can, but it would be helpful if this would have been integrated into the documentary more strongly or included on the website). Likewise, I saw no animals being raised—is natural farming inherently vegetarian?

The point of raising these tensions is not meant as a critique of natural farming but rather as a way of helping instructors think about how to use this excellent documentary in their classrooms. In other words, rather than



"Once you kill the lives in the soil you create a world of death."

The above quote are the words of Yoshikazu Kawaguchi, a natural farmer, teacher, and author in Nara, Japan. Source: Screen capture from *Final Straw* on the GEJ website at https://tinyurl.com/45h3j62u.

"If we knew how to live peacefully with insects and weeds, both of us would be better for it."

The above quote are the words of Seong Hyun Choi, an author, natural farmer in Gangwon Province, South Korea. Source: Screen capture from *Final Straw* on the GEJ website at https://tinyurl.com/45h3j62u.

trying to hide these tensions or explain them away to a student audience, it would make for an interesting discussion to expose them and ask students how they can be resolved. For instance, how much can people be self-sufficient? How can natural farming be a part of a solution to contemporary problems brought by industrial capitalism while keeping its benefits? How can people organize in ways that allow them to pool and share resources effectively? How could a particular society in a specific time and place (such as Meiji Japan) have better navigated the problems that natural farming is meant to address? If used in a class on modern Asia, a discussion could be organized around the environmental and social benefits natural farming offers on the one hand, with how the use of industrial farming techniques, including mechanization and chemical fertilizer, has led to increased food production in places like China and India, where the great famines of the past seem to be over, accompanied by the rise of living standards of many, particularly among the most desperately poor. It would, of course, be important to familiarize students with the reality of famine, as well as the fact it has often been frequently connected to environment degradation. This can be difficult if students have never experienced hunger firsthand, though, of course, the increase in university food banks reveals that some students have. In any case, instructors seeking to go this route will need to be sure to design the discussion to keep it within the course's scope. Obviously, this need for structure to prevent going "off topic" is a testament to the ability of this excellent documentary to cover so many complex and provocative issues.

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Instructors teaching courses on the environment, agriculture, and food will naturally find this documentary useful. I would also add that it could be utilized profitably in classes on religion and philosophy. I was struck with just how Buddhist and Daoist a lot of the ideas were, particularly concepts of the essentially oneness of everything in the universe. In the documentary, Ryoseok Hong describes how he could better understand Buddhist ideas of "no form" and "no abiding" after practicing natural farming. Likewise, one interviewee describes how we must understand the nature within ourselves and then cultivate it. Though that interviewee was Japanese, I could not help but think of the Korean Buddhist monk Chinul's idea of sudden enlightenment and gradual cultivation. And when Seong Hyun Choi argues that the universe is really one big individual and that a heaven on earth could be restored through farming, I was struck by the similarity of those ideas with the teachings of Cheondogyo. Likewise, Korn brings up epistemological questions about how we "know" and the importance of intuition.

In conclusion, this documentary is beautiful, thought-provoking, and, with proper preparation and guidance, can be used fruitfully in a wide variety of courses. ■

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Teacher's Guide for *Final Straw: Food, Earth, and Happiness*

https://tinyurl.com/58u8yj8e

The film is accompanied by an eight-page teaching guide that offers a synopsis of the film, its subject areas, and clear summaries of its main sections. The teaching guide links to resources from various farming organizations and think tanks, as well as texts on food supply chains, and offers discussion questions for the documentary.