

# Life in Nature Documentaries: Narrating Counterurbanization and Masculinity in Post-Developmental South Korea

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**Abstract:** This article studies the narratives of counter-urbanization as presented in contemporary South Korean documentaries. In recent decades, there has been a surge of ethnographic media productions with a return-to-nature theme, highlighting urban-to-rural migration. What appears as a Thoreauesque pursuit of pastoral life in the woods reveals the traumatic aftereffects of the 1960s–80s rapid industrialization as well as the 1990s Asian Financial Crisis that resulted in layoffs, bankruptcies, homelessness, and migration. This article analyzes a selection of counter-urbanist documentaries through the dual lens of social class and masculinity, especially considering South Korea’s hypermasculine industrialization and neoliberal ethos of survivalist individualism. It also examines cross-generational perspectives on counter-urbanization to recover human agency.

**Keywords:** Natural person, Farming boys, Masculinity, Salaryman, Neoliberalism, IMF crisis

The opening scene of the TV documentary *I Am a Natural Person* [*Nanūn chayōnin ida*] is ritualistic. A drone camera flies over the layers of a mountain range and zooms into a lone cottage. Then, the camera switches its focus to a TV host (Yun T’aek or Yi Sūngyun) as he climbs up the mountain and finds a man going about his day. He is a person of nature—henceforth referred to as “natural person” (*chayōnin*)—that is, a modern-day hunter-gatherer living alone in the remote mountains. After introducing himself, the natural person guides the TV host around his cottage, garden, storage, and chicken shed. Then, the two hike up to the forest to harvest wild roots, herbs, and mushrooms to cook the day’s meal. Sometimes they swim or bathe in a nearby brook. The visitor stays for a couple of nights, shares the food, and follows the daily life of the natural per-

son. Over dinner, the latter opens up to the stranger and tells his life story. It reveals his childhood, occupation, marriage (or lack of), health issues, and reasons for becoming a naturalist. Oftentimes, the naturalist left the city because of illness, work stress, or financial hardship. Through the storytelling, he establishes a bond with the visitor and the audience. This simple routine repeats with some variations in hundreds of episodes aired on MBN’s TV channel since 2012. The show has garnered a steady fandom among viewers of the industrial generation (*sanōphwa sedae*), who find solace in the organic lifestyle of the natural person. The term “natural person” (*chayōnin*) has become a vogue word in popular culture.

In recent years, documentaries focusing on the theme of “return to nature” have proliferated in the South Korean media. This trend coincides with the production of a plethora of reality shows, documentaries, films, YouTube channels, and dramas that promote a back-to-the-land and nature-bound lifestyle.<sup>1</sup> On the surface, such shows reflect a growing yearning among urban dwellers to escape the city in pursuit of “breathing room” (*yōyu*) and personal “well-being” in a society burned out by rapid economic development and neoliberal transition (Tiland 2020, 317; Ma, An, and Pak 2018, 294–295). In this regard, the documentary *I Am a Natural Person*

<sup>1</sup> To name a few, they include the long-standing EBS documentary series *Han’guk kihaeng* [*Korea Travel*] (2009–present); TVN’s seasonal reality show series *Samsi saekki* [*Three Meals a Day*] (2014–21); various MBN reality shows and documentaries, especially *Nanūn chayōnin ida* [*I Am a Natural Person*] (2012–present); NBS documentary series *Nanūn nongbuda* [*I am a Farmer*] (2023); KBS evening rural news program 6 O’clock *My Hometown* and similar programs in other stations; TVN/Netflix drama *Hometown Cha-Cha-Cha* (2021); and CacaoTV/Netflix drama *Once Upon a Small Town* (2022); YouTube channels *Little Tane* and *P’yūng TV*.

presents itself as the liberation of urban-industrial men and their quest for a self-subsistent life.

However, underlying the idyllic representation are complex socio-economic contexts surrounding their rural migration. Many of them joined a nationwide phenomenon known as “crisis-led counterurbanization” after the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, colloquially referred to as the “IMF (International Monetary Fund) Crisis,” when urban residents migrated to rural or mountainous areas to rebuild their lives in the aftermath (Remoundou, Gkartzios, and Garrod 2016). Counterurbanization, by definition, refers to the movement of an urban population to rural areas for various reasons—retirement of the urban middleclass, rural development, rural repopulation, farming, agricultural activism, escapism, financial hardship, and so on. The phenomenon captured scholarly attention during the 1960s/1970s back-to-the-land movement in the United States, when the educated urban middleclass moved to rural areas in pursuit of “semi-subsistence agriculture and search for a simpler way of life” (Jacob 1996, 241–243).<sup>2</sup> If the American middle class’ counterurbanization was intellectually or ideologically motivated, South Korea’s crisis-led counterurbanization since the late 1990s was, in one way or another, reflective of the aftermath of the IMF-crisis (Ma and Park 2019, 9–10). South Koreans, in this case, did not retreat to the countryside as financially stable middle-class retirees, as is typically the case in Britain or the U.S. Instead, like what happened in Greece in 2009, IMF-enforced economic restructuring and layoffs pushed the economically vulnerable segment of society “down the urban hierarchy” and compelled them to make a living in rural areas (Remoundou, Gkartzios, and Garrod 2016, 1665). Unlike Greece, South Korea’s counterurbanization was a reverse course of the 1960s–80s urban-industrial migration of the rural population. This recent phenomenon of counterurbanization left an imprint on the South Korean media culture, which turned their stories into documentaries focusing on the free-spirited natural lifestyle of the herbivorous middle-aged men (Kim

2020, 39–40 and 69). Over time, such media productions have included the younger generation, the educated middle class, women, and celebrities—all pursuing the “natural” lifestyle.

This article analyzes the phenomenon of “life in nature” documentaries through the lens of South Korea’s economic history, masculinity, and inter-generational inequality. It begins by studying the narratives of the older generation naturists in *I Am a Natural Person* and *Screening Humanity* (2020), who went through the Asian Financial Crisis, and concludes with a discussion on the younger generation rural migrants in *Farming Boys* (2016). Rather than being a mere paean for the life in nature, these documentaries reveal the ways in which rapid economic development (1960s–80s), global financial crisis (1997–98), and neoliberalism (1990s–present) have shaped the lives of South Koreans across generations. This is particularly true for the older male counterurbanizers in *I Am a Natural Person*, whose life experience followed the dramatic trajectory of South Korea’s economic history. They migrated to the city en masse from rural areas during the 1960s–80s economic boom, but left the city for the rural or mountain areas after the 1990s economic bust. This pattern of migration reflects the destabilizing effects of South Korea’s developmental economy and urbanization.

According to cultural critics Heo Yoon and Ch’oe T’aesöp, gender (especially masculinity) is an important factor in framing the earlier migration and subsequent urban-rural divide. Popular culture tended to highlight the history of male migration by associating the urban space with men and the rural with women (Heo 2021, 330 and 347). The urban space was identified as the site in which men worked in factories and offices, whereas the rural space was associated with the image of a left-behind village where aging mothers waited for their sons. Such a representation disregarded the fact that many young women also migrated to urban areas looking for factory jobs. Moreover, South Korea’s industrialization was “the epitome of hyper-masculine state

<sup>2</sup> The movement was often inspired by Scott and Helen Nearing’s book *Living the Good Life* (1954).

development” that blended authoritarian military culture of the 1960s–1980s with patriarchal factory discipline (Ch’oe 2018, 116 and 125). At the height of the economic boom in the 1980s–1990s, South Korea also idealized the image of a corporate-employed salaryman family breadwinner as hegemonic masculinity. In this regard, the eventual return of the urban working(class) men to the “feminized” space of nature since the late 1990s is worth looking into, as it also entails the breakdown of traditional family—through divorce, separation, or widowhood—and masculinity.

By studying a selection of documentaries, this article shows how different groups of men across generations have returned to the natural-rural environment to overcome personal setbacks—poverty, homelessness, illness, and burnout—and refashion their lives in the neoliberal era of social alienation and economic polarization. This article argues that rather than just being a peaceful resting space for the retired or unemployed male herbivores, the natural-rural environment is a contested site of masculine reinvention for the older generation and a battleground of survival for the younger generation of men in South Korea.

### **Anomic Men in the Hypermasculine Developmental State**

Who are the naturists in *I Am a Natural Person* that constituted the first wave of post-1990s counterurbanization in South Korea? People become naturists for various reasons. Some move to the mountains or rural areas because they cannot afford to live in the city, have lost their businesses after going bankrupt, quit their jobs due to workplace bullying, retired in old age, are philosophically minded modern-day David Henry Thoreaus, or suffer from terminal illnesses. Regarding their occupation, the naturists in *I Am a Natural Person* come from all walks of life. They were factory workers, soldiers, miners, teachers, engineers, office workers, artists, cooks, and so on. Despite their occupational diversity, many of them are poor working-class men of retirement age. As a generation, they were born between the 1940s and

1960s in rural areas, moved to the city in the 1960s to 1980s and experienced rapid urbanization, lived through the ascendance of South Korea’s developmental economy, and were hard hit by the 1990s financial crisis. Their natural lifestyle is often a form of economic survival and at times an ideologically driven choice.

This generation of naturists represents the condition of South Korea’s “compressed modernity,” in which economic development took place within a span of a single generation and faltered at its peak, leaving behind a “hysterical society” with a high suicide rate, among a host of social problems (Chang 2022, 22). Consequently, they experienced both developmental and post-developmental *anomie* as socially peripheral working-class men. They lived through the historical moment in which South Korea, alongside Japan, emerged as a “capitalistic developmental state” during the Cold War, with their industries boosted by U.S. financial aid and loans (Johnson 1999, 32–35). South Korea’s industrialization was carried out under the authoritarian rule of Park Chung-Hee, whose “modernization strategy” amalgamated Japanese militarism, Korean nationalism, and administrative democracy. Under the slogan of “rich country, strong army” (*puguk kangbyōng*) Park drove the export-led economy, focusing on both labor-intensive and heavy chemical industries under his “big push” policy (Moon and Jun 2011, 118–19). His authoritarian-style economic project was known for ruthlessly exploiting workers and suppressing labor rights. It culminated in the suicide of textile workers such as “Miss Kim” and Chun Tae-il, who protested the abysmal working conditions of the 1960s and 1970s (Koo 2001; Nam 2021, 113). Many South Korean naturists presented in shows such as *I Am a Natural Person*, indeed, are the working-class of this generation, who endured harsh labor conditions during the 1960s–1970s’ urbanization and industrialization.

South Korean working-class men occupied a contradictory position during state-led development. On the one hand, they were heralded as patriotic indus-

trial warriors, systematically mobilized in the dual mission of nation building and national defense—on the other, they were exploited as the powerless underclass (Ch’oe 2018, 119). According to Ch’oe T’aesöp, if President Syngman Rhee (1948–1960) used anti-communism and misogyny to uphold the ideal of “authoritarian masculinity,” Park Chung-Hee’s “hypermasculine state developmentalism” promoted the ideal of “economic development as the actualization of masculinity (*namsöngsöng üi kuhyön*)” (Ch’oe 2018, 114–115 and 125). If Park’s militarism defined masculinity by one’s ability to use violent force, his plans for economic development defined it through financial power centered on male-dominated corporations. He promoted the idea that the wealth of the state equaled the wealth of men and vice-versa. As Ch’oe points out, such ideals were misleading, because they were meant to be useful to the upper-class men—who profited from Park’s authoritarian rule—rather than the lower-class men, who remained subordinated to the hegemonic class of men (Ch’oe 2018, 119). It is important to note the existence of hierarchy and inequality among the men, especially along the lines of “hegemonic” and “subordinated” masculinities. According to R.W. Connell, hegemonic masculinity refers to “the configuration of gender practice” that works to ensure “the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (2020, 77). She points out that hegemonic masculinity is a mutable concept that is established through the “correspondence between cultural ideal and institutional power” (Connell 2020, 77). Furthermore, one also needs to note the existence of hierarchies among men. Marginalized groups—such as queers, ethnic minorities, and (sometimes) the working-class—may fall into the category of “subordinated masculinities,” though they may still be complicit in the perpetuation of hegemonic masculinity. In light of this theory, the working-class men during the Park Chung-Hee era can be regarded as “subordinated” or, more accurately, “peripheral” masculinity (Chöng 2017, 49–50). Park, nonetheless, managed to mobilize them for his political and economic agendas by trying to hegemonize their identities under the term “male breadwinner” (Ch’oe

2018, 127–130). The term became ubiquitous in popular culture, mass media, and advertisements, often evoking feelings of respect and gratitude by placing the male breadwinner on a pedestal. However, the middle-class notion of being a competent “male breadwinner” was a difficult or even burdensome ideal to live up to.

The working-class naturists in *I Am a Natural Person*, whose lives paralleled the ups and downs of South Korea’s developmental economy, observed the persistence of inequality and the sense of alienation that prevailed despite, or because of, the economic growth. As the sociologist Kyung-Sup Chang points out, contemporary South Korea struggles with a severe intergenerational inequality due to the “pervasive poverty” of the elderly, who spent their working life in the developmental economy, and of the youth, who grew up during or after the 1997 financial crisis (Chang 2022, 66 and 125). He argues that the peculiar condition of “the nation’s state-centered sociopolitical order and economic structure” gave rise to the “subaltern South Koreans who have been either alienated or subjugated” by the multilayered modernities of state capitalism, global neoliberalism, and the Cold War (Chang 2022, 75–76). The “subaltern South Koreans” tend to be resistant to the existing socio-economic conditions and have aired their grievances through public protests such as the Candlelight Revolution against the former President Park Geun-Hye, the daughter of Park Chung-Hee (Chang 2022, 77). What is remarkable about Chang’s study is his observation that South Korean films, dramas, and popular media have been far more effective in capturing “social realities and experiences” than the social scientists trained in Western universities who remained oblivious of the everyday woes of South Korea’s compressed modernity (2022, 4–5). In this regard, *I Am a Natural Person* is an influential cultural production that illustrates the lived experiences of the “subaltern” South Koreans in the post-developmental era, a subject that has long been neglected.

The life experience and perspectives of the naturists

in the show tend to reflect their disillusionment with the capitalist framing of their lives. They often talk about the feelings of burnout, stress, and discontentment in urban workplaces. One of the commonly mentioned turning points or traumas that triggered such reactions is the effects of neoliberal economic transformation that took place after the Asian Financial Crisis. It is, therefore, necessary to contextualize the traumatic moment in socio-economic terms. Not only did the crisis increase household debt, it also destabilized the labor market by laying off workers, increasing contingent employment, and intensifying competition. Recently, the South Korean film *Parasite* (2019) and the drama *Squid Game* (2021) captured the dystopian vision and loss of humanity in the midst of growing socioeconomic inequality. In contrast to these famous fictional works that depict South Korean capitalism as a life-and-death struggle, the naturist TV documentaries envision a radical departure from the competitive way of life. The naturists have tried to overcome the capitalistic dead-end by giving up materialistic desires and worldly success that constitute middle-class aspirations. Disillusioned with their former lives in urban-industrial settings, they turned to the natural environment as the place to “heal” themselves—their physical and emotional wounds—become self-sufficient, and recover individual agency. This is particularly the case with the older generation (i.e., the “baby boomer” generation, born in the 1950s–1960s) of naturists, who were the first group to leave the city and mainstream economy (Ma 2012, 3–4; Kim et al. 2023, 31–35).

Among them, the Korean War generation often faced the challenges associated with a lack of education and poverty. The naturist Yun Chi-sŏn, who lived in the mountains for over 24 years, was around nine or ten when the war broke out, and his family became wandering refugees. As they drifted from one place to another, Yun missed elementary school and remained illiterate. It was a problem when he took a job at a military supply factory in his 30s and 40s, as he could not do basic calculations or write words like “cabbage” or “radish.” He recalled, “I

felt dumb, so became self-conscious and quiet. I felt depressed, so I came to this mountain. I love it here. I feel comfortable ... I became a smart person (*saram i ttokttokhae chida*). I didn’t feel that way when I was in the city even though I made money, but here I am smart because I know various places in the mountain, the herbs, and the names of fish in the brook. Here, I am a commander (*taejang*). It is a heaven” (Ch’oe 2014, 1: 26).

Social discrimination pertaining to low education and poverty also affected the naturist Yi Tong-u, who was born in the 1950s and tried to end his life many times. When he was eight, his mother died, and his family fell apart. He explained, “I had a difficult childhood. I did not finish elementary school. I have been living alone independently since I was ten” (MBN 2014, 126–87). The enduring poverty and loneliness led him to multiple suicide attempts until he moved to the mountains. The current mountain where he lives is where he failed his last suicide attempt. Since then, he settled down in the area and makes his living picking wild mushrooms, herbs, and roots, becoming a dedicated self-caring naturist. These testimonies by Yun and Yi illustrate the ways in which the difficult socio-economic conditions of the (post-)Korean War (or early baby boomer) generation shaped their life experience and ultimately influenced their decision to become naturists later. They struggled due to poor economic background and felt socially marginalized due to the lack of education or a caring family in the war’s aftermath.

In addition to poverty, the experience of working in factories and construction sites during the 1970s and 1980s formed a shared class narrative in the industrial generation. Some naturists spoke of the exploitation of workers, physical abuse and insults, low wages, and work-related injuries. Im Man-sŏng’s story represents that experience (Ch’oe 2022). Born in the 1950s to a poor family in the mountains, he took on significant responsibility to support his family as the oldest child. As a teenager, he became a domestic servant to a wealthy household. He found the work unbearably hard and ran away to become a delivery

boy at a Chinese restaurant. Later, he landed a job at a lipstick factory, where he operated machines to cut nickel silver to make casings. In an accident, he lost his index finger to the machine and left the job after his company offered meager compensation. With the money, his father bought a small plot of farmland. After working as a farmer, he moved to another factory that produced farm equipment. To Im, retiring from these factory jobs and going into the mountains was liberation from his duties. Unlike working on the farm and in the factory, he enjoyed the freedom of being by himself and working for his own subsistence without having to support his family or being stressed out by workplace colleagues.



Screenshot of Im Man-sŏng with Yi Sŏngyun in *I Am a Natural Person* (2022)

Like Im, the naturist Sŏng Hwan-myŏng also worked in factories—first, in a pearl furniture factory and then in a textile factory—since he was 13 (Ch’oe 2020). He married early and had two children, but with his low-wage factory jobs, he could not afford even a small room for his family, so they drifted around the city looking for a place to live. Health problems also left him unable to work for a few years. Following his last job at a natural gas company, he left the city and moved to the mountains alone. Sŏng found emotional solace in the mountains, which became a final resting place for his life as a drifting urban laborer. Life in the mountains was more emotionally “comfortable” than living in the city, which left him restless. The naturist Kim Hyŏng-guk had a similar experience

as a teenage factory worker (Ch’oe 2018, Episode 298). Kim’s father was a miner, but passed away at a young age from lung disease, leaving his widowed mother to raise the children. Kim quit middle school as a teenager and took a factory job to support his family. He worked as a welder in an eyeglasses frame-making factory. Not only did he enjoy the job, but he also excelled at it, getting promoted to the managerial level. However, due to his physical disability and “short stature,” Kim often endured disrespectful treatment from others, which strained his relationship with people at work. He later opened his own frame-making factory and made decent revenue by selling the frames overseas. Then the Asian Financial Crisis hit and, like many small- to mid-size business owners, he went bankrupt and had to close his factory. He made a living as a day laborer on construction sites until his health failed. He eventually left the city, returned to his old hometown in the mountains, and has lived as a naturist ever since.

These personal narratives not only reveal the socioeconomic background of the naturists as the “subordinated” class of men, but also illustrate the underside of the hypermasculine developmental state that contradicts the premise of male empowerment and dominance. Rather than feeling empowered, the subordinated men were cornered on the social periphery. Their stories run against the triumphalist and redemptive characterizations of South Korea’s so-called “miracle” economy, which the sociologist Myungji Yang criticized as a debt-fueled economy operating on “unfair and defective” principles (Yang 2018, 8). Not only was the 1970s to 1980s model of a high-growth export-driven developmental state unsustainable, but it also polarized different social classes and genders. The source of the problem, Yang argued, was South Korea’s oversaturated real estate market, which became the primary means to ensure wealth and financial stability—that is, until 2022.<sup>3</sup> One could no longer become wealthy by working hard and saving money. Rather, one’s failure to secure a home in a timely manner would result in years or even decades of financial insecurity that

<sup>3</sup> In 2022, South Korea’s real estate market was hit hard by interest rate hike intended to curb inflation.

then might be passed on to the next generation. It not only contributed to the widening gap between different social classes, but also led to the eventual decline of the middle class and the debilitation of the working-class, whose job prospects have been reduced to “irregular” or contractual employment since the 1990s (Chun 2009; Doucette 2015). The upper class, conversely, could invest in multiple properties and reap high benefits with minimal effort. This process of social polarization resulted in transgenerational inequality, in which the upper class could pass on their wealth to the next generation, while the working poor could not (Piketty 2014, 31–32; U 2007). Not only were many of the naturists the product of this polarized socio-economic system, they were also often the reproducers of intergenerational inequality, especially after leaving their families.

Through their personal stories, the aforementioned working-class naturists showed what it was like to live in the shadows of the urban developmental state, where they experienced alienation, poverty, and inequality during their working life. Those who enjoyed temporary good fortune through self-owned businesses from the late 1980s to mid-1990s, and became the middle class—such as Kim Hyŏng-guk—faced a rude awakening in 1997. Within months, they witnessed the South Korean economy’s fall “from miracle to mirage.” According to Yang, South Korea’s celebratory rhetoric regarding the “dazzling economic success and achievements” not only overshadowed the problems associated with the rapid development, but also made its decline “more striking and dramatic,” even when compared to Japan (Yang 2018, 5). Indeed, to many naturists, the IMF crisis marked the point of no return, as small business owners and workers faced a free fall into job loss, poverty, and homelessness. After their businesses failed or they had been laid off, they left the city and headed to the countryside or the mountains to avoid being urban homeless. Oftentimes, as their testimonies reveal, they left their families behind to fend for themselves.

## The Asian Financial Crisis and Herbivorous Masculinity

The Asian Financial Crisis and neoliberal reforms of the 1990s played an important role in prompting the nationwide phenomenon of counterurbanization. In some cases, it entailed the breakdown of families, resulting in the downward transformation of male breadwinners into urban homeless or mountain-dwelling lone “herbivores” (Kim 2018, 69). According to Ma Sang-jin and Park Daeshik, historically, counterurbanization was usually initiated by government policies to ease economic hardship and population density (Ma and Park 2019, 7, 15–16).<sup>4</sup> The 1990s counterurbanization, however, was different in the sense that it was mainly a “voluntary”—rather than being guided by government policies—form of migration in response to the twin crisis resulting from economic neoliberalization: the changes brought forth by the World Trade Organization in 1995 and the IMF crisis in 1997 (Ma and Park 2019, 18–19). When South Korea “globalized” its agricultural sector in the 1990s by opening up the agricultural market to the global system, removing the policies that protected local farmers, and allowing imported farm products, ecologically conscious individuals and groups led the back-to-the-land movement in pursuit of an environmentally friendly, sustainable, and locally produced food system (Ma and Park 2019, 19; Abelmann 1996, 223). The grassroots movement occurred almost concurrently with an even greater wave of mass migration triggered by the IMF crisis. The post-IMF rural migrants, the focus of this article, are the group that typically appears in the show *I Am a Natural Person*. I would also note that a similar but smaller wave of counterurbanization surged again during the 2008 global financial crisis (Ma and Park 2019, 20). A story about this demographic appears in the latter part of this article through the narrative of the younger aspiring farmers in the *Farming Boys* (2017). In light of this historical background, it can be said that the seemingly pastoral phenomenon of the back-to-the-land

<sup>4</sup> It was particularly the case with the dispersal and relocation of Korean War refugees from urban to rural areas. One might also note that back-to-the-land movement in the US increased after the 1930s Great Depression.

movement was a product of tumultuous social and economic changes across generations. The post-IMF naturists who wanted to live uneventfully went through traumatically eventful lives since the 1990s. For the naturists who appeared in the show *I Am a Natural Person*, the IMF crisis is one of the most mentioned turning points in their lives. Their experience can be segmented into four phases: hard work in early life, unemployment in midlife, homelessness and/or breakdown of the family, and loss of health in later life. The story of Ch'oe Rim is a fitting example. Born to a poor family, Ch'oe ended up working as a cook for 30 years in the Middle East, where South Korean companies such as Hyundai operated massive construction sites. His job was to prepare food for 3,000 South Korean construction workers in Libya. As much as he believed that he worked for his family, the decades of long-distance separation led to an eventual disintegration of the family, as his wife left him and their children. Upon his return to Korea, he opened a sushi restaurant, but it folded during the Asian Financial Crisis. Ch'oe asks, "Do you know what it feels like to fall into a pit that you can never climb out of? Suddenly, I did not want to live, so I felt like jumping into the water or jumping off from great heights ... I thought something terrible [like suicide] could happen, so I came to the mountains" (MBN 2015, 354–90). There, he slowly recovered from the shock of the 1990s and the losses that came with it.

Another naturist Yi Sökjin was also the casualty of the IMF crisis. Like Ch'oe, Yi was born to a poor family in a rural village. He barely finished elementary and middle school. To help his family, he began working in a textile factory as a teenager. After working there for a decade, he opened his own jewelry shop with his savings and further expanded the business by adding an eyeglasses shop. He was successful to the point of exporting his products overseas. However, everything fell apart when the IMF crisis hit. In no time, he became heavily indebted—as his cash bonds and promissory note became worthless—and went bankrupt. To support his two teenage daughters and wife, he found a job in a

heavy machinery factory through a personal connection. As he lacked experience and knowledge, he struggled in the new job, drank regularly after work, and eventually fell sick. In a dialogue with the TV host, he recalled:

*Yi: I could not stop [working to support my children] then, so I forcibly endured it and my health deteriorated. Then, I learned that I had liver cirrhosis... Nine out of ten cases of liver cirrhosis turn into liver cancer, increasing the death rate... I thought, 'I may die like this.' So, I firmed up my mind to go to the mountains to cure my illness.*

*TV host: That must have been hard on your family, then.*

*Yi: I did not tell my family. I failed in my business and made them suffer. If I told them I was sick, I feared that they would worry too much, so I did not tell them at all.*

*TV host: You felt sorry, so you could not tell them.*

*Yi: ..... [slightly nodding] (Ch'oe 2018, Episode 297, 20:00–21:36).*

Yi fell silent for a moment, then, began to tell the story about his "miraculous recovery" in the mountains, where he solely focused on his personal well-being. In the remainder of the show, he shared his method of self-care. He lived on clean water, wild herbs and roots, bamboo shoots, and daily mountain climbing. He also cooked a deep-boiled pheasant stew with herbal broth and shared it with the TV host. It was what he cooks for his family when they come to visit him in the mountains. He always felt sorry for failing to offer them further financial support back in the city, so it is his way of making up for it. Curiously, the show does not present Yi as grieving over his failure to live up to the ideals of a Korean male breadwinner. Rather, he appears content with his post-breadwinner or post-masculinist lifestyle by focusing on his delights with the little joys of eating and living in nature.



As these narratives demonstrate, the post-IMF counterurbanization occurred within a broader context of life changes that affected the working poor: unemployment, family breakdown, and homelessness. The IMF crisis marked South Korea's shift from a developmental to a post-developmental state, in which "capital—rather than labor—became the main source of wealth" (Öm 2017, 166). The neoliberal devaluation of labor and downturn of the labor market resulted in mass layoffs and triggered the chain effect of homelessness, family breakdown, and suicide (Song 2009). While more women had lost their jobs, South Korean society (especially the media) focused on the downfall of the "male breadwinner"—casting them as the victims of the "male breadwinner" myth, while rendering women as passive dependents (Ch'oe 2018, 166–167, 175). According to Ch'oe T'aesöp, however, "The IMF crisis was the event that catastrophically revealed the inability of Korean men themselves [as a whole]—not just [a few] individual outliers. It called into the question of the very existence of men in Korean society" (Ch'oe 2018, 174). In a patriarchal society like Korea, theretofore cemented by centuries of neo-Confucian ideology, being born a man was enough to affirm one's self-worth, but the IMF crisis called that self-worth into question. It not only marked the irrelevance of the developmental era "male breadwinner" model, but eventually called for increased state support to make up for their lacking or absence.

The IMF crisis necessitated the introduction of state welfare to vulnerable populations—especially the youth, women, and the homeless—amid market liberalization and, thereby, gave rise to the oxymoronic concept of a "(neo)liberal welfare state" (Song 2009, 6, 10, 19). While the 1990s neoliberal policy that focused on "individualism, market liberalization, and contraction of the state" urged South Koreans to survive competitively in the market economy, the emerging welfare state also found it necessary to provide government aid to the vulnerable sectors of society (Chang 1999, 183). In a critical ethnographic study, Jesook Song examined the impact of the IMF

crisis on the homeless, under-employed youth, and women. In doing so, she problematized the ways in which the emerging neoliberal welfare state miscategorized them while attempting "the subjectification of individuals and the management of the population as a whole" (Song 2009, 22). To distinguish the "deserving" subjects—defined as "employable male breadwinners" who became homeless—from the "needy" subjects (mostly women), the state reinforced the idea of patriarchal family as normative family (Song 2009, 49–50). At the same time, women were regarded as invisible subjects, unless they were regarded as the culprit of family breakdown. According to Song, the discourse of "family breakdown" was amplified by the mass media and casually attributed to the IMF crisis, regardless of the endemic problems associated with South Korea's hetero-normal neo-Confucian family structure (Song 2009, 63).

In light of the social context, the show *I Am a Natural Person* breaks the myth of the traditional "male breadwinner," as many naturists have left or abandoned their families by the time they moved to the mountains. In their absences, their (ex-)wives often assumed the role of the "man in the family" by becoming the sole breadwinner while taking care of the children and possibly elderly parents as well. Not only did men's freedom in the natural environment entail a disintegration of the family, but also doubled women's work during the economic downturn. Despite *I Am a Natural Person's* redemptive tone regarding family abandonment, it illustrates the pattern of patriarchal emasculation in the post-IMF era. This was the case of the naturist and painter Kim Hyöng-t'ae, whose interior design business went bankrupt during the IMF crisis. Due to snowballing debt, he lost his house, where his family—his wife, two children, and mother—lived. He also lost his health as he battled depression and stomach cancer. He became suicidal and wondered, "Why is this only happening to me?" After recovering from the cancer, he thought, "Life is not supposed to be like this." He wanted to move to the mountains, while his wife

struggled to make ends meet as the family breadwinner. He recalled:

*After my bankruptcy, my wife had a hard time. Who will lend us money? ... We had to eat. So, my wife began to work while caring for the family. It must have been heartbreaking for her, but she never showed it. She would even console my mother, saying that she could feed us with her sole income. Due to my stomach cancer, I lost around 10 kg. So, my wife took a pity on my gaunt look and cooked invigorating meals such as abalone porridge and misutgaru (multigrain drink) everyday, putting in good stuff like honey. I felt sorry that I was broken when I should have been healthy and raising our children (Ch'oe 2018, Episode 295, 13:09–15:50).*

During this time, Kim's wife worked in a sewing factory during the day and stayed up late at night, cooking and caring for him and the family. Despite being unemployed, Kim pretended to go to work every morning, because he did not want his children to find out that he was jobless. Looking back, he said with regret, "It would have been better if I was able to support my children, then. Now that I have regained my health, I should live hard for my family and be mindful of my mother's health" (Ch'oe 2018, Episode 295, 15:28–15:48). Given that Kim has already moved out of his home to live in the mountains, there is little chance that he will live for anyone else but himself.

Through Kim's story, *I Am a Natural Person* offers a close-up narrative of the fall of the working and middle class following the developmental era and the fallout of the male breadwinner from the traditional family system in the post-developmental era. Contrary to the late 1990s media stereotype that blamed the family breakdown on "irresponsible motherhood and female caregivers," the narrators in *I Am a Natural Person* reveal that more women took up the responsibility as breadwinners, despite the challenges they faced in a patriarchal society (Song 2009, 63). Furthermore, according to Ōm Kiho, women "adapted to the neoliberal labor model more

quickly," often as contractual workers in emotionally demanding, but underpaid jobs (Ōm 2017, 166). Ōm also argues that their rise in the new labor system threatened the position of traditional male breadwinners and compelled the latter to reinvent their identities (2017, 170–171). While the increased number of working women in the post-IMF era was a remarkable shift in the labor demographics, one must note that "upwards of 70% of women workers engaged in some of the irregular employment" (Chun 2009, 535–536). This trend shows that while more women worked, they did so under less favorable conditions than men. In other words, they did not fully usurp or even threaten the labor structure that privileged men. It may be a reason why the naturalist Kim Hyōng-t'ae did not resent his wife for becoming the family breadwinner. While he felt sorry for her for having to work so much and embarrassed that he couldn't contribute, he was thankful that she took over his responsibility and gave him the freedom to live as a naturalist-painter dedicated to the life of self-care. Kim showed his feeling of gratitude by showing the MBN TV host his oil painting portrait of his wife.

What is interesting about *I Am a Natural Person* is that it does not always present the fallout of the male breadwinners from the family as a tragedy to be mourned. As the media critic Kim Hyōng'o points out, despite having a predominantly male cast of characters, the show signifies the "escape from the traditional masculinity, symbolized by authority, responsibility, strength, and physical power" by giving an empathetic portrayal of "a social loser, exhausted by the responsibility of being a family breadwinner" (Kim 2018, 68). There is an element of male redemption in the narrative of anti-heroism. Kim argues that *I Am a Natural Person* promotes the image of "herbivorous masculinity" (*ch'osikjök namsōngsōng*)—as most participants live on herbs, roots, and mushrooms—over that of carnivorous Bear Grylls' "Man vs. Wild" masculinity (Kim 2018, 69). At the same time, the show also appears to celebrate the resilience and self-sufficiency of working-class men outside the urban capitalist world who have managed to live contently like Henry Tho-

reau, despite unemployment, bankruptcy, and family breakdown. For instance, the IMF naturists rarely talk about receiving welfare money—therefore, avoiding “subjectification” to the neoliberal welfare state—or becoming the urban homeless sleeping in Seoul Station. Rather, they demonstrate how they have managed to live self-sufficiently in nature outside the constraints of capitalistic discipline and family obligation. This liberationist message of counterurbanization has made the show popular among middle-aged viewers in their 40s through 60s, who are anxious about the possibility of midlife layoffs (Kim 2018, 43).

In gender theory, herbivorous masculinity is regarded as “an oppositional form of masculinity” situated against hegemonic, especially salaryman, masculinity (Charlebois 2013, 89). In addition to lacking in ambition and sexual interest, male herbivores are distinguished from the hegemonic men for their disinterest in the role of family breadwinner. According to Justine Charlebois, there is a “strong connection between masculinity and paid labor,” as salaried men could claim the “*patriarchal dividend*”—combined with “material wealth, social prestige, and institutional authority”—while providing financial support to their families (Charlebois 2013, 92). The herbivorous men’s withdrawal from this leadership role, however, does not imply the end of hegemonic masculinity or patriarchy. Neither does it bring gender equality (Charlebois 2013, 90 & 95). In Japan and South Korea, herbivorous masculinity is associated with economic stagnation and “class stratification” (Charlebois 2013, 94; Chöng 2017, 48). The disempowerment of working-class men in neoliberal economies—such as post-growth Japan and post-IMF South Korea—gave birth to the category of the “herbivorous man,” who would rather “enjoy by himself” than live as a family breadwinner (Öm 2017, 171–172). For them, the concept of “equality refers to the ‘equality among men’” and, from this point of view, they have become the victims of inequality in a society dominated by a “few powerful men” (Öm 2017, 180; Ch’oe 2018, 84). That has been their experience from the decades of the hyper-

masculine developmental state to the neoliberal present, and their solution is to live for themselves and pursue the life of “private enjoyment” (Öm 2017, 173). However, the phenomenon of “herbivorous masculinity” as exhibited in *I Am a Natural Person* can be seen in a critical light. As the show’s female viewers might well notice and is mentioned above, some of the naturists have deserted their families to pursue their freedom in nature, while overburdening their spouses with the dual role of family breadwinner and carer. Despite the documentary’s value as a media ethnography of the alternative lifestyle of socio-economically marginalized men of the post-IMF era, its lighthearted portrayal of the naturists as lone herbivores selfishly dedicated to their own self-care shows the show’s limitation as a social criticism. It does not go far enough to reveal what happened to the naturists’ families outside the frame of the camera.

In addition, despite the documentary’s emphasis on the organicity of life in nature, it downplays the extent to which such a lifestyle was nested within neoliberal society. For one thing, the wilderness presented in *I Am a Natural Person* is far from being a pristine utopia. Living in the forests and mountains required invisible financial transactions in the form of taxable land and property ownership, or rental payment. In fact, nothing that the naturists harvested in the woods—wild berries, herbal roots, and wild mushrooms—was entirely free. They required the landlords’ permission, and, for that matter, the series often contained a little disclaimer that MBN broadcasting station received permission to pick wild mushrooms or roots from the owner. Regarding the landownership, not all naturists discussed in this essay disclosed the process by which they came to occupy the land they lived on. The former chef Ch’oe Rim, for instance, explained that he purchased the land where he built his container house with his “savings from 10 years of unskilled manual labor (*makil*)” (MBN 2015, 230). An equally common form of land acquisition was through family inheritance. In such case, the naturists would go back to the farms or forests their parents or grandparents

passed down to them and build their own houses (MBN 2015, 198–199 and 230). Other naturists would rent cheap, abandoned cabins in the mountains or work as a forest ranger in exchange for free accommodation (MBN 2014, 85 and 260). Other times, naturists got financial support from their families or relatives to acquire the land.

Furthermore, *I Am a Natural Person*'s celebration of a solitary yet fulfilling life in nature reflects or promotes the neoliberal principle of *kakcha tosaeng* (各自圖生)—translated as “finding one’s way to survive by oneself” or “every man for oneself.” The proverbial term *kakcha tosaeng* can be traced back to the Imjin War period (1592–1598), when the government of Chosŏn urged defenseless civilians to look for ways to survive on their own during the violent turmoil of the Japanese invasion (Yi 2016). The term reappeared in government records during periods of famine, when hungry civilians survived on “tree barks and grassroots” and families scattered for individual survival (Yi 2016). Ironically, the discourse of *kakcha tosaeng* resurfaced in contemporary South Korea after the IMF crisis and Sewol Ferry Tragedy of 2014. The term captured the widespread social phenomenon of “insecurity and uncertainty” in the neoliberal era, where one must survive on one’s own rather than seeking help from family, society, or state (Chŏn 2020, 7–8). The social economist Chŏn Yŏng-su characterizes *kakcha tosaeng* as an “existentialist keyword for survival” in South Korean society, which saw the “restructuring” of family in the low growth economy of the post-IMF era (Chŏn 2020, 8–12). In focusing on the breakdown of traditional family, Chŏn takes the show *I Am a Natural Person* as an example of *kakcha tosaeng* of middle-aged Koreans seeking freedom and happiness away from their family (Chŏn 2020, 181–182). Besides this point, I would also like to note that *I Am a Natural Person* promotes the neoliberal ethos of “every man for oneself” by emphasizing the naturists’ ability to live successfully without social welfare, even at the lowest point of their lives. The seemingly happy and free images of the post-IMF naturists reaffirm the neoliberal belief that you are

going to be okay even without state support. The show idealizes the individualized form of survival, regardless of the breakdown of one’s health, wealth, and family. Ironically, the popularity of the show affirms the triumph of the neoliberal way of life, glorifying the idea of every man for oneself reassuring the survival of the fittest.

Despite these shortcomings, *I Am a Natural Person* deserves credit for unraveling the working-class past and sentiment toward the challenges and disappointments of South Korea’s capitalistic modernity that shaped their work life, daily routine, social relations, and health. The rapid industrialization and urbanization also alienated them from the natural environment that was ravaged by decades-long economic development. During the authoritarian period of 1960s–1980s, they were told to believe in the superiority of “modernization”—as opposed to the “backwardness” of rural life—at the expense of the environment (Park 2016, 86–87). As urban workers who often came from rural areas, they succumbed to the new environment surrounded by concrete buildings, machine and automobile noises, and polluted air. By the 1990s, when the IMF crisis swept South Korea, the oft-lauded economic development turned out to be a “poisoned prosperity” that altered the landscape and contaminated the soil, water, and air, leading to the rise in chronic respiratory diseases and cancers associated with pollution (Eder 1996, 6, 22). The naturists were middle-aged when they faced the dual crisis of nationwide economic and environmental breakdown in the 1990s. Many also developed health issues along the way. Their belated attempt to reconnect with nature by going back to the land, focusing on their health and well-being, was their exit from urban-industrial life. By doing so, they tried to regain their agency and sense of self. What began as a self-searching venture of the “herbivorous men” in the aftermath of economic crisis, however, revealed its limitations. Their move into nature was, in a way, a selfish way of dodging their responsibility as a family breadwinner. It meant that their spouses would be the sole breadwinner and carry the dual burden of caring for the family and supporting them

financially. The men's pursuit of life in nature at times adversely affected those they left behind in the city.

### A Salaryman's Exit to Life in Nature

Facing the economic and environmental crises of post-1990s South Korea, the idea of returning to nature to recover human agency and build an alternative lifestyle became increasingly popular through mass media. Reflecting both the real-life experience and escapist fantasy, this trend has not faded away even as South Korea prepared itself for the era of the fourth industrial revolution, led by artificial intelligence and digital technology. More people shared their experiences of moving into the countryside or to the mountains to find themselves, recover their sanity, and make a living. From 2001 to 2021, the number of urban-to-rural migrants jumped from 880 to over half a million (Kim et al. 2023, 33). Historian Albert L. Park identifies this search for the “pastoral life” as a global phenomenon in the neoliberal age, in which “‘the rural’ has become a resource for reimagining new paths of fruitful social development” (Park 2016, 84). He situates this phenomenon within the context of the post-Cold War era, which marked the decline of the socialist left as a critical voice to counter the problems of capitalism. Questioning the view of the rural as a pristine space untouched by capitalism, Park highlights the social movements—especially “contemporary agricultural and food movements”—and local cooperatives in South Korea that try to “reclaim” the rural by pushing back the forces of neoliberal capitalism (Park 2016, 82–85, 97, 105).

Insofar as media representations are concerned, the degree of social and political consciousness concerning the “reclamation” of rural or return to natural life is varied. The show *I Am a Natural Person* depicts a highly individualized form of reconnecting with nature. The naturists tend to farm on a small scale without families or social communities and do not belong to agricultural cooperatives. They are lone herbivores who struggle against the capitalistic fram-

ing of modern life. By contrast, there are documentaries that depict individuals or groups, who choose to migrate to rural communities with a distinct sense of purpose and social consciousness. They include the documentary on the philosophical rural migrant Han Pyöng-sök, who appeared in a five-day KBS TV documentary series *In'gan kükchang* [*Screening Humanity*] in 2020. As a naturalist with a university education, he translated the 10-volume book *An-astasia* by the Russian author Vladimir Megre—a Siberian equivalent of David Thoreau's *Walden*—and ran a family farm based on his conviction about a self-subsistent mode of living. There are also documentary films about university-educated younger generation rural migrants. For example, a recent autoethnographic travel documentary, *Farming Boys* (2016), addresses the challenges 20-something South Korean back-to-the-landers face in becoming farmers in the neoliberal age as they tour the world for two years to survey various agricultural cooperatives or communes run by young farmers. It illustrates a generational and, to an extent, class contrast to *I Am a Natural Person*, whose portrayal of herbivorous masculinity signals the industrial generation men's quiet withdrawal from the neoliberal economy. The protagonists of *Screening Humanity* and *Farming Boys* are university-educated men who struggle with the expectation of having to make a living as a white-collared salaryman. Living in the hyper-competitive post-IMF South Korea, where hiring and firing happen easily, they question the view of a salaryman-breadwinner as a hegemonic man and try to move away from that ideal as much as possible. For them, going back to the land is a way of recovering their original masculinity.

As demonstrated in these examples, the degrees of social and political messages from contemporary documentaries regarding the “return to nature” vary, especially across generations and social groups. The documentaries show different approaches to building alternative lifestyles in the non-urban—and possibly less capitalistic—environment. If the older naturists are focused on their personal well-being, the young farmers seek to make a living in nature within a rural

community and, if necessary, fight the obstacles that appear in the process. In both cases, reconnecting with nature involves recovering their sense of agency and living a self-sufficient life in a free and open environment. For the participants of *I Am a Natural Person*, recovering their agency involves building their own houses, growing vegetables, harvesting wild mushrooms and ginseng roots, raising their livestock, cooking for themselves, brewing wine, fermenting condiments, and curing their own illnesses—even cancer and diabetes. This may also be the case for the socially conscious naturalists. But, as the remainder of this article will demonstrate, their aim is also to make their natural or rural life sustainable in the long term.

In this regard, the TV documentary about Han Pyöngsök in *Screening Humanity* (2022) marks a philosophical departure from the example of mountain-bound lone male herbivores. It tells the story of a middle-aged couple living a self-subsistent life on a farm near the DMZ area. Han first settled in Yönc’hön County around 2005. Before that, he worked in the Russian branch office of the Korea Trade Investment Promotion Agency for over a decade. Having been a salaryman with a university education—a source of pride for his family—Han once embodied the ideal of “hegemonic masculinity.” As it is the case with contemporary Japan, South Korea also associates “middle class salaryman,” rather than working-class laborer, with the image of “hegemonic masculinity” (Slater and Galbraith 2011; Connell 2020). Han no longer believes in or pursues this ideal. As time went by, he was unsure about the direction of his life and career. He also clashed with his ex-wife over her desire to make more money and give their children pricey private tutoring. Han recalled, “I felt like, ‘This is not it, maybe there is something better ...’ I aimlessly wandered through my life. Then, I encountered the book, *Anastasia*; that book helped me find a new focus in life” (Chöng 2020, 9:45). It was a turning point. After reading *Anastasia*, he quit his job, got divorced, and moved to his hometown in Yönc’hön to build a farm on his family-owned land, naming it “Han’s

Homestead.” He wanted to live like the protagonist of *Anastasia*—who lived naturally in the wilderness of Siberian Taiga—rather than being “hounded” by the pressure to pursue material prosperity (Megre 2007, 249). To Han, the hegemonic status of salaryman masculinity was not worth struggling for, as it subordinated him to the never-ending cycle of capitalistic production and consumption. Like many naturalists, he quit being a family breadwinner. Instead, he wanted to make his farm his life’s legacy to the next generation. In this way, he reinvented his identity from being a salaryman father to a farm-bound semi-patriarch with a goal of liberating his children from the urban life by giving them an option to live a sustainable life in nature.



Screenshot of Han Pyöng-sök and Im Insuk in *Screening Humanity* (2020)

The documentary *Screening Humanity* opens with a bird’s eye view of Han’s farm, showing a house and a square-shaped (200 m<sup>2</sup>) pond nestled in the middle of the deep forest. Han built the house himself with environmentally friendly materials and dug the pond. He planted chestnut trees and vegetables for seasonal harvests. As he picks up chestnuts, he notes, “Even if you don’t work every day, they somehow manage to produce something for you to eat at a precise time of the year” (Chöng 2020, 5:12). In addition, he raises honeybees, chickens, goats, and so on. To make cash, he grows perilla seeds and extracts oil from them in a wooden machine he devised and patented. He sells bottles of the perilla oil online with the help of his second wife, Im Insuk,

a Korean-American entrepreneur from Alaska. Much of what he did in Yōnch'ōn was inspired by the sustainable organic farming described in the 10-volume book *Anastasia*, which he translated into Korean daily after work. The book even made it possible for him to meet his current wife, who read his translation and traveled from Alaska to see him.

The book begins with the author Vladimir Megre's three-day meeting with the nature-bound woman Anastasia in freezing Siberia. She is described as a real person, not a fictional character, who grew up alone in the wild forest of Taiga after her mother left her there at the age of one. She believes that she is protected by wild animals and lives on the plants in Taiga. She teaches Megre how to survive in nature and reminds him that humans have "lost the ability to recognize the original purpose of plants" (Megre 2007, 96). She then shows him how to find medicinal herbs for self-cure, make vegetable gardens, raise honeybees, and so on. She reminds him that "if humans can communicate with plants, it will open up a great possibility" (Megre 2007, 86). Early in the story, the author Megre also meets an old man who tells him the story of mysterious Siberian cedar trees that produce medicinal oil that cures illness and strengthens immunity to the point of making some people invincible. In an anecdote, the old man attributes the superhuman vigor and virility of the (in)famous Russian visionary Grigori Rasputin to the Siberian cedar trees. He grew up among the trees, consumed the cedar oil, and was reputed to be indestructible. This anecdote allegorically convinces the reader of the masculine power of the herbivorous life. Despite having a female protagonist, the book *Anastasia* is written from a male perspective and contains anecdotes or passages that reaffirm the idea of male empowerment and rebirth in nature.

The mystical naturism described in *Anastasia* made the book popular in Russia and inspired a Korean salaryman to turn his life around to reconnect with nature and live like Anastasia. He quit the salaryman rat-race and tried to live self-sufficiently by following the ways of nature in his own garden. He

and his current wife's days are devoted to farming, gathering nuts, extracting oil, and maintaining the farm. Han grew up in the developmental era and quit his job a few years after the IMF crisis. His skepticism about the blind pursuit of money and material desires reflects the zeitgeist of his generation, who saw that the wealth of the nation does not necessarily make one happy (Mezaki 2013). In an argument with his ex-wife, who tried to stop him from becoming a poor farmer, Han retorted, "How much money do you need? What do you need it for?... Then, we might just die making money. We will be hounded by it until we die" (Megre 2007, 697). Rather than trying to extrapolate a deeper social criticism of the effects of rapid development and the IMF crisis, the documentary *Screening Humanity* frames his decision as a personal choice and highlights his philosophical conviction. It also focuses on the romantic side of their story—"the love fulfilled in the garden." However, as his wife Im points out, living a self-sufficient life involves hard work.

### **The Return of *Farming Boys***

Compared to the mid- and later-life naturists whose counterurbanization is seen as an individualized form of escapism, that of the millennial generation—known as the MZ's—is seen in a more constructive light. Indeed, the counterurbanization of the younger generation is presented as a solution to the problems associated with post-industrial societies like South Korea and Japan: youth unemployment or under-employment, rural decline, and the aging population. Their move back to the land is also regarded as an alternative life and career choice in the neoliberal age, especially for those who do not subscribe to the "hegemonic salaryman masculinity" ideal. Scholarly discussion on counterurbanization in contemporary Japan, often seen as a futuristic mirror image of South Korea, offers a persuasive explanation. In her ethnographic study, Susan Klien attributes the return-to-the-land movement of the young Japanese to the sense of "anomie in a post-growth society" (Klien 2020). Japan had a "miracle economy" during the Cold War that peaked in the 1980s—with soaring

real estate and stock prices—but has stagnated since the 1990s. The stagnation affected the younger generation of Japanese, also known as the “lost generation,” who remained “trapped in a bad economy” for an indefinite period of time (Yang 2018, 3). Living in a post-growth society, they feel alienated in a suffocatingly competitive and regimented capitalist work culture. As David H. Slater and Patrick Galbraith point out, there is also the neoliberal “‘restructuring’ of labor force” that replaced lifetime employment with numerous “irregular employment” jobs (2011). Some millennials have strayed away from the mainstream economy by not seeking regular employment but choosing to remain in the limbo state of “Not in Education, Employment, or Training,” despite society’s tendency to “pathologize” them (Pha 2014; Slater and Galbraith 2011). They live a frugal life with a bare minimum income from part-time work and do not aspire to go beyond the status quo. Some of the younger generation Japanese—as well as South Koreans—leave the city, looking for an alternative lifestyle. They prefer the freedom of being in charge of their own work and time (Klien 2020, 28). In rebuilding their lives in the rural environment, they try to enhance their quality of life and find a renewed sense of purpose (Klien 2020, 50).

The dilemma of youth un(der)-employment and the narrative of counterurbanization in contemporary Japan is strikingly similar to South Korea. Like Japan, South Korea too underwent the so-called “miracle economy,” whose aftermath trapped its younger generation in a state of “post-growth *anomie*.” This phenomenon is partly captured in the Japanese film *Little Forest: Summer and Autumn* (2014), which was remade in South Korea under the same title *Little Forest* (2018). In the Korean adaptation, a young female protagonist Hyewön returns to her country home after spending a few years in the city—where she unsuccessfully prepared to take a test to become a public servant—and quitting her part-time job in a convenience store. She grew up in a remote village with her widowed mother, who suddenly left her in the final year of high school with a letter announcing that, now that the daughter is ready for college, the

mother wants to pursue her own dream. The letter concludes, “I didn’t go back to Seoul after your dad passed away because I wanted to plant and have you set root here. When things are hard, remember the scent of the land, the wind, and sun here. Then I know you can dust yourself off and get up again” (Im 2019, 1:29:10). It may appear as though Hyewön’s mother is trying to persuade her to settle down in the rural village by setting her “root” there. However, the phrase “dust yourself off and get up again” suggests that the rural area should serve as a transitory place, where Hyewön could heal and recuperate from her personal setbacks, such as failing the public servant test. The underlying premise is that the rural area will play a supporting role in Hyewön’s success elsewhere.

Indeed, when things do not go as planned, Hyewön returns to her vacant country home and becomes a farmer. While reminiscing over her mother’s food and words of wisdom, she delights in cooking for herself from the ingredients she harvests and reconnects with her old friends and neighbors. Without a grand agenda, the film focuses on the daily food she cooks while realizing the joy of slow life in nature. By nourishing herself with the food from mother earth, Hyewön gradually recovers from the sense of defeat that she felt in the city. *Little Forest* is a romanticized representation of counterurbanization of the younger generation in Japan and South Korea. Unlike many real-life young back-to-the-landers, who could not afford to buy a house and farmland, Hyewön already has them waiting for her. Nonetheless, the film addresses the generational dilemma of growing up in post-developmental societies with the pressure to become something. The notable difference between the Japanese original and the Korean remake is the ending. While the Japanese protagonist Ichiko settles down, gets married, raises children, and carries on the tradition of her village, in the Korean remake, Hyewön remains ambivalent about making a permanent commitment to the rural life. The Korean *Little Forest* ends with Hyewön living in the present as a young farmer and does not show what happens afterwards. Taking cues from



her mother's words, "dust yourself off and get up again," it is possible that she may yet again try to go elsewhere to pursue her dreams, just as her mother did. It is likely that she has never fully given up the aspiration of urban success.

*Little Forest's* ambivalence towards the idea of living happily ever after in the rural world is also reflected in the South Korean documentary film *Farming Boys* (2016). Unlike the fictional narrative of *Little Forest*, the documentary offers a more realistic perspective of the younger generation toward the back-to-the-land career path. In *Farming Boys*, three young men in their mid-twenties—Kim Hasök (26), Yu Chihwang (27), and Kwön Tuhyön (26)—deliberate their decision to become farmers. They all received a university education, majoring in business administration, mechanical electronics, and horticulture science, respectively. However, they were unsure about joining the regular job market and living like a "photocopy" of other people's lives. As Yu would put it, "When I look at my friends, they live like copying machines and I hated that. So, we debated it every night: 'Do you want to try farming?' ...I think I need more confidence in the question, 'Can I really make a living from farming?'" (Byön, Jang, and Kang 2017, 1:50–2:06). Unlike Yu, Kwön was born into a farm household, but he did not like it and studied engineering in university. He changed his mind later: "After I was discharged from the military, I looked at my village. Then, I felt like wanted to make it into a rural village where I could live happily" (Byön, Jang, and Kang 2017, 2:25–2:40). While Kwön was more confident in becoming a farmer than Yu and Kim, they are all aware of the challenges of living as farmers in South Korea. They do not have start-up funding to buy land and resources for farming. They fear becoming heavily indebted, as it is not guaranteed that their hard work will pay off. In this regard, they are no different from the financially stressed peers of their generation. Like the NEET youth of Japan, Kim Hasök also admitted that "there was nothing in particular that [he] wanted to do" when he graduated from university (Byön, Jang, and Kang 2017,

1:35). He felt crippled by the fear of the competitive job market in the city. Rather than remaining in the NEET state, Kim joined Yu and Kwön in their pursuit of becoming farmers. But to commit their lives to farming, they need conviction. So, they go on a road trip together to travel around the world and meet young farmers to see if they can live successfully as farmers.

Their journey begins in Australia, where they find work through working holiday visas as cleaners and fruit pickers on regional farms. They plan to save enough money for their travel to farms worldwide. Then, they contact various agricultural cooperatives in Europe and Asia, where they can contribute their labor through "Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms" programs and learn about various farms. The documentary maintains a cheerful tone—with upbeat music, pastoral scenery, and the carefree optimism of the young men—but does not fail to address their skepticism about becoming farmers. As one character would say, "When I first say, 'I am going to do farming,' they say, 'Don't do it, it's hard. You can't make money or get married'" (Byön, Jang, and Kang 2017, 14:32). In an era when the hegemonic masculinity is defined by wealth and social position, typically as an office-bound corporate salaryman, becoming a farmer calls into question one's masculinity as a financially stable family man. Having witnessed the national-scale downfall of male breadwinners and the rumored suicides of rural bachelors since the 1990s, the farming boys are particularly unnerved by such prospects in their own generation. At the same time, they are not willing to embrace the life of a typical salaryman.

In one scene, they make jokes about South Korea's competitive job market as they feed a flock of seagulls at a seaside park in Australia. One says, "Let me show you what it's like to be 20-something in South Korea," and throws the food at the seagulls (Byön, Jang, and Kang 2017, 4:42). The seagulls crowd in to eat the crumbs, and he says, "It [the competition] is fierce. This is reality." Then, he throws more food, shouting, "Public servant! Big



Top: “It’s Fierce.”

Bottom: Film poster of *Farming Boys*

Screenshot of the seagull scene in *Farming Boys* (2017)

corporation!” and see the birds flocking aggressively. Then, when he says “Farming!” only a few seagulls move.

This scene shows the skepticism of young South Koreans concerning the reality of the job market and the suffocating competition in urban Korea. In this aspect, the film parallels Chang Kang-myōng’s novel *Because I Hate Korea*, which tells the story of a disillusioned South Korean millennial named Gye-na quitting her country—mockingly referred to as “Hell Chosŏn”—and moving to Australia. She explains, “Why did I leave Korea? In short, I hate it ... it’s because I can’t live here ... And why I can’t live here ... I really don’t have what it takes to compete in Korea” (Chang 2018, 5). Her narrative caricatured her generation’s view of South Korean society, and her solution to the irrational competitiveness is to flee to Australia, where the working-class is treated better with higher wages. In contrast to the fictional protagonist Gye-na, real-life millennials in *Farming Boys* have a different point of view. They already experienced that living in Australia on working holiday visas involves backbreaking work in farms and factories. Rather than fleeing Korea, they want to stay in rural Korea as farmers but need a firmer conviction.

One of the earliest destinations the farming boys visit is “Terra Bene Commune” in Italy. It is a cooperative farming community founded by young Italians (and other Europeans) who occupied public land in protest of failed government policies concerning youth employment. According to the occupant farmers, Italy has a roughly 50% unemployment or under-employment rate among the younger generation. Some commune members are artists or worked in urban theaters and found life in the city unaffordable. So, they occupied government-owned land in the countryside and began to live self-sufficiently, producing and consuming the harvests together. In a sense, their rural migration was crisis-led, though ineffective government policies triggered it. During their stay, the South Korean farming boys worked in a barren potato field that produced few potatoes—buried among the stone-filled soil—and lacked water. Indeed, the commune had no indoor plumbing system, electricity, or running water—sometimes no water at all. The commune members, however,

expressed their satisfaction with the self-sufficient and nature-bound lifestyle and celebrated occasional rainfalls. Working alongside the Italian commune members, the farming boys are often taken aback by the poor facilities in the commune but realize that they do not necessarily affect the level of satisfaction the commune members feel. As Kim Hasök would put it, “We may think they are having a really hard time, but they don’t see it that way. It’s like this, they finally have their home and space to farm. That looks great” (Byön, Jang, and Kang 2017, 27:30). The young farmers of the commune appreciate what they have now, especially compared to the times when they had nothing.

After Italy, the Korean farming boys visited a husband-and-wife-owned farm in the French Alps, a French winery run by a retired former professional, and a family-owned dairy farm in the Netherlands. The family farms in France appear to be in much better condition than the Italian commune, as young couples could get support from the government and local organizations in leasing a large portion of land and starting up their own farms. This type of support is precisely what young South Korean farmers need, especially if they have no land inherited from their family. As they work on various farms, the Korean farming boys discuss the agricultural conditions in South Korea—the aging population and limited landownership among young farmers—with their hosts as they share meals together. Their European counterparts acknowledge a similar problem in their own countries, but also mention that more younger farmers can borrow land from the government and local cooperative agencies and run profitable farms. Through these interactions, the farming boys realize the importance of government policies, which in South Korea have been directed towards supporting major urban corporations. They are amazed at how some of the European farmers looked happy and content, as they could build their own lives and raise families just through farming, while adopting more organic and eco-friendly farming methods.

Overall, making the documentary becomes a formative experience for the Korean farming boys, who reflect on their values and work ethic and assess whether they are suited for the laborious farm life. On one occasion, the moving experience of helping a lamb give birth convinces one protagonist to appreciate the profession more. The film concludes with the farming boys returning to Korea. Afterwards, Kwön becomes a strawberry farmer in Sanch’öng, whereas Kim goes to Seoul and works in an urban life cooperative. Yu founds a youth farming cooperative in rural Namhae to assist the settlement of young back-to-the-landers and writes a book detailing his travel as the “farming boys” (Wön 2021). Indeed, not everyone becomes a farmer in real life. In contrast to the cheerful tone of the protagonists and the idyllic scenes, *Farming Boys* is more cautious or anxious in its outlook than *Little Forest*, in which the young protagonist returns to the land and house she inherited from her mother. The farming boys’ main concern is the lack of land and resources to start their farms. Compared to the naturists in *I Am a Natural Person* and *Screening Humanity*, the *Farming Boys* holds a less romantic view of going back to the land. Due to the generational differences, the farming boys see the rural migration as the beginning of their career rather than the last phase of their lives. Like Han, who quit his white-collar job to pursue life in nature, they also resisted the idea of conforming to the hegemonic salaryman masculinity ideal; none of them became a salaryman upon returning to Korea. At the same time, they are painfully aware of the risks of becoming heavily indebted or living as lifetime bachelors in an aging rural community. Perhaps due to these concerns, the documentary muses less about the marvels of reconnecting with nature—as in *I Am a Natural Person* and *Screening Humanity*—and more so emphasizes the boys’ wish to live a self-sufficient life and recover their agency.

## Conclusion

South Korea’s fast development and urbanization leading to the 1990s left limited choices for those

who wanted to live more naturally. Ironically, the late 1990s Asian Financial Crisis and the implementation of the IMF-prompted neoliberal policies made it difficult for the economically disadvantaged population to sustain themselves in the competitive urban economy. The IMF crisis triggered not only urban homelessness, but also the phenomenon of counterurbanization in rural and mountainous areas. In light of this backdrop, this article studied the phenomenon of crisis-led counterurbanization through media ethnographies and documentary films that have become popular in recent decades. While such documentaries show pastoral images and tell heart-warming stories about humble life in Korea's rural and natural environments, they also tell the stories of the individuals whose lives have been affected by dramatic political and economic changes.

Beginning with the study of the documentary series *I Am a Natural Person*, this article looked at the phenomenon of naturism through the dual lens of class and masculinity, especially regarding the generation of South Koreans who lived through the country's hypermasculine industrialization. It examined the issues of working-class alienation, exhaustion, and powerlessness during the developmental era, which also severed them from the natural environment. The article discussed the dramatic life changes South Korean workers experienced during the IMF crisis, especially the fall of "male breadwinners" that propelled the back-to-the-land movement and gave rise to the phenomenon of the "masculinity" of the naturists. Despite being critical of the hypermasculine developmental past, the herbivorous male naturists fell short of initiating radical social change. Subsequently, the article looked at how other counterurbanizers—as shown in *Screening Humanity*—have forged an alternative lifestyle and "reclaimed the rural," guided by a social or philosophical conviction.

Conclusively, the article addressed the generational differences in counterurbanization. For the older generation, going back to the land signifies an opportunity for natural self-regeneration in the last phase of their lives. For the young aspiring farmers,

it is a major gamble for a sustainable work life in the post-IMF era of exhausted opportunities. The pressure to make a living solely through farming overrides the excitement of living a pastoral life. As the critical documentary *Farming Boys* reveals, social and financial challenges like aging, depopulation, and globalization are associated with rural migration, especially in the age of neoliberalism. Such challenges, however, have existed in rural Korea since the 1970s. Contrary to the expectation that the younger generation's return to the land would allow them to regain the paradise lost to industrialization, the long-term outcome of counterurbanization is still open-ended. Media ethnographies on this issue may only show a segment of the young migrants' experience, but their commitment to rural life is ultimately motivated by hope, a hope to shape their own lives.

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#### **Web links:**

*Farming Boys*: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=St\\_njRb-yS0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=St_njRb-yS0)

*I Am a Natural Person* (Im Man-sŏng): <https://www.mbn.co.kr/vod/programContents/preview/592/4117/1045842>

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