When Cinematic Time Folds into Embodied Time:  
Emergence of the Affective Landscape  
in *The Last Rice Farmers*  

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**Abstract**  
*The Last Rice Farmers*, a Taiwanese documentary film released in 2004, concerns the future direction of Taiwanese agriculture in the wake of Taiwan’s joining of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2002. The film has elicited negative responses from various critics, who have complained that the co-directors failed to find political solutions to the problems faced by agriculture in Taiwan. This essay argues that the film makes a singular statement on these problems with an “affective” take: the film appeals to the affective force of moving images to bring the personal experience of four farmers to its viewers. The essay will draw on Mark Hansen’s theory of embodied time consciousness to explore the relationship between cinematic and embodied time: when watching the film, the viewers are aware of clock time but can also respond to the images via their own embodied time consciousness. It will be argued that when cinematic time is enfolded within embodied time, the interstices between the images open up an “outside” and render possible what Hansen calls “affectivity.” In *The Last Rice Farmers*, affectivity as an interface between the movement of images and the viewer catalyzes an affective landscape which emerges from the embodied memories of the characters and their unique local culture.

**Keywords**  
*The Last Rice Farmers*, cinematic time, embodied time, affectivity, Taiwanese documentary

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If the people who work for the land are not attached to it . . . , they are as good as dead. . . . The land nurtures us. It’s the wellspring of life . . . because it’s our treasure, it’s the farmers’ treasure. Our existence depends on it. The jade green rice shoots look beautiful under the moonlight. When the mood hits me, I hum a melody. Just sing whatever comes to mind. Even though I fret that a typhoon may be coming or about natural disasters or pestilence, it’s “riceless joy” springing from my heart. . . . No rice, no worries.

—Kung-bin Huang

The Last Rice Farmers

The Last Rice Farmers raked over the earth covered by coldness, enabling the affections nurtured by the mother earth to breathe again.

—Yiwei Geng

“The Victory of Images”

(emphasis in original)

Wumile (The Last Rice Farmers), a Taiwanese documentary released in 2004, addresses the issue of the future direction of Taiwanese agriculture after Taiwan joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2002. Prompted by the question of why farmers insist on cultivating rice when the profits they can earn are very low, the co-directors, Lan-chuan Yen and Yi-tseng Juang, attempt to find the answer by following four old farmers and recording their everyday lives for fifteen months. While much of the film describes the process of cultivating rice, it aims to foreground the problem that the farmers in Taiwan have long been neglected by the government, in spite of the fact that their hard work has ensured their country a stable supply of rice for several decades.

The film weaves together the daily routines of the four farmers, the scenery of the rice fields in different seasons, and the local farming culture. The nostalgic, pastoral strokes of the film instantly endeared it to Taiwanese film audiences. However, the film’s lyrical tone has elicited negative responses from several critics,

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1 The first version of The Last Rice Farmers was entitled Let It Be in English, and it did not offer English subtitles. The two directors generously offered me a new version, which was by then renamed The Last Rice Farmers and had English subtitles. My translations may be slightly different from the film’s subtitles.

2 It was first broadcast by the Public Television Service, Taiwan (PTS) in 2004. The DVD was released in 2005.
who complained that the filmmakers did not try to find solutions to the problems faced by agriculture in Taiwan. Among them, Li-hsin Kuo attacks the film’s humanitarian approach which, according to him, “only draws on the viewers’ nostalgia for a romanticized image of aging rice farmers” while it sacrifices “the more complicated and urgent realities behind the characters.” It will be argued here that the film’s tone is affective rather than, as Kuo says, “sentimental” and “emotional.” Although the film does not provide a “rational and political” solution to agricultural problems in Taiwan, this does not mean that it deliberately ignores the “complicated and urgent realities” behind Taiwanese farmers’ hard work. Instead, the film enables its viewers to rethink the past, the present, and the future of agricultural development in Taiwan by showing them the farmers’ actual—or what I will call “embodied”—experiences, which are grounded in personal experiences. The detailed and faithful presentation of farmers’ lives in the film allows viewers to directly experience these lives, experience the farmers’ hard work. Through the farmers’ act of narrating their own stories combined with the scenes showing their strenuous efforts in the fields, the film evokes the viewers’ affections and sparks in them a concern for the local farming culture. It is, therefore, unfair to say that the film shifts attention away to unimportant aspects of agriculture such as the daily work of the farmers and ignores “serious and complicated agricultural problems.” The filmmakers do address the issue of structural injustice in the local agricultural system, and they do so by presenting the lived experiences of the farmers. “Serious, rational analysis and debate” cannot be separated from concrete experiences insofar as the latter serve as the material basis for the former.

As the directors of The Last Rice Farmers deploy an “embodied” approach to present the life and farming culture of Taiwanese farmers, this essay will take the same approach to unfold what is hidden in and between the film’s images. The directors of the film deliberately adopt the strategy of recording the details of the four farmers’ daily routines, weaving their everyday lives with their narrations of their stories. And the leisurely movement of images imitates the slow pace of farming life, which is in turn echoed by the fluidity of the pastoral score. Paradoxically, the slow pace of the film is determined by the speed of a cinematic technology which condenses the long farming process, from tilling the land to harvesting, into 110 minutes, freezing particular moments and releasing these images to the viewers in cinematic time. When watching the film, the viewers are aware of mechanical clock time but also respond to the moving images via their
own embodied time consciousness. When cinematic time is enfolded within embodied time, the interstices between the images open up some sort of outside and render possible what Mark Hansen terms affectivity. Following the stories and footsteps of the farmers, the viewer of the film experiences a series of spatial and temporal embodiments in/of the farmers’ daily routines. When the viewers are immersed in the images of the film, it is as if they were led into the images by the force of affectivity. This essay suggests that the experience of watching the film generates what we may call an affective landscape, which emerges when cinematic time is folded into the film audience’s embodied time consciousness.

Cinema, Embodied Time, and Affectivity

In recent years, the concerns with Taiwan’s agricultural sector have materialized in a wide variety of studies and representations, all seeking to address the impoverished status of local farmers. Yinning Wu, in her book *Jianghu zainali?* (*Where is Jianghu?*), traces agricultural developments in Taiwan since 1960. She attacks the government’s unreasonable agricultural policies through a powerful poetic narrative combined with academic research. Similarly, Lan-chuan Yen and Yi-tseng Juang use a documentary film to record the Taiwanese farmers’ arduous lives. Their choice of cinematic representation means that the directors have to work within certain limitations, that is, they must present the issue visually and acoustically within a certain time-frame. *The Last Rice Farmers* has the power to trigger the viewers’ affections or, to use Hansen’s term, affectivity, opening their “embodied time consciousness,” which is closely correlated with memory and aesthetics. In other words, the experience of watching the documentary activates our sense of temporality, our sense of the interrelationship of past, present, and future. This consciousness of trans-temporality is folded into the movement of the images themselves, creating a unique landscape where the embodied memories of the characters and the aesthetics of localism emerge.

Film-watching, after all, is more than a purely visual experience. Multiple modes of perception are brought into play by cinematic techniques, and among them is the correlation between the “embodied time consciousness” of the spectator and cinematic time in itself, which Hansen calls one of the essential perceptual experiences of film-watching. The moving images in a film prompt the perceiving subject to deploy “its sensorimotor power to create the unpredictable, the experimental, the new” (7). The capacity of the body to experience itself as “more
than itself” is triggered by another force: that of affectivity (Hansen 7).³

Visual experiences are usually regarded as the perceptions which the body generates in reaction to external stimuli. According to Hansen, Henri Bergson’s theory of perception opens up a new understanding of embodied visual experiences. Dissatisfied with the mistakes of realism and idealism—the former making of matter a thing able to produce in us perceptions, the latter reducing it to the perception which we have of it—Bergson redefines “image” (a term he uses to replace matter) as “an existence placed half way between the ‘thing’ and the ‘representation’” (9). Among all the images, Bergson notes, “there is one which is distinct from all the others, in that I do not know it only from without by perceptions, but from within by affections: it is my body. I examine the conditions in which these affections are produced: I find they always interpose themselves between the excitations that I receive from without and the movements which I am about to execute, as though they had some undefined influence on the final issue” (17; emphasis in original).

Viewing the body as “a center of indetermination within an acentered universe” (36), Bergson characterizes it as playing a creative role, for in dealing with the information from outside it is always transforming itself into something new. The body, according to Hansen’s interpretation of Bergson, operates as a filter that selects those images that are relevant to it, based on its own embodied capacities, from among the universe of images revolving around it (3). The force of affections (not perceptions) produced in the body “folds” the excitations from outside into the body and serves as an interface with an intensifying mutual force which renders the body the source of action.

Thus it is the action of the body that makes possible the creation of something new (Hansen 5). Extending Bergson’s theory to encompass the interrelationship between technical images and embodied perceptions, Hansen puts forth the concept of affectivity, which is differentiated from affect, to explore the new perceptual experience of “technical images.”⁴ According to Hansen, affectivity is a force in

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³ The term “affectivity” here reminds one of Gilles Deleuze’s concept of “affect” in Cinema 1, which according to Hansen is a force brought forth by the sensorimotor body and triggering what is hidden in the body to be expressed in the frame in any form, such as the photograph, the cinematic image, and so on (Hansen 8). An autonomous force sets free what is hidden in the body, which is endowed with a life of its own in the frame of the visual. For Hansen, Deleuze dismisses the idea that the frame in any form “reflects the demands of embodied perception, or more exactly, a historically contingent negotiation between technical capacities and the ongoing ‘evolution’ of embodied (human) perception” (8). Using the term “affectivity,” Hansen supplements what is missing in Deleuze’s theory—the influence of technical capacities on human perception.

⁴ Although Hansen focuses on new media and new arts in his exploration of the relationship...
the body that is the very medium or interface between the body and the (new) technical images it confronts (130). In other words, affectivity is the agency of the perceiving subject, which serves as a force to transform the perceptions produced by internal or external stimuli into something new. Hansen writes: “affectivity actualizes the potential of the image at the same time as it virtualizes the body” (130). As a means of interfacing with technical images, affectivity brings forth bodily responses when one perceives these images; at the same time, these bodily responses cause more forces in the body to respond to the stimuli generated by the images.

Film-watching, an action involving visual technology and the body, therefore gives rise to a unique form of affectivity which triggers the production of new perceptual experiences in the body. As a form of technology, film-making creates a particular frame for the production of cinematic images. In order to generate the movement of images within a certain period of time, film-making utilizes different techniques, such as cutting and editing, to give the audience a sense of continuity. Friedrich Kittler views cinematic techniques, such as montage, slow motion, and time lapse, as deluding techniques which “translate technology into the desires of audience” so that the audience can experience the “continuities and regularities of motion” (119). Kittler’s observation addresses the question of how the technology of film-making produces cinematic time. However, associating the subject’s film-watching with Jacques Lacan’s concept of the imaginary, Kittler takes the representational images in a film as nothing but “phantasms of our deluded eyes” (119), a view which tends to correlate our visual experiences with disembodiment. Kittler fails to delve into the issue of temporal and spatial embodiments involved in film-watching. Film-making is a technology that creates the movement of images in what Hansen calls the “intensive time of machine processing” (235). For Hansen, this intensive time is the time that “exists only in machines and between them, the context of the slow human ‘now’” (235). Cinematic time, which might also be called a form of machine time, consists then of the artificial arrangement of moving images. The images in a film, which are originally separate shots, are re-designed and re-connected via cinematic techniques. The sense of continuity of these images is produced via the force of speed which connects them all, thus producing cinematic time. As a crucial technological element of cinema, speed liquidates the

between digital images and human perceptions, what he has written on these aesthetic experiments elucidates in a broad sense affectivity as “the privileged modality for confronting technologies that are fundamentally heterogeneous to our already constituted embodiment, our contracted habits and rhythms” (133). His point helps one to reconsider how the technological evolution of visual (re)presentation changes one’s perceptual experiences.
frozen moments of images, creating the sense of time for the spectator. The speed in/of cinema determines the framework of the visual experiences of its spectators; however, this does not mean that the speed produced by technology dominates human perceptions. Whereas the technological frame of a film, based on clock time, controls the audience’s sense of temporality to a certain degree, speed also opens up interstices between the images. Speed involves the presentation of time in cinema on two levels: the first decides the machine time which generates the movement of images, while the second triggers the spectator’s embodied time consciousness, which is correlated with his/her sense of the “now.” The scientific research of Francisco Varela may prove useful for our inquiry here. Varela has tried to link phenomenology with neurobiology in his study of the relationship between time consciousness and affectivity. He suggests that while our time consciousness is limited to the neural structure of the brain, its sensorimotor embodiment endows it with a particular flexibility. While some neurobiologists, such as Stephanie Strickland, attempt to make a direct correlation between machine time and human perception, Varela’s approach aims to explore the dynamic relationship between the rich texture of the temporal horizon and the dynamic operation of the cell assemblies of our brain (252).

In Varela’s view, the temporal horizon is composed of a multiscalar hierarchy of temporal registers, which is the basis of the flow of time (273). The duration of time is not a function of the linear dimension; rather, the flow of time is characterized by its depth or “thickness” (Hansen 250). Our perception of time is formed through the dynamic process of the framing of the cell assemblies, a process activated by machinic quanta in temporal registers (Varela 273). The neural structure of the brain generates time consciousness by operating the formation of cell assemblies which are selectively combined when responding to the depth of time. As Varela remarks, our sense of the duration of time “is dynamically dependent on a number of dispersed assemblies and not on a fixed integration period” (277). Different from the informational-computational model of neuroscience, Varela provides a model based on the framework of lived experience and sensorimotor embodiment. What differentiates our time consciousness from machine time lies in the fact that there is an affective level in the former which has the potential to open infinite possibilities of neural dynamics while operating under

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This approach presupposes that the present-time consciousness comprises a frame which functions by making a linear and fixed correlation between the neural structure and the machinic quanta; that is, the neural structure works by corresponding to the machinic quanta that it receives directly. In other words, this approach, which is mechanism-oriented, reduces the temporal consciousness to a string of temporal quanta (Hansen 251).
the constraints of the neural framework. Similarly, according to Hansen, affectivity as a medium sets off “the imperceptible and nonexperienceable domain of embodied neural dynamics” (252), which opens up some sort of “outside.” That is to say, affectivity initiates something new in our time consciousness since our perception of time is based on the neural structure of our brain; as affectivity opens up our embodied time consciousness, it “serves to differentiate it from machinic registration of time” (252). The new time consciousness brings forth nonlinear temporal registers, opening up a thickness of the “outside” and allowing us to surmount the rigid machinic registration.

When watching a film, then, a spectator does not simply perceive machine time/clock time, but also responds to the moving images with their embodied time consciousness. Unlike other perceptual experiences of temporality, the affectivity triggered by watching a film is correlated with the speed essential to cinematic technology. The production of the movement of images consists in condensing actual time. During the process of filmmaking, a director takes shots at different moments over a long period of time. In the case of documentary film, he or she usually observes a real event or a person during a certain period of time. The shots taken are thus congealed images, since they are images produced at frozen moments that have already died. Via cinematic techniques, the director then re-arranges the images, condensing the moments taken as shots and producing an intensive cinematic time. When a film is seen by its audience, the congealed images are liquefied and set free. Speed in cinema thus simultaneously congeals and liquefies time. Since the movement of images in cinema is generated by speed, the spectator’s sense of temporality is created via the folding of cinematic technology into speed. The affectivity created by watching a film brings forth the spectator’s embodied time consciousness, generating interstices or affective spaces between images.

How does our embodied time consciousness induce the sense of spatiality? The movement of images in cinema is a spatial presentation of narration: a story is told through the flow of spaces. During the process of watching a film, the spectator whose eyes are “walking” on the screen experiences the spatiality in and of the moving images. The eyes’ movement across the screen folds itself into the cinematic speed, liquefying and enlivening the space which is congealed by the frame of the camera. The flowing space is interwoven with the spectator’s embodied time consciousness, extending and expanding his/her temporal registers among past, present, and future. Film-watching furnishes us with the history and memory of other lived bodies, and yet our embodied time consciousness creates an
imaginary dimension based on the lived experience of our own lived bodies. The affective space that emerges through the process of the in-folding or inter-folding of cinematic and embodied time is an imaginary dimension which opens up a novel experience.

The experience of watching *The Last Rice Farmers* is a unique one. Two major temporal vectors produced by cinematic techniques constitute the cinematic time in the film: one is the momentary congealment of time generated by close-ups, and the other is the “silky” movement generated by the extended stretches of time in the images of everyday life, along with the shaping of the local landscape. The two temporal representations create two unique aesthetics: an aesthetic of laboring bodies and an aesthetic of localism. The two aesthetics are both related to the function of speed in cinema: speed enfolds cinematic time and unfolds embodied time, projecting what we may call an affective landscape, an imaginary plain that is opened up by both the close-ups of single parts of the laboring body and moving images in cinematic space. The wrinkles and sweat seen in close-ups summon affectivity, which serves as an interface to hook the viewer’s gaze. This is so because entangled with the images of the farmers’ body parts is the history of agriculture in Taiwan—an entanglement that can in one way or another evoke the viewer’s embodied time consciousness. The frozen moments produced by close-ups are blasted open by affectivity, which sets free the condensed affections as well as multiple temporal registers of the images and opens up an affective landscape—the viewer’s bonding with the farmers via temporal and temporal embodiments. On the other hand, the moving images of everyday life generated by the long stretches of time have the effect of de-familiarizing the local landscape to create a “flow of life,” to borrow Siegfried Kracauer’s term (71). The temporalization of space, or the cinematic flow of life, seduces the viewer to walk on the screen and become part of the film’s silky movement, enfolding his/her embodied time consciousness and unfolding another aspect of the affective landscape—a re-familiarization of the farmers’ everyday life. If the effect of de-familiarization arouses the viewer’s attention to the farmers’ daily routine, the force of affectivity, catalyzing the viewer’s embodied time consciousness, invites him/her to be immersed in the farmers’ daily routine. These two temporal vectors are intertwined, enveloping and unwrapping the past, present, and future.

**Narrating, Close-ups, and an Aesthetic of Laboring Bodies**

The theme of *The Last Rice Farmers* is orchestrated through and around the
long process of growing rice. The images in the film do not move to the rhythm of linear time; instead, their movement is driven by the intertwined narrations of the four main characters and their laboring bodies. The rice-growing process in the farmers’ fields is interwoven with their strenuous lives, through which a nonlinear temporality unfolds. One stratum of their embodied narrations is always linked with another throughout the different stages of rice-growing. The embodied narrations are composed of the farmers’ voices with their unique local accents, along with the camera shots with their intense, warm, bright colors which bring the objects in a given image much closer to the audience. As David Bordwell tells us, the bleak, dark colors in an image retreat while bright, warm colors come forward (114). In *The Last Rice Farmers*, the colorful images combined with the affectionate voice of the farmers create the effect that the viewer of the film is having a conversation with the farmers face to face, invited to look at the traces their hard work has left on their bodies. Thus the farmers’ narrations are often transiently frozen in the close-ups on their wrinkled faces, the sweating hands, or feet covered by dirt. The close-ups catch these fleeting moments, freezing some objects and enlarging them simultaneously.

The separate parts of an object presented through images have their own “expression”—in a Deleuzian sense. Defining the close-up in film as the intensity of the body purified and abstracted from “spatial-temporal co-ordinates in order to call forth the pure affect as the expressed,” Deleuze links this unique filmic technique, which he sometimes would call “the face,” with the concept of autonomy of affect (99). However, unsatisfied with Deleuze’s cutting of the connection between affect and the body, Hansen revalorizes the function of the face/close-up as catalyzing “the production of a supplementary sensorimotor connection between the body and a domain (in formatics) that is fundamentally heterogeneous to it” (133; emphasis in original). Hansen’s account opens up a new domain in the theorization of film images, inviting us to consider how the technology related to the medium of the image generates new perceptual experiences. The close-up in film, the magnified arrangement of the separate parts of an object abstracted from its spatial-temporal coordinates, is a function of one of the crucial aspects of speed in cinema—its ability to condense time. Some parts of the object are enlarged and frozen by the lens at a certain moment, while the detailed and magnified presentation of the object condenses all the temporal registers of the moment. Every detail of the image is the fold of a certain time register, having a life of its own and telling its own story. The viewer’s gaze is hooked by the folds of the close-up. Triggered by affectivity, the viewer’s linear time consciousness is burst open by the
folds of the close-up, and his/her different temporal registers are set free. In *The Last Rice Farmers*, the details in the close-up of a farmer’s body, an ox’s face, or a rice plant with golden grains convey affective memories leading back to the different stories of farmers’ lives, thereby generating an aesthetic of laboring bodies. Hooked by the folds in/of the images, the viewer of the film “touches” the contours of the enlarged objects, experiencing an explosion of his/her time consciousness. At the same time, an affective map emerges when the viewer’s linear time consciousness is replaced by an embodied one, one made by a plane of nonlinear temporal registers.

The stories in the film include those of Uncle Huang-ming’s childhood memories and his small business, Uncle Wen-lin’s attachment to his ox, Uncle Kung-bin’s family story and his comments on the agricultural policies, and Uncle Kung-bin’s wife’s arduous life in a traditional farming family. The four farmers’ narrations are interwoven with the rice-growing process. Although the framework of the film follows the traditional twenty-four solar terms based on the *Farmers’ Calendar* (農民曆 Nongminli)\(^6\) to record one cycle of the rice-growing season, this cycle is a condensation of the four farmers’ lives. Each phase always leads to a story which is interwoven with the other stories. For instance, the scenes of rice fields are layered with shots of the farmers’ laboring bodies: their sweating faces, wrinkled hands, hunched backs, bare feet covered with dirt, and slightly deformed legs.

Uncle Huang-ming’s story is catalyzed and brought to life by his own action of laboring in the field. As he is clearing the weeds in his field, they inspire a childhood memory. Like a thread in a piece of cloth, the weeds weave together his childhood memory with his present labor. He tells the cameraman: “Back when our village used to keep oxen, we liked weeds. I usually cut seven or eight bales of weeds a day for the oxen to eat. That’s good. Now I hate this kind of grass. Weeds are farmers’ enemy.” Then the cameraman asks him, “Why don’t you use the spray killer?” He responds, “It ruins the soil if you use it too often. Sometimes I hoe it by hand to lessen the soil damage. But it takes time and effort . . . , and the grass grows back soon.” While he is talking, the camera catches his sweating face, working hands, and his wet shirt. The close-ups of his laboring body resonate with his voice full of affection for the soil. This feeling of affection then triggers more childhood memories, echoing the ongoing action of his laboring body. Uncle Huang-ming

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\(^6\) In Taiwan, the *Farmers’ Calendar* is an important book of references for farmers. It is arranged in the order of the twenty-four solar terms, which indicate the twenty-four periods reflecting the change of seasons. Based on the wisdom of ancient farmers, the *Farmers’ Calendar* lists information that is useful to agricultural practice (*Encyclopedia of Taiwan*).
Thinking back to the time of keeping oxen, when I was younger. It was not a pleasant memory. Back then, . . . Once on my shoulder I had a cyst and couldn’t wear a coir cape in the rain. We all wore coir capes then. I didn’t let the ox out to graze on the grass. They told me, “no lunch for you.” My father had just died. I helped my older sister in the fields. My mother was home. Know what she did? She did people’s laundry at the crack of dawn for very little money every day. . . . My mother was blind. My little sister took her to people’s houses to do some chores. So she earned a little money day by day to run our family. That’s how we three survived. . . .

While he is telling his story, we get a series of different close-ups of his laboring body and his various expressions. A close-up of his face dominates his narration and links it with his recollections of childhood. In this close-up, the sparkling sunlight dots his sweating face along with his sparse, gray hair. While the sweat bears witness to his hard work, the gray hair reveals his age. Nonetheless, a mysterious smile in his eyes allures the gaze of the viewer of the film. The smile as a fold catalyzes the force of affectivity, triggering the viewer’s embodied time consciousness. Contrasting with the sad tone of his voice, this smile pierces the sadness, creating an atmosphere of calmness. While his melancholy voice, telling the story of his father’s death, brings the viewer back to the old man’s past, the smile escapes his laboring body as if the old man had rid himself of it. His long, strenuous life has been ironed out by the smile. Enchanted by the smile, the viewer’s time consciousness travels with Uncle Huang-ming to and fro through different temporal registers that are intermingled through the serenity of his face. Another scene of hard work consists of his working on a comforter. Uncle Huang-ming makes comforters by hand when he does not go to work in the rice fields. Accompanied by shots of his sweating body as he carries a special device to fluff the cotton, he tells the cameraman: “This is the way comforters used to be fluffed. There used to be very distinct on- and off-seasons. Making comforters by hand is really difficult. Working every day . . . one could make only 365 comforters a year. Now with machines it’s different. Now it takes less than a month to make 365 of them. It’s so much faster now.” While he is carefully fluffing the cotton, sewing the cover, and tidying the finished comforter, the close-ups of his sweating

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Footnote: 7 In the past, Taiwanese farmers used to wear coir capes as their raincoats.
face, strong hands, and naked upper body move with the rhythm of his motion. The
close-up of his naked upper body shows how its muscles shake as he moves his tool.
The muscles as a fold blast open the frozen image of an old man. It seems that the
shaking and dancing muscles no longer belong to the old man: they have become
merged with the soft comforter. These muscles also invite the spectator of the film
to join in their dancing and shaking, the better to appreciate the beauty of this
farmer’s physical labor.

The movement of Uncle Huang-ming’s laboring body enfolds and unfolds that
of Uncle Wen-lin’s ox. Whereas most of the oxen have been replaced by tractors,
Uncle Wen-lin still keeps an ox which, obedient and diligent like a hard-working
farmer, works for his owner and keeps him company. Uncle Wen-lin’s narration is
always accompanied with images of his docile ox. Not as eloquent as Uncle
Huang-ming and Uncle Kung-bin, Uncle Wen-lin tells his story under the guidance
of the directors. The following conversation between the cameraman and Uncle
Wen-lin traces the history of the oxen that he had kept:

Cameraman: How many oxen have you had?
Uncle Wen-lin: I reckon around 30. The first one I ever bought. . . .
My wife had a pile of gold jewelry. . . . A great big stash. It was really
a lot.
Cameraman: Was that her dowry?
Uncle Wen-lin: Yes, from her dowry. There was so much [gold],
you couldn’t hold it. The whole lot was worth 8,000 dollars
Cameraman: You sold your wife’s dowry for an ox?
Uncle Wen-lin: You bet I did.
Cameraman: Your ox is the last one left in Jingliao.
Uncle Wen-lin: This ox is sometimes borrowed for filmmaking or
gives kids rides. He is so nice and tame. I can’t bear to sell him off.
Otherwise, I would buy a tractor. Oxen really have a hard life.
Sometimes he can’t even budge and gets hit and cussed at.

During the conversation, the close-up of the face of the ox is skillfully used as
a metaphor for the hardworking farmers. Working together, the ox and the farmer
use their bodies as a laboring force. The face of the ox is connected with the scene
of Uncle Wen-lin’s manipulation of the ox in the rice field. Unwilling to use a
tractor to loosen the soil, Uncle Wen-lin uses some skills to control his ox, such as
pulling its tail to command it to turn left or right. Their working together does not go smoothly, since the ox is often stuck in the mud. These images of their toiling in the field seem to deliver the message of the difficulties that Taiwanese farmers are faced with. However, the close-up of the ox’s face conveys a different message. Contrasted with its huge body which is always working, its eyes are looking at the camera innocently. Quite independent of its laboring body, the ox’s lively eyes become a fold in/of the image, having a life of their own and showing their energy which is different from a cold tilling machine. The cameraman later asks Uncle Wen-lin why he still keeps an ox, and he answers: “I guess I’m just no good. I only know how to grow rice in the fields.” At the same time, the camera takes shots of the ox pulling an oxcart filled with dried grass. Passing by a field full of weeds and mud, Uncle Wen-lin lifts the yoke from his ox, relieving the ox of its burden. The ox enjoys eating the grass and playing in the mud, which resonates with the earlier image of its innocent eyes. At this moment, the ox is not the farmer’s working partner but a lively animal. Whereas the traditional farming culture is declining, the close-up of the ox’s eyes summons the old times back, a time when most of the farmers relied on and worked closely with oxen.

The ox’s image is interwoven with that of Uncle Kung-bin’s laboring body in the rice field. During the cycle of the rice-growing process, the images of Uncle Kung-bin’s body are interspersed with those of his rice plants, his everyday life, and his comments on the agricultural history of Taiwan. Uncle Kung-bin is a typical Taiwanese farmer. He was born in Jingliao Village and has made a living by growing rice and running a small business selling beans there all his life. The Last Rice Farmers focuses mainly on Uncle Kung-bin’s story, which interweaves his recollections of his life with the agricultural history of Taiwan since the 1950s. The documentary starts with the question: “Why do you still choose to grow rice when the price remains so low?” Without hesitation, Uncle Kung-bin replies: “Ah, you just let it be. You just deal with bad prices. We are like dead meat. . . . We are just poor farmers. We still have to plant rice even with poor prices as long as it pays more than fallow fields.” The camera follows his daily routine in the rice field, recording the process of growing rice. As Lan-chuan Yen indicates in an interview, when she was shooting the farmers’ stories she listened to these stories like a member of an audience (Jian). Avoiding interrupting the work of the farmers, the

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8 In the Taiwanese language, the term “dead meat” (死肉 si-bah) means that a certain part of the human body is already dead and is thus senseless (Taiwanese Idioms Dictionary). It is used figuratively here, suggesting that these old farmers are insensible to the changes in modern society.
two directors tried to film the events “unnoticed,” recording their natural language, daily routines, and their laboring bodies. With no voice-over and only a few captions, the directors aimed to present those farmers’ lived experiences via the raw power of images (Jian). The filming strategy that the directors have adopted lies in presenting the actual life of farmers through the farmers themselves. In her account of her intentions in making the documentary, Yen remarks that she would like this film to show and help to preserve the dignity of Taiwanese farmers. These farmers, she says, used to be regarded as unintelligent or foolish commoners; but they are actually wise men and women (Jian). Therefore, the documentary revolves around the farmers and their lives, without any “intrusion” of experts explaining the agricultural policies and history of Taiwan.

The film’s presentation of Uncle Kung-bin’s story begins by showing him raking the soil in his rice field in preparation for planting rice seedlings. The camera follows closely details of his daily routine. While these details might seem insignificant, they are full of the wisdom which the farmer has accumulated through many years of experience. In fact, Uncle Kung-bin keeps a journal which records the process of his rice growing. Two episodes show him writing down important events. In the first one, Uncle Kung-bin explains why he keeps a journal as he takes notes of the seedlings this year:

Second crop of 2003. . . . The fields are tilled and ready to be planted. The rice shoots are beautiful this year. If the seedlings are good, they will grow up beautifully and neatly. And we’ll feel happy. It is a good start. If the shoots grow up well, they can withstand the cold and develop well. If the seedlings are bad, you’ll work much harder later. It is hard work. I began to take farming notes thirty years ago to record the second stage of rice cultivation. I recorded what pesticide I sprayed today to observe the results so that I could check them the next year. Without the notes, sometimes I would do the same thing repeatedly. . . .

A close-up of his fingers leafing through his notes accompanies his voice. When his fingers touch the white paper covered with words, his nails blackened by

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9 According to Cheng-hung Liao, Chun-chieh Huang, and Hsin-huang Hsiao’s research, although farmers have long been the basis of the Chinese society, they are usually ignored and suppressed when the ruling class sets the new economic and political policies; farmers are often seen as adopting the attitudes of conservatism and passive fatalism (147), and in most academic studies the negative descriptions of farmers are far more numerous than the positive ones (152).
dirt silently tell a story of their own, one more powerful than any words. The nails, which are dyed by the color of the earth, reveal the natural force of plants and the heat in the rice fields, while the words on the paper turn into vague marks. On the one hand, the image of the nails condenses the long cycle of farming work into a moment; on the other, it links the viewer’s time consciousness with the life of the nails, merging with this story being told in a rice field.

The second episode shows Uncle Kung-bin’s anxiety about Rhizoctonia, a disease which causes serious damage to crops. While the camera shows him spraying foliar fungicides to control Rhizoctonia in his rice field, he speaks of his memory of the old days when farmers used toxic pesticides without knowing how dangerous they were:

In the 1950s, a pesticide called Parathion, a highly toxic pesticide, caused sickness and even many deaths of farmers. Some became drowsy after using the pesticide spray, which made you dizzy. They didn’t know that they were poisoned by the pesticide and went home to sleep. The next day they were found dead. Things like that happened. So, around the 1960s, the damage from the pesticides was very serious. You often saw someone carrying another farmer who got poisoned in the field.

Though Uncle Kung-bin’s humorous tone tries to lighten the bitterness of the story, the image of him carrying the heavy equipment filled with pesticides, which according to him weighs thirty kilograms, shows the audience the harshness of a farmer’s life. Exposing most of his body to the white spray, Uncle Kung-bin works diligently as if he is unaware of the danger of these chemicals. The close-up of his feet standing firmly in the field surrounded by green rice shoots reflects his attachment to the earth; on the other hand, these naked feet, like the plants flying in the wind, look fragile. When asked why he was not worried about being poisoned, his answer is humorous: “There was medicine for it. We had other things to worry about!” With little attention from the government, Taiwanese farmers bear some resemblance to the image of the naked feet, helpless and vulnerable.

The affective landscape of The Last Rice Farmers enfolds and unfolds the moving images of farmers’ memories, leading the spectator across the nonlinear surface of different temporal registers. We sense that the four farmers’ memories might collide with one another at a certain point. Uncle Kung-bin’s wife, the only female character in the film, tells the story of a woman’s life in a traditional farming
village. Although her story is sometimes superimposed onto Uncle Kung-bin’s, most of the time it allows viewers to experience a traditional housewife’s life in a farm village. In the film, her body is always moving and working in the rice field, the kitchen, the small shop that she and her husband own, and the backyard of their house where she does all kinds of chores. In one of the conversations between her and her husband when they are peeling off the shells of peanuts, Uncle Kung-bin jokes that his wife was destined to marry him, which awakens her memory of her harsh life in the early days of their marriage. She uses the metaphor of “eating bitter soup” to describe her marriage, and says that she has tasted much more bitter soup than her husband. Following her narration, the camera shows us her daily chores: picking up firewood in the backyard and carrying it to the kitchen, cooking dinner using a traditional oven, and washing clothes by hand.

Then a close-up of her face freezes all her movement. The wrinkles here enfold the “bitter soup” she has tasted, and they become a gentle, shy smile. The smile attracts the viewer’s attention, releasing the frozen moment and, as it were, inviting the viewer to touch her wrinkled face. Though the shot turns back to her wrinkled hands which are busy peeling off the shells, the smile explodes linear movement of images, setting free all the condensed affections in her life as well as making an affective bonding with the viewer. The smile leads to more scenes of her doing chores: working with a rake in the field, cutting off a wild plant, planting vegetables in a small field, and carrying the rake home at dusk. Her daily routine unfolds the harsh life of a woman living in a traditional farming village. Her years of hard labor have shaped the way she looks: a woman with a slightly hunched back, rough hands, and feet covered with dirt. Watching her story lets us feel that we are touching her laboring body; we experience how the household chores have sculpted the wrinkles on her body through the movement of the images.

The visual presentation of these personal stories not only records the farmers’ lives; it also conveys the history of how agricultural policies have been imposed on farmers in Taiwan. The four farmers’ lived experiences are inscribed in their bodies. All the close-ups of their laboring bodies are knitted together with their everyday life and the small village where they live. Their lives shape the local landscape while the small village also molds the shapes of their bodies. The two together create an aesthetic of localism.

**Estrangement, Flow of Life, and an Aesthetic of Localism**

*The Last Rice Farmers* is set in two small villages, Jingliao and Molin, where
most of the villagers rely on farming to make a living. The camera moves around the villagers' everyday life and the local landscape, creating a unique artificial space. As Kracauer notes, the illusion of continuity in a film is produced by the juxtaposition of pictures of material phenomena taken in different places, that is, by the spatial interrelationships of these scenes (48). According to John Grierson, in the case of a documentary film, the artificial space is created by the “arrangements, rearrangements, and creative shapings” of natural materials (20). The “creative shapings” of natural materials in *The Last Rice Farmers* rest on the estrangement of everyday life, which is an effect of the temporalization of space. The directors take the strategy of de-familiarizing the familiar and rearranging the natural materials in a way that reminds one of what Kracauer calls the flow of life (71-72).

Cinema has a way of “disintegrating familiar objects and bringing to the fore—often just in moving about—previously invisible interrelationships between parts of them,” as Kracauer says (54). In other words, the camera disassembles and reassembles the reality we already are familiar with on the one hand, while “forcing” us to look at objects that often remain unnoticed on the other. Sometimes, the things that we are very familiar with, such as the streets we walk on, the food we eat, and the neighbors we see every day, are neglected by us. That is, we do not really “see” them as we are so used to seeing them; they have been integrated into our everyday existence (Kracauer 55). The images of these objects that we take for granted and thus normally do not really “see” generate the effect of estrangement. As Kracauer puts it, “we would be immobilized if we focus on them” because we are suddenly made aware, suddenly shocked into an awareness of their actual existence (55).

In *The Last Rice Farmers*, trifles in the farmers’ everyday life have been recorded faithfully and some of the details repeated several times. Carefully observing, the directors deliberately take close-ups, close- and medium-distance shots to catch every move the subjects make while eating, talking, doing chores, and working. The repetition of mundane details stretches out time as if it were slowing down, generating a leisurely circular flow, resonating with sunrises and sunsets day after day, like the cyclical rhythm of the seasons and of time itself. Echoing the scenes of the farmers’ embodied narrations, these recurrent scenes of everyday trifles produce the effect of a cyclical temporality. While the cinematic time stretches the temporal register of the present, an affective flow of life emerges from the images of the daily trifles. The lyric rhythm of the most ordinary parts of the farmers’ life draws out the undercurrents of the viewer’s embodied time consciousness. On the one hand, these images of everyday life make the viewer...
alienated from his or her experience of the familiar everyday life. On the other hand, when the cinematic rhythm is folded into his or her multiple layers of temporal registers, the viewer is led to expand his or her time consciousness, to re-familiarize himself or herself with the circular temporality of the farmers’ life. The affective flow of life, triggered by the farmers’ real everyday life, emerges when the viewer’s time consciousness is interwoven with the stretches of the time of the farmers’ everyday life and folds out a special “outside”—the viewer’s affective bonding with the farmers’ cyclical rhythm of life via his or her embodied time consciousness.

While the film focuses mostly on Uncle Kung-bin’s and his wife’s everyday trifles, the viewer of the film traces the marks they are making. Uncle Kung-bin’s family’s daily routine seems ordinary on the surface, but beneath lies a sense of estrangement that helps to shape an aesthetic of localism, that is, a unique rendition of life emerging from the everyday in farming culture. The camera magnifies the ordinary gestures of everyday life. In the episode showing how Uncle Kung-bin and his wife start their day, the viewer experiences the traditional, simple life of farmers de-familiarized. Before sunrise, Uncle Kung-bin gets up, turns on the light, opens the door and windows, tears off the paper with the previous date on the calendar, and welcomes a new day. Shot mostly as close-ups, the images invite the viewer to follow Uncle Kung-bing’s hands and to “touch” the objects that begin his day.

Later, he starts his ritual of piously worshiping the gods. Carefully dusting the altar, pouring water into the cups for the gods, and then lighting incense, Uncle Kung-bing worships the gods in heaven first and says his prayer: “May Jade Emperor in the heaven, the Three Officials of Heaven, Earth, and Water . . . Bestow us fortune and peace, happiness and success, good harvests and prosperous business, favorable conditions and peace in the land.” Later, he says a prayer to the gods on the altar: “Dear Sakyamuni Buddha, Guanyin Bodhisattva, Amitabha . . . All Buddhas in the three realms. My dear benevolent Buddhas, bless everyone with peace . . . good business and crops . . . success and happiness . . . favorable conditions and peace in the land.” Then moving to the kitchen, the camera catches him worshiping the Stove God in front of a traditional stove: “Dearest God of the Stove, who watches over everyone, please give us good business and crops, good family fortune.” The detailed cinematic presentation of this religious ritual prolongs

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10 In the Chinese Taoist pantheon, the Jade Emperor (玉皇大帝 Yuhuang dadi) is the creator of the universe and supreme ruler of the Heavens, the Earth, and the Underworld. In the Taiwanese traditional religion, the Jade Emperor is also regarded as the supreme god (Encyclopedia of Taiwan).

11 While variously understood, the Three Officials of Heaven, Earth, and Water (三官大帝 Sanguan dadi) are among the most respected deities in Taiwanese folk religion.
the whole process. As with any of the other daily routines, the camera also reinforces its circular movement, releasing the triviality of everyday life from its constraints and, in part through de-familiarization, making the insignificant seem essential. On the other hand, Uncle Kung-bing’s affectionate voice over the de-familiarized images of the religious routine pierces into the viewer’s time consciousness, evoking the viewer’s temporal register and rendering it resonant with Uncle Kung-bing’s repeated religious practice. Through an imaginary temporal register, the viewer is re-familiarized with the circular mode of temporality in traditional farming life.

This religious ritual is indeed one of the recurrent themes in the film. Worshipping the gods is an important part of Uncle Kung-bing’s everyday life. On some important occasions, such as during the harvest season or on a god’s birthday, he dutifully prepares food for the gods. His pious face, as it moves around the enlarged pictures of gods, shrines, and incense, seems to slow down the time. The movement of his worship is frozen by the smoking incense, as if he himself has been integrated into the white smoke. His movement also creates a kind of artificial space, a religious one, produced by the detailed presentation of worshipping the gods. Here, an aesthetic of localism emerges through a farmer’s simple wishes to have a good life.

In fact, Uncle Kung-bin’s religious routine is extended as part of the local religious activities. Attending the religious festivities of the Grand Quadrennial Celebrations—the most important religious event in Jingliao and Molin—he begins his journey from Desin Temple, stops by Nankunshen Temple, and then goes back to Desin Temple, which worships Lord Jiang. As a member of the palanquin procession, Uncle Kung-bin takes charge of carrying the palanquin of Lord Jiang along with other participants. Following in his footsteps, the camera moves along with the procession, recording what Uncle Kung-bin experiences. The religious rituals include the performances of parade leaders, the possession of spirit-mediums by gods, and the “supplication procession.” The flow of cinematic images begins

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12 Deshin Temple is the religious center of Jingliao and Molin. The Grand Quadrennial Celebrations are held here every four years to celebrate the birthday of Lord Jiang (姜府千歲 Jiangfu qiansui) on November 14 in the Lunar Calendar (Cai 126-31). The Grand Quadrennial Celebrations start with the palanquin procession to Nankunshen Temple to share the power of the gods there. The palanquin procession is similar to a Christian pilgrimage. The believers in a certain god carry the god to another temple, usually to that of a god who is more powerful or who is the original one (Cai and Wu 202; Huang 108-09).

13 Parade leaders (陣頭 zhentou) are the persons who give performances in religious rituals, festivals, and even funerals, such as playing music, singing, and dancing. The most common types include the stunt parade leaders, the music parade leaders, and the religious parade leaders.
from the lion dance (performed by the parade leaders), and moves through the ritual of inviting gods and the bleeding faces of spirit-mediums to the people crowded in the temple, holding incense to worship the god, and finally to the long line of people who join the supplication procession.

While parade leaders and the members of the religious team carrying the palanquin walk along the streets of the villages, the local people who have prepared food and incense to worship Lord Jiang say their prayers piously. When the palanquin of the god passes by their houses, some crawl under it—an act of praying to the god for peace and happiness. Watching the film, we see the local people’s pious faces mixed with the palanquin, the dancing and singing on a parade car, and the fireworks which are being set off all along the way by the procession team. Without any voice-over and with little conversation, the parade passes quickly with a silky winding movement. The viewer of the film experiences a visual banquet composed of combined dramatic scenes from different religious rituals.

Once again we have the technique of many close-ups and a rapid switching between images. The close-ups, which are presented with bright and saturated colors, switch so fast that they seem to collide with one another, gaining a great sense of estrangement. The collision of the images knocks open an outside in the viewer’s time consciousness, which is merged with the estranged religious event and generates a novel temporal register consisting of astonishing and yet re-familiarized religious moments. Uncle Kung-bin’s own movement within the procession mixes with the local landscape. The streets, littered with fireworks and paper money for the gods, are crowded with his neighbors, friends, and relatives. Following Uncle Kung-bin, the viewer of the film then pays a visit to two small villages with a sense, once again, of estrangement. The serene villages are saturated with the touch of religious sensations provoked by the lively religious music, colorful banners, an incessant display of fireworks, and pious people. Beneath the surface of Uncle Kung-bin’s daily routine, then, lies a “route of festivals.” This route is also part of his everyday life, producing another dimension of the aesthetic of localism that is generated by the unique local culture.

The rice field also plays an important role in Uncle Kung-bin and his wife’s

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Spirit-mediums (乩童 jitong) play an important role in traditional Taiwanese religion. They are the “surrogates” of specific gods (Huang 92). In important religious events, they invite gods to possess their bodies, and then undertake several performances to show the power of the god as well as to exorcize evil spirits (Cai and Wu 178). In these rituals, they would strike themselves until they are bleeding (with instruments like the seven-star sword, the shark-tooth sword, the copper club, the moon hatchet, and the spiked ball). It is believed that such beating can bring purity, exorcize evil spirits, and admit the power of the god (Huang 96).
daily routine. Doing his work according to the *Farmers’ Calendar*, he takes care of his rice plants day by day. The twenty-four solar terms not only record the change of seasons, but also mark different stages in the cycle of the rice-farming process, reminding farmers when to do specific tasks. On the day of the Summer Solstice (June 21), for instance, Uncle Kung-bin and his wife start loosening the soil in preparation for planting the rice seedlings later. Around Minor Summer Warming day (July 7), they work for a few days to plant the rice seedlings. Then, while waiting for the seedlings to grow, they have to take care of the rice shoots—using pesticides and different chemical substances to protect the plants from disease while also spreading fertilizer. On Autumn Dawning day (August 7), Uncle Kung-bin carries two and a half bags of sulfate fertilizer to spread on the rice plants.

Working in the rice field for a long time every day, and sometimes visiting it several times a day, Uncle Kung-bin uses the metaphor of a lover to describe his attachment to his field: “The land is like our lover. What does a lover want? If she would like to eat ice cream, we’d give her ice cream. If she would like to look beautiful, we’d give her a lipstick. Though the land does not speak, when we walk around and step on it we know what she needs.” The small, green rice seedlings gradually become tall plants with golden grains. It is as if the rice plants condense the couple’s sweat and footsteps into their golden grains. The cinematic shift from the image of waves of green plants to that of golden grains turns the rice field into a temporalized space, one which marks the farmers’ intimate connection with the plants and with the soil, marks their endless labor—often down on their haunches—during the period of rice cultivation. In the images depicting the cultivation of rice, the condensed time of the farmers’ strenuous work folds into the viewer’s embodied time consciousness. While their sweating faces, wrinkled hands, and hunched backs via the flow of images produce the sense of estrangement, the spectator perceives the heaviness of the ordinariness of the couple’s everyday life. That is, the everyday ordinariness is constituted by the incredible length of time as well as the strenuous work. The images of rice cultivation explode the viewer’s linear time consciousness, evoking him or her to break the flat surface of ordinary everyday life and to perceive the rich and complex temporal registers contained in these images. The aesthetic of localism emerging here is closely tied to the farmers’ observation of the progression of seasons they have learned from the traditional calendar.
Conclusion

In recent years, aware of their increasingly difficult situation, many farmers in Taiwan have taken political action to protest the unjust policies and measures that our government imposing on farmers.14 And their protests are often carried out with them carrying sacks of rice grains in street demonstrations.

The scene resonates with scenes showing the laboring farmers in The Last Rice Farmers. In both cases the farmers use their bodies to present their close relationship with the plants they have been growing all their life. The Last Rice Farmers further explores the farmers’ lived experiences in their rice fields. The directors of the film adopt the strategy of the aesthetics of embodiment to re-consider the dire situation that have confronted farmers in Taiwan. This does not mean that rational and objective analysis of policies is not necessary. However, any rational analysis of a policy, which depends on abstract logical thinking, should be based on real experiences. The public concern with agricultural problems and farmers’ rights cannot be separated from the actual lands, the earth, the ground that they rely on, and the bodies they use to work this land.

That is to say, the film’s power of persuasion consists in its affective landscape made up of embodied images. To accuse the film of adopting the strategy of nostalgia, sentimentalism, and de-politicization neglects the directors’ intention, which is to present their argument in a different way. They appeal to the power of the images, as Yiwei Geng remarks. While documentary filmmaking is often aligned with the rhetorical tradition since it mainly serves a social purpose, as Bill Nichols has said (2), a documentary film’s purely aesthetic dimensions can add significantly to the power of persuasion. In the case of The Last Rice Farmers, the farmers’ narrations are interwoven with embodied images which invite the spectator to build a connection between the stories and characters. The film wants to persuade the viewer to walk in the rice fields and experience the unique local culture nourished by the life-activity, the life-world of farmers. When the cinematic time folds into the spectator’s embodied time consciousness, the movement of images unfolds the subtle power that can move the spectator to find a solution to the problem of Taiwan’s dying agriculture.

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