



Film Review

The superfood chain

Directed by Ann Shin

Fathom Film Group, 2018, 66 min.

[available for streaming on TVO.org, with supplementary materials at www.thesuperfoodchain.com]

Review by Fabiana Li

From supermarket shelves to social media, superfoods make a frequent appearance in today's food landscape, even as the meaning of the term—and the health claims attached to it—are often unclear¹. The ubiquity of superfoods could indicate a greater level of health-consciousness in today's society; more likely, this interest in 'health food' has been partly shaped by (and in turn fuels) the food industry's efforts to sell us new products. Increasingly, however, people want to know more about what they put on their plates: where do these foods come from, who produced them, and under what conditions? These are some of the questions that are explored in the documentary film *The Superfood Chain*, directed by Ann Shin.

Shin's interest in the topic was sparked by her role as a parent and her desire to learn about the best foods to nourish her family, which sometimes meant getting swept up by the latest superfood trend. The proliferation of superfoods may be attributed to the confusion and anxiety around food choices that results from too much information; from alarmist newspaper headlines linking food and health, to celebrity diets and cookbooks, we are constantly exposed to a cacophony of 'expert' advice about which foods to choose or avoid. It is in this environment that superfoods thrive, and even if most people recognize that the key to health is more elusive than

¹ Superfood is a non-medical marketing term used to describe food with a high content of antioxidants, minerals, or other nutrients that are associated with desirable health outcomes.

savvy marketing might lead us to believe, this has not slowed the demand for products like quinoa, coconuts, teff, and wild salmon. These are the main products that Shin follows as she travels to meet quinoa farmers in Bolivia, teff growers in Ethiopia, members of a community producing coconut oil in the Philippines, and Haida Gwaii fisherfolk off the north coast of British Columbia. The questions that drive the documentary are: What consequences has the superfood craze had on their diets and livelihoods? Have they benefited from the increased demand for these foods? And what can we, as consumers, do to promote more sustainable food systems?

The ubiquity of quinoa—a South American crop prized for its nutritional content—has become a classic example (and cautionary tale) illustrating effects of the globalization of food. Through my current research on quinoa, I have observed some of the dynamics that are described in the film: the increased demand for quinoa internationally, the rise and drop in prices, and the mixed results experienced by families in traditional quinoa-growing communities in the Andes. The film shows that farmers who depend on cash crops are susceptible to boom and bust cycles and must continuously adapt to the whims of global consumers. While health-conscious ‘foodies’ may be partly responsible for its growing popularity, interest in quinoa extends to agricultural researchers and international organizations such as the United Nations, which designated 2013 the “International Year of Quinoa.” For experts researching and promoting its production and consumption, quinoa holds promise in the fight against global food insecurity and climate change. Canada, the United States, Spain, and China are only some of the many countries where quinoa is now grown, and it could one day be produced at a lower cost in places far from the Lake Titicaca region where it originates. Like other media coverage of the quinoa boom, the film risks overdetermining a cause-and-effect relationship between consumers in the global North and farmers who grow their food. However, it is not possible in a short documentary to fully explore the intricacies of the international quinoa market and the ongoing transformation of local diets and agricultural systems.

What is clear is that the profits to be made from quinoa’s global spread do not always reach the communities that have traditionally depended on it, and it is not easy to envision an alternative model that could benefit farmers more directly. In search of answers, Shin turns to Fair Trade as a possibility, using the example of coconut oil. In the community in the Philippines profiled in the film, a Fair Trade organization enabled families to gain control over the production of coconut oil, benefit from new equipment and a processing facility, and earn higher prices for their product. The story provides an unequivocal endorsement of Fair Trade, but this leaves out the challenges that often accompany such initiatives. While it may seem like a win-win proposition, Fair Trade does not always benefit the poorest growers who need it most (due to the cost of certification, for example), nor does it address the root causes of poverty. Regardless, the story told in the film gives viewers the sense that for a small extra cost, they can directly help and empower producers.

Conscious consumerism provides an overly simplified answer to the problems brought about by the global popularity of certain crops, but the film does touch on some structural

factors, such as government policies to safeguard food sovereignty and food security. In the case of teff, the Ethiopian government sought to prioritize local consumption of this grain, which is an integral part of the diet, by limiting its export to prevent prices from skyrocketing. Closer to home in Canada, the film's focus on wild salmon emphasizes the importance of Indigenous food sovereignty. In this case, it is about the Haida's sovereign right to food in spite of pressure from commercial fisheries. The value of the documentary is that it aims to expand the narrow nutritional focus of superfoods to include the social and ecological repercussions of what we eat. As Shin states in the narration, this film is not just about food: "It's about farmers and their sovereign right to grow and sell their own cultural crops."

In today's food scene, superfoods are taken out of context, disaggregated into a series of vitamins and minerals, and disconnected from the cultures and ways of life that gave us these products in the first place. The film aims to reconnect these foods with the people who grow, harvest, fish, and depend on them, showing the viewer the rhythm of the agricultural cycle, traditional food practices, and the joys and hardships of everyday life. Significantly, there is a focus on children throughout the film—their contributions to the household economy, their education (in school and on the land), and their future aspirations. The filmmaker's focus on children may signal change and hope for the future, and also makes the documentary suitable as a teaching tool and to encourage conversations with a younger audience.

The Superfood Chain can spark fruitful conversations about where our food comes from. The film urges viewers to think more deeply about their food and implies that by doing so, they can choose more wisely (seeing beyond the marketing hype, choosing Fair Trade, and opting for local foods that might provide benefits similar to the supposed superfoods). The risk is that the conversation ends with the idea that political action equates with ethical consumption (what Guthman (2007, p. 264) calls a "neoliberal anti-politics" that focuses on dietary choices and self-discipline rather than structural inequality and food policies). In spite of its focus on North American consumer habits, the film tries to push the viewer into a more nuanced response, and is most effective when it shifts the focus to the lives of people who depend on the foods that global consumers now covet. This glimpse into local communities suggests that what is needed is not individual but collective action, and a profound transformation of our global food system to ensure food security, food sovereignty, and long-term sustainability.

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References

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