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THE LAST MERMAIDS

For years, the women of Jeju Island have risked it all to fill their nets. But a new generation seeking careers beyond the sea threatens to kill this centuries-old tradition





BY ALISON FLOWERS // PHOTOGRAPHED BY BRENDA PAIK SUNOO

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ESTERNERS HAVE CALLED them the last mermaids on earth. It's an appropriate designation: these women divers plunge up to 65 feet into the ocean with nothing more than their lungs and a wet suit, and they may not be around much longer. But unlike Hans Christian Andersen's Little Mermaid, the *haenyeo*, or women of the sea, aren't teenagers. Most are grannies. True, their wrinkled faces tell a story, but it's no fairy tale. For hundreds of years, the *haenyeo* have struggled to survive as the primary economic providers of Korea's Jeju Island. But now, because of the danger inherent in free-diving and the changing tides of women in the workplace, the cherished tradition is in jeopardy of dying out. Still, the *haenyeo* cling to the only thing that might survive: their legacy.

"Jeju women are strong, energetic, and diligent," says Youngsook Han, a professor at Jeju National University. She grew up watching the *haenyeo*; their free-diving tradition—one that has been passed from mothers to daughters, many believe, since prehistoric times—even seemed commonplace. But it's not: they are the only women on the planet who dare to do what they do. These gutsy grannies dive to unthinkable depths, without any machinery to aid their breathing, in order to nab the edible innards of the sea: abalone, squid, seaweed, urchins, octopuses, and small snails. They then profit from their dives by selling the fruits of

their marine labor, most of which are shipped overseas to restaurants, some even winding up on American sushi platters.

Many *haenyeo* whiz to work on motorbikes around 7 a.m. At a warehouse, they don rubber wet suits, glass masks, fins, and *taewaks*, orange flotation devices with nets that resemble giant basketballs. Metal tools in hand, they climb aboard a boat, ready to free-dive for hours as they fill their nets. The women have no formal training; they learned to dive from their mothers and grandmothers, building endurance over time. Jeju Islanders know the *haenyeo* are at work when they hear a whistling noise off the coast. The *haenyeo* make that whistle sound, called *sumbisori*, when they inhale and exhale after rising to the surface. They can stay under water longer that way, about two to three minutes, some even up to ten. "When I'm in the water, my body feels free because of its energy," says Ko Myeong-ho, a *haenyeo* in her 80s. "That's why I'm comfortable in the sea, even though I am very tired when I come out." Fatigued, the *haenyeo* wrap up their work back at the co-op when they put out their catch, weigh it, and calculate their profits.

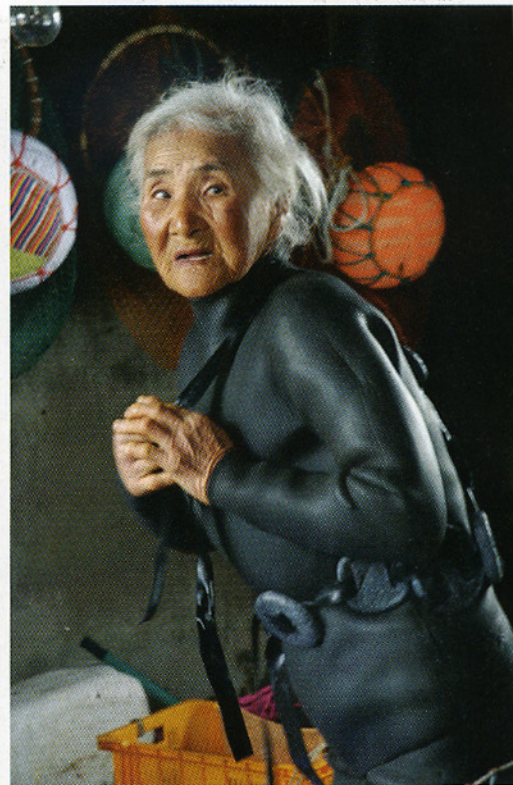
The grannies aren't unusual only because of their unique diving capabilities. The economic independence they've created for Jeju's women clashes with the Confucian patriarchy of Korea. But despite an intimate knowledge of foraging the sea, many *haenyeo* are still managed by men—who, except for a few cases, don't dive in themselves. That's because a massacre in 1948 and the Korean War greatly reduced the male population of Jeju Island. But it comes down to physicality as well: anatomically, women have better endurance in the water because of their higher body-fat percentage.

It's no doubt that the *haenyeo* drive also plays a part. "When they look at the sea, they see it as a working field," says Brenda Paik Sunoo, the Korean-American author of *Moon Tides: Jeju Island Grannies of the Sea*, whose photos are featured here. That work is determined by the lunar calendar and amounts to about 15 days per month. When the *haenyeo* aren't in the water, many farm the land, harvesting onions, garlic, cabbage, flowers, and tangerines, which are sold at local markets. Unlike the marine product, the women share profits equally. It's a practice that exemplifies their sister-like bond.

"What is most remarkable to me is the sense of strength, as well as community—walking into a room of 100 diving women, it is physically palpable," says Dr. Anne Hilty, an American psychologist who lives among the Jeju women. Sunoo elaborates: "When they're together, they're sharing everything together." They even share each other's pain, from life's first tide to its last. *Haenyeo* midwives have shepherded their younger sisters through childbirth, and in turn, healthy *haenyeo* regularly feed and bathe the elderly former divers. In 1999, a *haenyeo* and her daughter even founded a shelter to assist survivors of domestic violence. The *haenyeo* sisterhood carries over into social activism as well. One day a month, they serve as guardians of the sea. On that day, they pass over treasure in search of trash: Styrofoam, cigarette butts, fish traps, and candy wrappers.

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Though the *haenyeo* genuinely care about the sea's well-being, they're also concerned about what it will yield, so the women gather yearly for a shamanist ceremony to ensure an abundant harvest. They set up a seaside altar, gingerly adorning it with rice cakes, fruit, and sea products as offerings. Predominantly women, the shamans also regularly perform *gut* or spiritual ceremonies to protect the *haenyeo*. Belief in these practices intensified during the Japanese occupation of Jeju (1910-1945), when shamanist activities were forbidden and many *haenyeo* reportedly died.

During this period, the *haenyeo* were also exploited, shipped as far as Japan, China, and Russia to dive for sea urchins for Japanese soldiers, never earning fair wages. While some traveled back and forth to see their families, others never returned. By the 1930s, the *haenyeo* had had enough. Women spearheaded protests, culminating in a 1932 gathering of 17,000 people, one of the biggest against Japan in Korea's history. As a result, the women were taught to read, write, and calculate the weight of their catch, helping them to claim their rightful earnings.

But overcoming these setbacks did little to secure the tradition's endurance, and the *haenyeo* are dying out. In 1970, there were 15,000 of these women. By 2002, only 5,600 remained, with more than half older than 60. Now there are probably fewer than 2,500 left. The tradition is faltering in part because the job is dangerous. Rather than risk losing a catch, a *haenyeo* may risk her life by staying underwater too long, and most suffer pain in their extremities and joints. So today, young women are donning business suits rather than wet suits, especially as education has become open to females. "In former days, we women couldn't help but work as *haenyeo*," says Ko Chun-hwa, who is in her 80s. "There wasn't any other way for us to earn a living."

But thanks to the money these *haenyeo* earned, they have been able to afford their daughters a rightful education, which has allowed them to leave the island for safe, white-collar jobs. "I learned how to dive when I was in elementary school," Han says. "My friends and I used to go to the sea and catch products in the shallow water whenever we had free time." But Han stopped playing in the sea when she started middle school. "These days, all of the girls go to school," she says. "They don't have time to go to the sea to learn how to do *haenyeo*."

But despite the tradition's dwindling, or perhaps because of it, writers and artists like Sunoo have descended upon Jeju, intrigued by the grannies' peculiar prowess. It is this recent media storm that may well carry the *haenyeo* legacy into historic waters. Tourism could help keep the tradition afloat as well, with the recent opening of a Jeju Island *haenyeo* museum. There is even a school that emulates the *haenyeo* experience—but it's for education, not job training. This validation has done much to elevate the free-divers' confidence and that of their children. "I'm sure that their kids might have felt some shame saying that their mother was a *haenyeo*," Sunoo says. Today that's changed. "I think [younger women] are getting more interested in *haenyeo*, as *haenyeo* are getting more attention from outsiders," Han says.

Even their children's children, who may never know the sea as a playground or a workplace, are learning to honor them. At the one-year celebration of the *haenyeo* museum opening, a group of Jeju kids sketched pictures of their submarine grannies. In those crayon and marker tributes, the free-diving women weren't glamorized like the mermaids of Disney movies and fairy tales. Instead, they were shown as they truly are, harnessing the powerful sea for their families. ■