

# Mastering **underwater** traditions

BY JOHN TAN

**F**OR years, Song Ji-hyo captivated fans as an award-winning actress, appearing in numerous blockbusters such as *Wishing Stairs*, *A Frozen Flower* and *New World*. Her fame then exceeded South Korea's borders upon her appearance in the long-running reality show *Running Man*.

But after 24 years in the entertainment industry, the 43-year-old is undertaking the greatest challenge of her life, becoming one of South Korea's legendary *haenyeo* (sea women).

The *haenyeo* are keepers of a tradition passed down from generations for at least 400 years, a lifestyle Unesco has recognised as an "Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity".

Every day, these women dive up for seven hours a day without air apparatus or advanced equipment, to gather shellfish, seaweed and other sea life for their families and livelihood.

In her latest three-episode documentary *Deep Dive Korea*, Song takes viewers on a personal journey, subjecting herself to the intensive training necessary to become one of those legendary sea women. Speaking to *theSun*, she opens up about her passion for the cause, the intensive training she endured and her hope for viewers to take away from the documentary.

## Why did you decide to do this show?

I decided to do a documentary on *haenyeo* because I wanted to experience their lives. I wanted to understand their lives as *haenyeo* because the focus is usually on what they do. The focus has not been on how they became *haenyeo*.

So, I wanted to emphasise this aspect – of how they put so much effort into becoming *haenyeo*. I wanted to not only understand their jobs as *haenyeo* but also convey their stories and efforts.

## Would you say this differentiates *Deep Dive Korea* from other travel and diving series?

Yes, it is a deep dive into our cultural heritage, which is *haenyeo* that is all across South Korea. The series not only showcases *haenyeo* as a job, but also their culture, community and lifestyle.

You will get to see how even when they are sad, happy, sick or have recently given birth, they still have to dive in for their survival. That kind of warrior type of lifestyle is what differentiates this entire show from just a mere travel programme.

## What was it like to squeeze 30 years' worth of training into one month?

I have never been afraid of water since I was young. But, the process of becoming a *haenyeo* was difficult. The process of getting used to the water and going down to the depth and finding something to harvest was difficult.

It was physically difficult, and it stressed me out during the whole training month. But what was most challenging was the responsibility to showcase the true side of *haenyeo*. I was worried that my portrayal of a *haenyeo* might seem clumsy or imperfect.

I was under the stress that if I did not perfect it, everyone would look down on *haenyeo*. So, I was being a perfectionist while training. But, I was mentally determined to be recognised as a *haenyeo*. So, this motivated me to keep going.

## Did the fear of drowning ever cross your mind?

Yes. I was always afraid of incidents such as that because the sea is always dangerous. Whether you are prepared or not, the sea always invites some sort of danger. And so, definitely, I was under a lot of pressure, worrying "what if this happened, what if that happened?"

There was one *haenyeo*, in fact, who passed away on the surface in the neighbouring area Hadori because she had a heart attack.

Incidents such as this can happen to anyone and everyone – no matter how experienced you are. You just need to know your condition and be aware of the danger. Just have to always be careful.

➤ South Korean superstar Song Ji-hyo sets out to become legendary *haenyeo*



Watch Song (in purple) mingling with the *haenyeo* community every Sunday on BBC Earth on Astro (channel 554) and UnifiTV (channel 501) at 9pm.



Song (left) has trained for one month to experience sea harvesting.



The documentary takes place in Jeju Island.

## What are some moments on the show that you will cherish?

I saw a dolphin for the first time outside a cave. They were not enclosed and were freewheeling. On my arrival to Jeju and my day of departure, they were there – as if they were saying hi and goodbye.

Another unforgettable memory I have is how I got to learn so much about the underwater lifestyle while training to become a *haenyeo*. I learnt how they had their rules, orders and an entire community I was unaware of.

It was one of the coolest experiences I had. One particularly vivid memory, for instance, was when one of the *haenyeo* cut the sea urchin, cracked open and gave it to a fish. The fish surprisingly led her to an area with more sea urchins.

That was their way of communication – "Hey, I feed you a sea urchin. If you want more, let me know where I can find it."

So, that is when I realised this is the harmony of living with nature. We can live and co-exist together.

## What was the most beautiful sight you saw under the sea?

There was once I tried catching a sea urchin. I could not take it off and it got ripped. It then cracked open and the sea urchin was exposed. The fishes thought I was feeding it to them

because they swam towards me. So, we ended up swimming together as the fishes were all around me. It was fun.

Now that you have heard the story when you watch episodes two and three, you will understand why there were a lot of fishes around me and not other *haenyeo*.

## What do you hope viewers take away about South Korea and the haenyeo community after watching the show?

I want people to understand *haenyeo* are not greedy people who will dive into the water and take as much as they want. They will hold their breath as long as possible. They will go down and search for what is available and then come back up.

It is a compromise with nature. They will only take whatever nature allows them to. So, that is why they do not use oxygen tanks when diving. This determination and appreciation for nature is what I want people to focus on and learn.

I also hope for viewers to learn more about their lifestyles, and how they dedicate their tasks as *haenyeo*, farmers and mothers. There is more than what is seen on the outside.

## Do you hope to do this again?

Definitely! If they are doing season two, I want to do it. I am not satisfied yet as I have not mastered *haenyeo* truly. So, I want to continue myself.



Song reveals her aunt was a *haenyeo*.