

## Female divers of Korea (Haenyeo / 韓國海女)

Good morning, teachers and students. Today, I'd like to share with you the perseverance of the female divers of Korea (haenyeo). They are also known as “*sea women*” (海女). A few months ago, I watched a television programme produced by National Geographic. The programme mainly introduced the perseverance of the women divers in Korea. They are well known for their independent spirit, iron will and determination. With perseverance, such Korean women divers really soar high.

Originally, diving in Korea was an exclusively male profession. In other words, traditionally, there were only men divers. But in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, female divers (haenyeo) outnumbered male divers and sea diving became a female-dominated industry. The possible reasons are: Firstly, in the 17th century, a significant number of men died at sea due to war or deep-sea fishing accidents. As a result, diving became the work of women, who took up the responsibility of looking after the family. Secondly, physiologically, women have more “fat under the skin” (皮下脂肪) than men, making them more equipped to stay in cold waters.

Normally, divers refer to people who work underwater, usually with special equipment. But the female divers of Korea are different. **The female divers of Korea have only simple tools and instruments.** They dive into the sea to catch different seafood, such as abalone, octopus, top shell and oysters. Their instruments are: Wetsuit (a piece of clothing made of rubber that fits the whole body closely, worn by people swimming under-water); Goggles (a pair of glasses that fit closely to the face to protect the eyes from water); Chest weights (to assist diving) (貼身重物); L-shaped hoe (a garden tool with a long handle, used for breaking up soil and removing plants); and net (for putting the seafood that they catch).

**The work of female divers in Korea is really a difficult one.** Traditionally, girls started to train to become female divers when they were 11 years old. Beginning in shallow water, trainees worked their way up to more challenging depths. After about seven years of training, a girl was

considered a "professional sea diver". Today, the oldest female divers are over 80 years old and have been diving for more than 66 years. Sea diving is really difficult work. Before wetsuits were available and all they wore were cotton swimsuits, the female divers would stay in the water for only up to an hour at a time during the winter months. After an hour, they got out of the water and sat by the fire for 3 to 4 hours to dry off. After this break, they would jump back into the water for another hour. Can you imagine how a woman stays in cold water for a few hours? This is really a hard job and challenging task. During the summer months, they stayed in the water for up to 3 hours at a time before a break. With the introduction of wetsuits, female divers found they could stay in the water for five to six hours at a time, even during the winter. For each dive, female divers dive up to 30 meters deep and can hold their breath for over three minutes. Their harvests consist of a lot of seafood such as abalone, octopus, top shell and oysters. But at the same time, the female divers also face a lot of dangers such as jellyfish, sharks and poor weather.

In spite of the difficulties, **Korean female divers always have a positive mindset.** The sea women always stay together in groups. They try to sing together to encourage one another. They also try to speak loudly to overcome their fear.

Today, the sea-diving industry has declined due to industrialization. In 1970, 31% of the female divers were 30 years old or younger, 55% were between 30 and 49 years old and only 14% were 50 or older. But in 2014, however, 98% of the female divers were over the age of 50. In the coming future, such female divers will most likely disappear from Korea. Nevertheless, boys and girls, learn from the female divers of Korea the lesson of perseverance. **With perseverance, the female divers in Korea really soar high.**