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【論 文】

Gender, Maritime Labour and Embodied Ecologies: Jeju Haenyeo and the Politics of Female Free Diving

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1. Introduction

Across global maritime societies, fishing and diving are commonly associated with male labour, physical endurance, and risk-taking. Yet on Jeju Island, a volcanic island off the southern coast of the Korean peninsula, women have historically dominated breath-hold diving for marine resources. Known as haenyeo (literally “sea women”), these divers harvest abalone, sea urchins, conch, and seaweed without oxygen tanks, descending repeatedly to depths exceeding ten meters in cold coastal waters. Their work is physically demanding, seasonally structured, and economically vital to local communities.

In 2016, the haenyeo tradition was inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). This recognition framed the divers as guardians of ecological knowledge and symbols of female resilience. However, heritage designation risks obscuring the complex political economy within which haenyeo labour developed and continues to evolve. The divers’ lives are shaped not only by tradition but also by colonial histories, market integration, demographic change, and environmental crisis.

This article offers a comprehensive gendered analysis of the haenyeo tradition. It advances four central arguments:

- (1) The feminization of diving on Jeju was historically contingent, emerging from ecological constraint, demographic patterns, and state extraction rather than cultural exceptionalism.
- (2) Haenyeo labour generated a localized form of economic matrifocality that reshaped household power without dismantling broader patriarchal structures.
- (3) The embodied practices of diving produced alternative performances of femininity that complicate dominant gender norms in Korean society.
- (4) Contemporary transformations—climate change, neoliberal tourism, and demographic

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aging—are reconfiguring both the material and symbolic status of haenyeo labour.

By integrating feminist political economy, embodiment theory, and environmental anthropology, this article situates the haenyeo within broader theoretical debates while grounding analysis in historical specificity.

2. Historical Emergence of Female-Dominated Diving

2.1 Ecological Constraints and Subsistence Strategies

Jeju Island's volcanic terrain historically limited agricultural productivity. Unlike the fertile plains of mainland Korea, Jeju's rocky soil and exposure to strong winds made rice cultivation difficult. Households diversified subsistence strategies through livestock, dry-field farming, and marine harvesting. The sea thus functioned as a critical economic resource.

Early records from the seventeenth century indicate that both men and women engaged in diving. Over time, however, women became the primary divers. Several explanations have been proposed. One centers on demographic shifts: male migration, military conscription, and maritime taxation reduced male labour availability. Another emphasizes economic rationality: women's diving allowed men to pursue wage labour or agricultural work, maximizing household income streams.

Rather than representing a primordial matriarchy, the feminization of diving emerged from adaptive responses to ecological and political pressures. Women entered maritime extraction not as a symbolic inversion of patriarchy but as economic actors responding to material necessity.

2.2 State Extraction and Labour Reconfiguration

During the Joseon dynasty, marine products such as abalone were subject to state tribute. Male divers faced heavy taxation and corvée obligations. Some historical accounts suggest that families shifted diving labour to women partly to evade taxation, as female divers were initially less targeted by state authorities. Over time, this labour reallocation became normalized.

Under Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945), commercialization intensified. Abalone and sea cucumbers became export commodities within imperial trade networks. Haenyeo were incorporated into market circuits, traveling seasonally to other coastal regions and even abroad. Colonial authorities regulated diving associations and marine harvesting zones, formalizing cooperative structures.

While commercialization expanded income opportunities, it also exposed divers to exploitative intermediaries and price volatility. Women navigated these dynamics collectively, forming associations that negotiated sales and enforced rules. The colonial period thus

simultaneously expanded and constrained female economic agency.

2.3 Postwar Modernization and Industrialization

In the postwar period, rapid industrialization in South Korea reoriented national development toward manufacturing and urban growth. Small-scale fisheries faced competition from industrial fleets. Younger generations pursued education and urban employment, reducing recruitment into diving.

Nevertheless, through the mid-twentieth century, haenyeo income remained crucial to Jeju households. Oral histories describe women financing children's education and household construction through diving earnings. Economic matrifocality persisted even as broader Korean society underwent patriarchal modernization.

3. Feminist Political Economy and Household Power

3.1 Economic Matrifocality

Scholars have sometimes described Jeju society as matriarchal. However, closer analysis reveals a more complex configuration. Property inheritance and lineage systems largely remained patrilineal. Political authority beyond the village level was male-dominated. Yet within households, women divers often controlled significant income streams.

Feminist political economy emphasizes how access to independent earnings reshapes intra-household bargaining power. Haenyeo income frequently exceeded that of male agricultural labour, particularly during peak export periods. Women financed children's schooling, dowries, and family investments. This economic contribution enhanced women's authority in domestic decision-making.

However, economic power did not eliminate gendered expectations. Women continued to shoulder domestic labour, including childcare and eldercare. Diving did not replace domesticity; it supplemented it. The "double burden" of wage labour and household responsibility characterized many divers' lives.

3.2 Collective Organization and Governance

Haenyeo are organized into cooperative associations known as jamsuhoe. These associations regulate harvesting schedules, designate marine zones, and enforce ecological rules. Divers are hierarchically ranked according to skill and experience, from novice (hagwon) to senior (sanggun). Senior divers play leadership roles, managing disputes and coordinating sales.

The jamsuhoe constitute gendered institutions of governance. They provide mutual aid, distribute risk, and maintain social cohesion. Collective diving reduces individual danger:

women enter the water in groups, monitor each other's safety, and respond to emergencies.

This cooperative structure exemplifies common-pool resource management. Seasonal rotation of harvesting grounds and size restrictions on catch reflect long-term sustainability strategies. Unlike industrial fishing, which often prioritizes short-term profit, haenyeo practices historically emphasized regeneration.

3.3 Labour, Risk, and Gender Norms

Diving is dangerous. Risks include hypothermia, decompression-related illness, drowning, and long-term musculoskeletal strain. Yet within Jeju communities, female risk-taking became normalized. The wetsuit-clad diver, carrying a net bag and knife, stands in contrast to dominant Korean gender ideals emphasizing modesty and domesticity.

By occupying maritime space traditionally coded masculine, haenyeo enacted alternative femininities. Their physical endurance challenged biomedical and cultural assumptions about female fragility. Pregnancy diving and rapid postpartum return to work further complicate Western feminist narratives that position women's reproductive bodies as incompatible with physically demanding labour.

Nevertheless, normalization of risk also reflects economic compulsion. Divers often continued working into advanced age due to limited pension systems. Risk acceptance cannot be romanticized; it must be situated within structural constraints.

4. Embodiment, Physiology, and Gender Performativity

4.1 Training and Adaptation

Haenyeo begin training in adolescence, learning breath control, underwater navigation, and marine ecology from senior divers. Repeated exposure conditions the body to cold water and hypoxic stress. Studies of diving reflexes indicate pronounced bradycardic responses among experienced divers, reflecting physiological adaptation.

However, such adaptation results primarily from training and environmental exposure rather than genetic determinism. Embodiment theory emphasizes that bodies are shaped through practice. The diver's body is not naturally suited to the sea; it becomes so through disciplined repetition.

4.2 Gender Performativity in Maritime Context

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity suggests that gender is constituted through repeated acts. Haenyeo diving can be interpreted as a performative practice that produces a distinctive form of femininity—strong, economically active, and communally oriented.

This performativity is embedded in material conditions. The sound of *sumbisori*—the

characteristic whistling exhalation as divers surface—functions as both physiological necessity and auditory marker of communal identity. The collective rhythm of descent and ascent enacts solidarity.

Importantly, such alternative femininity exists within, not outside, patriarchal structures. Haenyeo did not articulate their labour as feminist resistance. Rather, their practices demonstrate how gender norms can be reconfigured through economic and ecological necessity.

5. Ecological Knowledge and Maritime Commons

5.1 Traditional Ecological Knowledge

Haenyeo possess detailed knowledge of tides, currents, seasonal cycles, and species behavior. They assess the size and reproductive status of marine organisms, avoiding overharvesting juveniles. Knowledge is transmitted orally and through apprenticeship.

This knowledge system reflects long-term interaction between community and environment. It aligns with theories of commons governance emphasizing local monitoring and rule enforcement.

5.2 Climate Change and Ecological Crisis

Rising sea temperatures, ocean acidification, and pollution increasingly threaten marine biodiversity around Jeju. Abalone populations have declined. Seaweed beds are affected by warming waters. Divers report longer search times and reduced yields.

Environmental degradation disproportionately impacts aging divers, who must work longer hours to maintain income. The ecological crisis thus intersects with gendered vulnerability.

5.3 Sustainability and Limits

While haenyeo practices historically promoted sustainability, they operate within broader ecological systems influenced by global climate change. Local stewardship cannot fully offset structural environmental transformations.

This tension highlights limits of romanticizing traditional ecological knowledge. Sustainability requires integration of community governance with national and global environmental policy.

6. Heritage Politics and Neoliberal Transformation

6.1 UNESCO Recognition and Cultural Branding

UNESCO inscription elevated haenyeo to global visibility. Museums, festivals, and

performances now present diving as cultural spectacle. Tourism campaigns brand the divers as symbols of resilience and authenticity.

Heritage recognition can provide funding and prestige. Yet it also risks commodifying living labour. Divers become performers for visitors, their work reframed as cultural display rather than economic necessity.

6.2 Aging Demographics and Labour Decline

The average age of active divers now exceeds sixty. Few young women enter the profession due to educational opportunities and urban employment prospects. Diving's physical demands and uncertain income deter recruitment.

Government subsidies attempt to preserve the tradition, but structural economic change limits sustainability. Without significant transformation, haenyeo may persist symbolically while declining materially.

6.3 Tourism, Gender, and Representation

Tourism narratives often emphasize empowerment and matriarchy, simplifying complex histories. Such representations can obscure ongoing labour precarity and environmental vulnerability.

Feminist analysis must interrogate how global audiences consume images of strong sea women while remaining detached from the structural conditions shaping their lives.

7. Comparative Perspectives

Comparisons with other female diving traditions, such as Japanese ama divers, reveal both parallels and divergences. While ama also engage in breath-hold diving, Jeju's scale of female dominance and cooperative governance is distinctive. Comparative analysis underscores the importance of local ecological and political contexts in shaping gendered maritime labour.

8. Discussion

The haenyeo case challenges universalizing narratives of patriarchy. Women on Jeju historically exercised economic authority within households and governed maritime commons collectively. Yet empowerment coexisted with domestic burdens and structural constraints.

Embodiment further complicates feminist theory. The divers' bodies demonstrate that gendered physical capacity is socially constructed through training and necessity. Risk, endurance, and strength are not inherently masculine traits.

At the same time, contemporary transformations reveal fragility of such configurations. Climate change, neoliberal tourism, and demographic aging reshape both labour and identity.

The haenyeo tradition illustrates how gender systems are dynamic, contingent, and embedded in ecological and political economies.

9. Conclusion

The haenyeo of Jeju Island offer a compelling lens through which to reconsider the relationship between gender, labour, embodiment, and ecological governance. Far from representing an isolated cultural curiosity, the divers illuminate the historically contingent nature of gendered labour formations. Their existence challenges universalized narratives about patriarchy, maritime economies, and the physical limits of female bodies. At the same time, their current precarity underscores how fragile such alternative configurations can be when confronted by structural transformation.

This article has argued that the feminization of diving on Jeju did not emerge from an enduring matriarchal order but from ecological constraint, demographic pressures, and state extraction. Women entered and eventually dominated marine harvesting as a rational adaptation to shifting labour demands and economic opportunity. Over time, this adaptation crystallized into a durable institutional system: cooperative governance structures, skill-based hierarchies, and shared ecological rules that sustained both livelihoods and marine ecosystems. Thus, gendered labour was not merely symbolic but materially embedded in political economy and environmental conditions.

Yet economic matrifocality did not dismantle patriarchal structures. Property transmission, kinship norms, and broader state institutions remained male-centered. What emerged instead was a layered gender order in which women's wage-earning capacity coexisted with persistent domestic expectations. The haenyeo illustrate that empowerment is rarely absolute; it is relational and negotiated within structural limits.

Their example cautions against both romanticizing women's economic agency and reducing it to false consciousness within patriarchy. Rather, the divers occupied a liminal space—simultaneously constrained and influential, subordinated and authoritative.

The embodied dimension of haenyeo labour further complicates gender analysis. Through repeated practice, women cultivated physiological adaptations to cold, hypoxia, and risk. The diving body was trained into resilience. This fact destabilizes essentialist narratives that position physical endurance or risk tolerance as inherently masculine traits. Instead, bodily capacity emerges as historically produced and socially conditioned. The haenyeo demonstrate that gendered embodiment is neither static nor biologically predetermined but shaped through disciplined interaction with environment and labour.

Moreover, their ecological governance challenges dominant models of extractive capitalism.

Through seasonal rotation, catch restrictions, and communal monitoring, divers historically maintained marine sustainability. These practices resonate with theories of commons management while remaining embedded in gendered institutions. Women's collective authority in regulating maritime space complicates assumptions that environmental governance is male-dominated. At the same time, their sustainability practices functioned within relatively stable ecological systems. As climate change accelerates, local stewardship confronts global forces beyond its control.

Today, the haenyeo tradition stands at a crossroads. Aging demographics, declining marine yields, and shifting labour aspirations among younger generations threaten its continuity. Heritage recognition by UNESCO has elevated symbolic value but does not guarantee material sustainability. Tourism and cultural branding risk transforming living labour into aesthetic spectacle. The wetsuit-clad diver may become an icon detached from the economic and environmental conditions that shaped her.

This tension reveals a broader paradox in heritage politics: recognition can both protect and fossilize. When traditions are framed as endangered cultural assets, they are often abstracted from their political-economic contexts. The haenyeo are celebrated as resilient women of the sea, yet their precarious livelihoods and exposure to ecological decline remain under-addressed. If preservation efforts fail to confront structural inequalities and environmental degradation, heritage inscription may serve more as symbolic compensation than substantive support.

The haenyeo thus illuminate a broader theoretical point: gender systems are dynamic formations embedded in ecological and economic relations. They can generate alternative configurations of power, but they are vulnerable to macro-structural change. The divers' history underscores that gender is not merely discursive performance; it is lived through labour, risk, and collective governance. To understand gender in maritime societies—or any society—requires attention to political economy, embodiment, and environmental context simultaneously.

In the Anthropocene, as climate change reshapes coastlines and marine ecologies worldwide, the haenyeo's story acquires renewed relevance. Their intergenerational knowledge of tides, currents, and species behavior represents a reservoir of environmental insight developed over centuries. Yet without systemic climate mitigation and economic restructuring, such knowledge alone cannot secure the future of diving communities. The survival of the haenyeo depends not only on cultural pride but on structural alignment between ecological sustainability and economic viability.

Ultimately, the haenyeo compel scholars to move beyond binary frameworks of oppression versus liberation. They embody a historically specific configuration of gendered labour that both challenged and reproduced aspects of patriarchy. Their diving bodies testify to the malleability of gendered physicality. Their cooperative institutions demonstrate the capacity of women to

govern commons sustainably. And their uncertain future reminds us that gendered labour systems are inseparable from broader ecological and political transformations.

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Abstract

The haenyeo—women free divers of Jeju Island in the Republic of Korea—constitute one of the most distinctive gendered maritime labour systems in the world. For centuries, these women have harvested marine products through breath-hold diving, forming cooperative institutions, sustaining household economies, and transmitting ecological knowledge across generations. This article examines the haenyeo tradition through feminist political economy, theories of embodiment, and environmental anthropology. It argues that the haenyeo represent neither a simple case of matriarchy nor a romanticized survival of tradition, but rather a historically contingent gendered labour formation shaped by ecological constraint, state policy, colonial capitalism, and neoliberal heritage politics. The paper traces the historical emergence of female-dominated diving, analyzes household power dynamics and cooperative governance, examines embodied adaptation and gender performativity, and interrogates the contemporary transformation of haenyeo labour under climate change and cultural commodification. By situating the haenyeo within broader debates about gender, labour, and environmental governance, this study contributes to feminist scholarship on maritime economies and challenges universalizing assumptions about patriarchy and female embodiment.

Keywords

Haenyeo, gender, labour, maritime, UNESCO heritage