

■ YEAP PING LIAN

The amazing stories of gifted autistic children around the world will be told by a Korean documentary producer Hyun Mo Jung. **JESSICA LIM** catches up with him when he was in town to film a Malaysian child's story.



Capturing genius on film



THE INTERVIEWER:
Hyun Mo Jung



TEN seconds through a simple recital, 12-year-old Yeap Ping Lian leapt up from his piano seat with a happy shout.

He bounded over to the lanky man who was filming him, and examined the video camera's lens cap with curious fingers.

Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) documentary producer Hyun Mo Jung laughed and lowered his camera.

"It's all right, it's okay," he said to Ping Lian's mother, Sarah Lee, who was trying to get her son to give it back.

It was Jung's third and final day in Malaysia, where he was completing his last leg of shoots for a 60-minute documentary on Savant Syndrome.

Savant Syndrome is a rare condition where people with development disorders display outstanding talents. About 10 per cent of autistic children have some savant skills.

His subject was the little boy who was restlessly roaming all corners of the house, making crooning and whirring noises.

Ping Lian, an autistic child, produces exceptional artwork, be it be acrylic, paint or marker, and pencil drawings.

After taking a look at his work, world expert on Savant Syndrome Dr Darold A. Treffert declared the youngster an autistic savant. The latest colour to Ping Lian's palette is an invitation to exhibit in Henry Gregg Gallery, New York, in January.

Jung's documentary, entitled *Beyond the Power of the Brain*, is due to be screened on Sept 17 during primetime on KBS, Korea's biggest television network.

The other two autistic savants on the documentary are American memory-extraordinaire Kim Peek (the inspiration for Barry Morrow's 1988 Oscar-winning movie *Rain Man*) and eight-year-old Californian piano wonder Kodi Lee.

Of all his productions, Jung takes most pride in the human-interest ones. His personal favourite so far is *Love That You Can't See*, a 2001 documentary about a blind American couple who adopted four blind Korean children.

"The main character was the third child, Ellen. The family tried so hard to find a doctor who would 'open her eyes', but surgery after surgery failed.

"She was abandoned in a supermarket as a baby. We followed her journey as she tried to trace her biological parents. This failed too.

"She cried for hours, and so did I."

Jung said that the responses to *Love That You Can't See* was overwhelming, with audiences saying they were moved to tears. Even Korea's First Lady Kwon Yang-suk was touched, and requested a personal audience with the family.

Jung said his inclination to make family-oriented documentaries probably stemmed from his own

closely-knit family.

When he was 16, his father, the editor-in-chief of *The Korea Times*, uprooted the family, following a job offer, to the United States.

Being in a strange country with his father often busy working, his mother watched out for Jung and his three siblings.

"She didn't speak English and hadn't worked for 15 years. She valued education above everything, and to put us through school and extra English classes and she set up a gift shop and managed it."

Being the eldest son in the family, he sheepishly admitted to being spoiled as a child.

"My grandmother spoil me. It was difficult to adjust to the US where I had to do things myself.

"Besides, my English was 'zero'. I didn't make it easy for my mum, I can tell you. That's why I appreciate her so much.

"When I see how Sarah loves Ping Lian, I'm reminded of the courage and strength of mothers everywhere."

Jung studied journalism in University of Hawaii, started working in KBS when he was 25, and hasn't looked back since. He's now 38.

"Making documentaries is really what I'm passionate about. This is the first time a documentary on savants is being shown in Korea.

"If I could touch just one person's heart with it, I would consider it a success." — jessicalim@nstp.com.my