

## Cuban independence activist Lim Cheon-taek

**Raised funds for independence and supported provisional government of South Korea, led efforts for national education**

**Published history of Cuban Korean immigrants and their involvement in independence movement, received Order of Merit for National Foundation**

The Overseas Koreans Agency has selected Patriot Lim Cheon-taek (1903-1985), a pioneer of the Korean independence movement in Cuba, as the May 2025 Overseas Korean of the Month.

A first-generation Korean immigrant to Cuba from Mexico, Lim led the Korean independence movement in various areas, including organizing the Cuban branch of the Korean National Association, raising funds for the independence movement, educating young Koreans and making media appearances.

Born in 1903 in Gwangju, Gyeonggi Province, Lim moved to Yucatan, Mexico, with his mother in 1905. In 1921, when the economic situation deteriorated due to the Mexican Revolution, he resettled in Cuba with 300 other Koreans and settled in the Matanzas region of Cuba.

When the Japanese consulate in Cuba demanded that Koreans register as overseas Japanese citizens, Lim founded the Matanzas Regional Association of the Korean National Association in response. Starting as a clerk, he rose to various positions, including secretary, president and adviser, leading the independence movement in Cuba.

### **Named by Ministry of Patriots and Veterans Affairs as October 2024 Independence Activist of the Month**

In 1941, after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, he was one of 11 people representing the three provincial councils of the Korean National Association in Cuba who led the formation of the United Korean Diplomatic Association in Cuba to publicly declare the Korean intention to liberate themselves from the Japanese. Two years later, he launched a more systematic and organized independence movement by launching the United Koreans in Cuba Association.

When Lim received a letter from Dr. Kim Gu that the provisional government was experiencing financial difficulties, he organized Koreans in Cuba to collect one spoonful of rice from each family to fund the independence movement.

From 1937 to 1944, they raised and paid US\$1,289 to the Korean National Association's Central Committee and \$246 to a



Patriot Lim Cheon-taek

Chinese bank in Havana, Cuba, to send to Dr. Kim Gu of the Provisional Government in Chongqing. This was not a small amount of money considering the wages of Koreans in Cuba at the time were only \$2 to \$3 a week.

To support the Gwangju Student Independence Movement in 1929, he organized a support rally with 100 Korean Cubans in 1930 and raised a special donation of \$100 to send to his homeland.

"The 10,000 or so compatriots in the U.S. mainland, Hawaii, Mexico and Cuba were mostly laborers, but their patriotism was intense," Kim wrote in his autobiography about the Cubans' support for independence.

Through people's education and journalistic activities, he worked to establish the national identity of Korean Cuban youth and document the history of Korean immigration and the independence movement in Cuba.

In 1925, he began his career as a teacher at the Minsung

Korean Language School, the first Korean school in Cuba, and served as its principal for many years, teaching Korean language, history and culture to foster national education and the identity of the next generation of Koreans.

In 1930, he rebuilt the Jinsung Korean Language School, which had ceased operations due to financial difficulties, and established a night school, the Youth Academy, to educate young people through reading, lectures and debates, laying the foundation for the next generation of leaders to lead the independence movement.

As a correspondent in Cuba for the Sinhan Minbo for more than a decade beginning in the 1930s, he informed the U.S. and South Korea about the independence movement of the Korean community in Cuba and distributed magazines, such as the Gongbo, published by the Korean Provisional Government, to the Korean community in Cuba to spread international solidarity for Korean independence.

In addition, starting in 1941, he published a series of articles on the 20-year history of the migration of Koreans to Cuba in the Sinhan Minbo, and based on this, he published “Cuban Immigration History” in 1954. This book is the first to systematically document the history of Korean immigration to Cuba and the independence movement, and is regarded as a valuable source for the study of international Korean history today.

In honor of Lim’s contributions, the Korean government awarded him the Order of Merit for National Foundation in 1997, and the Ministry of Veterans Affairs honored him as the October 2024 Independence Activist of the Month.

“Lim Cheon-taek was a patriot who boosted the hope of Korea’s independence from the other side of the world,” Overseas Koreans Agency Commissioner Lee Sang-duk said. “We are honoring him as the Overseas Korean of the Month to highlight his lifelong dedication to his country so that future generations can better remember his noble achievements.”

### **Patriot Lim’s granddaughter visits Korea at OKA’s invitation**

To commemorate the establishment of diplomatic relations between South Korea and Cuba in February last year, the OKA invited three to four Korean Cubans, including Lim’s granddaughter Nora Lim Alonso, to Korea last December to experience the history and culture of their homeland, including retracing the steps of their ancestors’ independence movement.

In an interview with the media at the time, Alonso recalled her grandfather.

“I knew Korea as my grandfather’s country, but I didn’t really know much about it. I only had the image of a hard life that I



Lim Cheon-taek’s granddaughter Nora Lim Alonso visits the mausoleum of her grandfather, who is buried at Daejeon National Cemetery, during a visit to Korea in December 2024 at the invitation of the Overseas Koreans Agency.

heard from my grandfather, but when I came here, I was surprised to see how much it has developed. My mother is from Spain, so my grandmother taught me how to make kimchi and cook a lot of Korean food, so I grew up eating Korean food.

In particular, my grandfather not only founded and ran a Korean language school in Cuba but also learned Spanish to better fit into what was then a Spanish colony and taught it to the Korean immigrants who came with him. He was also very passionate about educating his children so that they would not forget their Korean roots. My father, Jeronimo Lim (Korean name Lim Eun-jo), served as the Cuban government’s vice minister of industry and food and president of the Korean Association in Cuba, and my aunt, Marta Lim (86), who is still alive, published a book called “Koreans in Cuba” in Spanish and Korean.

### **Lim’s great-grandson receives Korean citizenship**

Lim Penzan Antonio, 28, a great-grandson of Lim Cheon-taek, who is pursuing a master’s program in artificial intelligence (AI) at Chungnam National University, became a South Korean citizen in August last year at a ceremony in which the government awarded him a certificate of citizenship for descendants of independence heroes.

The OKA recognizes and announces the Overseas Korean of the Month for contributing to the development of Korea or raising the profile of Koreans in their country of residence. The agency recognized the late Kim Pyeong-jin (1926-2007), a Korean Japanese businessman who led the development of Jeju Island’s tourism industry, in March and the late Hong Myung-ki (1934-2021), former chairman of the M&L Hong Foundation, who was a generous Korean American donor, in April. 장