

## From ‘Tearful henequen’ to ‘Viva Corea’

In 1905, 1,031 people took their first steps onto the state of Yucatan just over a month after departing Incheon, Korea

This year marks the 120th anniversary of Korean immigration to Mexico. The 1,031 Koreans who arrived in Mexico in May 1905 spent around four years on the henequen farms before dispersing and putting down roots. Today, more than 30,000 of their descendants live in Mexico.

For Koreans 120 years ago, Mexico was considered a land of opportunity. For our forebears, who were struggling with food scarcity and the chaotic social atmosphere of the late Joseon period, the media advertisements filled with phrases recruiting workers for Mukseoga (墨西哥 - Chinese characters for Mexico) were enough to pique their curiosity.

‘Four-year contract. Free housing. High wages.’

On April 4, 1905, 1,033 Korean immigrants to Mexico boarded the British merchant ship Ilford at Jemulpo Port in Incheon.

After traveling through Yokohama, Japan, the ship docked at the port of Salina Cruz in Oaxaca, Mexico, just over a month later. During that time, two children and one adult died, and one child was born, so 1,031 people took their first steps onto the shore. They were soon traveling by train and ship to the Yucatan port of Progreso, where they were divided into groups of 10 to 25 people and placed at the henequen farms of Merida.

### Diasporic life after four years of farm labor

Henequen is a type of cactus with sharp leaves. It was a component used in rope for ships, which was in high demand at the time. From as early as 4 a.m. until sunset, Koreans would cut the leaves and strip off the fibers in the scorching heat, with temperatures reaching 40 C in the middle of the summer. Their faces were blackened, and their hands often bled from thorns. Historians who have studied the situation agree that the workers had to pay rent and buy their own food.

In an editorial dated July 29, 1905, Hwangsung Newspaper exposed the plight of the Korean people in Mexico with heartbreaking statements, such as, “They wear torn clothes and worn-out straw shoes,” “The image of desolate Korean women reminds one of the plight of cattle, and it is impossible to look at them without tears,” and “It is impossible to stomach the miserable condition of the serfs.”

Even after the contract period ended, the migrants found it



Korean laborers work at a henequen farm in Mexico.

difficult to return to their homeland, which was under Japanese occupation, and most chose to scatter and settle throughout Mexico. Some assimilated by marrying Mexicans. About 270 of the first generation of Korean immigrants went to work on Cuban sugar cane plantations in 1921. They are the ancestors of more than 11,000 Koreans living in Havana and Matanzas today.

### Establishing Hangeul schools and supporting Independence Movement

Korean immigrants in Mexico realized their desire to “not pass on hardships to the next generation” and preserve their identity by establishing Hangeul schools to teach children and raise money for the independence movement and send it to their home country.

According to a report published by the former Agency of Patriots and Veterans Affairs (now the Ministry of Patriots and Veterans Affairs), titled “Survey Report on Historic Sites of the Overseas Independence Movement: Mexico, Cuba,” ahead of the expiration of their contracts, Koreans on the Yucatan Peninsula established the Merida Local Committee of the Korean National Congress to campaign for the restoration of national rights. They also established the Sungmu School (崇武學校), a combatant training institution, to train soldiers.

Today, more than 30,000 of their descendants live in Mexico. Although they have localized their appearance and language over



A poster for the documentary "Descendientes" hangs in downtown Mexico City in 2022.

the generations, they still remember their roots by organizing Korean descendant associations and actively enjoying Korean culture.

"The descendants have grown up in a very different country with different traditions," Melissa Mondragon, the director of a 23-minute documentary titled "Descendientes" (Spanish for descendants) in 2022, told Yonhap News Agency. "I have witnessed how the Korean descendants have become a community in Mexico, sharing the grief of their ancestors."

### Third- and fourth-generation descendants active in politics and medicine

Currently, descendants have reached the fifth generation, according to the Korean Descendants Association. Some third- and fourth-generation descendants have served as senators (Nora Yu) and state chief justices (Lisbeth Roy Song). The descendants want to be "remembered" through more diverse interactions with Korean society.

Korean Descendants Association President Marta Kim, a medical doctor in Mexico City who actively participates in various compatriot gatherings and conveys the descendants' wishes, emphasized, "I want us to work together to honor the sacrifices of our ancestors and create a place where we can be more united."

In particular, the descendants would like to see more exchanges between the two countries, especially based on the high level of interest in Korean culture among locals.

According to analytical data from the Korea Creative Content Agency, the Latin American content market is expected to have been growing at an average annual growth rate of 6.63 percent since 2021 for six years, outpacing the global average growth rate of 5.19 percent, with Mexico, in particular, showing a strong willingness to consume Korean culture.

### Riding the 'hallyu' wave, local favorability toward Koreans increases

The Korean Embassy in Mexico has requested the active attention of the Overseas Koreans Agency and the Ministry of Patriots and Veterans Affairs to facilitate this year's commemoration activities for the 120th anniversary of Korean immigration. The embassy will also begin preparatory work to survey the current status of Korean descendants.

Locally, Merida, Yucatan, which is home to the Korean Immigration History Museum, and Campeche have designated May 4 as Korea Day. The Yucatan state government also celebrates the same day as Korea Day. In 2021, the Mexican Federal Congress declared Korean Immigrant Day, in the first instance of a special national holiday being declared.

In this way, Mexico will mark the 120th anniversary of Korean migration with a yearlong effort to honor the contributions of Koreans and promote exchanges and cooperation with South Korea. 🇵🇷

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