

## ‘Henequen of 120 years ago’ Liberation Day cheers of joy and sorrow echo across Mexico

89-year-old second-generation Korean descendant leads ‘Manse’ chant dressed in ‘hanbok’;  
‘precious time to reflect on our roots’

A ceremony commemorating the 80th anniversary of Liberation Day was held at the Palacio Real banquet hall in Merida, the central city of Yucatan State in eastern Mexico, on Aug. 10.

Attended by about 100 descendants of Koreans, spanning from the second to fifth generations, the event proceeded with a salute to the national flag, an overview of Korea’s independence history, congratulatory addresses by the Yucatan governor and mayor of Merida, and remarks by Consul General Lee Sang-hee of the Embassy of the Republic of Korea in Mexico.

During the subsequent performances of “samulnori” percussion and fan dance, 12-year-old Lia, a fifth-generation descendant dressed in “hanbok,” captivated the audience with her performance to Korean rhythms, eliciting beaming smiles from the gathered families. Her father, who proudly regarded his daughter, had the Korean name Lia tattooed on his left arm.

The highlight of the event was the brief-yet-powerful Mexican-style three cheers. Maria Amparo Kim Yam (89), a second-generation Korean descendant born in Mexico in 1936, raised her drink and led the chant with clear pronunciation, shouting, “Manse!” three times. The rest of the attendees immediately repeated her cry like an echo.

“I was born and raised here, gave birth to eight children, and those children in turn gave birth to 28 children,” Kim said. “Though circumstances prevented me from ever visiting Korea, I know well that something Korean resides within me.”

Kim Yam’s father, Miguel Kim Son, was one of 1,311 people who boarded the British merchant ship Ilford at Jemulpo Port in Incheon 120 years ago, in 1905.

Amid the chaotic social atmosphere and days of poverty, our ancestors at the time viewed Mexico as a land of opportunity. They boldly boarded ships, their hopes pinned on newspaper recruitment ads that later proved to be nothing but “sugar-



Key attendees, including Jeong Gab-hwan, standing representative of the Latin America Branch of the Center for Historical Truth and Justice (4th from R), and Lee Sang-hee, consul general of the Embassy of the Republic of Korea in Mexico (C), pose for a commemorative photo at the 80th Liberation Day celebration held in Merida, Yucatan State, Mexico, on Aug. 10. On the far right is Juan Duran, president of the Yucatan Korean Descendants Association.

coated lies.”

However, various records and oral accounts reveal that the henequen plantations in Yucatan where they were placed were almost akin to a “living hell.” Henequen, a type of cactus with sharp leaves, was the material for ship ropes, which were in high demand at the time.

The first generation of Korean immigrants to Mexico, who were not even paid properly, are referred to as the “eniken” (henequen). The term eniken is used as if it were a word representing the tear-soaked daily lives of Koreans at that time.

Even through their hardships, the first generation of Korean immigrants in Mexico established the Sungmu School to train independence fighters and sent funds back to their homeland for the independence movement. Miguel Kim Son, the father of Kim Yam, sent part of his living expenses to Korea.

Dolores Garcia (64), director of the Korean Immigration Museum and a third-generation Korean immigrant, said: “I feel this year is more special than any other. It’s a precious time to reflect on our roots together with many descendants of Koreans.” 🇰🇷