

Chairman Seo Gab-ho: ‘Pioneer of investment in the homeland’ and ‘Spinning Mill King of Japan’

Led large-scale investment in the motherland during the 1960s, contributing to Korea’s economic development
 Led movement to donate properties to diplomatic missions in Japan, including providing land for Korean Embassy in Japan

The Overseas Koreans Agency (Commissioner Kim Kyung-hyup) has selected Chairman Seo Gab-ho (1914-1976) as the Overseas Korean of the Month for October 2025. He donated the building and grounds of the Korean Embassy in Japan and contributed to Korea’s economic development through large-scale investment in his homeland during difficult times.

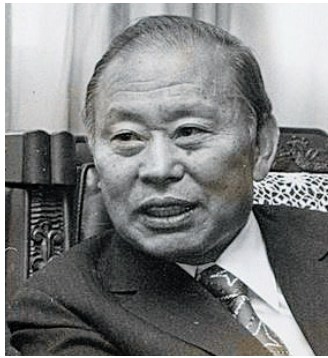
Seo Gab-ho was born in 1914 in Samnam-myeon, Ulju-gun, South Gyeongsang Province, the son of a poor farmer. At age 9, he crossed over to Osaka, Japan, alone, without a single relative. Driven solely by the determination to survive, he collected scrap materials, sold candy and gum, and took on all manner of menial jobs, saving every penny to build his seed money.

Noticing his diligence, a Japanese acquaintance introduced him to a job at the Shinto towel factory in Osaka’s Senshu region. Enduring discrimination and contempt, he mastered weaving techniques and gained insight into the spinning industry.

Using his savings and two machines received from Shinto, he established a cottage-style cotton spinning mill in Izumisano. Cotton was designated a military supply, so everything he produced sold out immediately, generating revenue that later became the foundation for his spinning business.

In March 1948, after Korea’s liberation from Japan, he used his accumulated seed money to purchase discarded spinning machines and established Sakamoto Spinning, going from strength to strength. Two years later, in the spring of 1950, he acquired Kawasaki Heavy Industries and established a second factory, Osaka Spinning. The outbreak of the Korean War caused a surge in demand for military uniforms, keeping the factories running around the clock.

Riding this momentum, in 1955, Seo acquired Hitachi Spinning, which was facing bankruptcy, and ascended to the position of group chairman. By 1961, he achieved annual sales of 10 billion yen



Chairman Seo Gab-ho, selected as the Overseas Korean of the Month for October, known as the “Spinning Mill King of Japan”

(US\$65 million), earning the title “Spinning Mill King of Japan” and becoming Osaka’s top income taxpayer. The Sakamoto Spinning Group grew into one of Japan’s top 10 spinning companies, driving the nation’s economic revival. Seo expanded his business into hotels and real estate, even entering the top five ranking of Japan’s highest-income earners.

‘One must never feel ashamed of one’s homeland’; an extraordinary love for his country

Seo, who rose to become chairman of a major Japanese corporation, never spared support for his homeland and the Korean community in Japan, driven by an extraordinary love for his country that “one must never feel ashamed of one’s homeland.”

In October 1951, he purchased a 2,400-pyeong (7933 m²) plot of land and a two-story building in Tokyo’s Azabu district (currently valued at 1 trillion won), formerly used as the Danish Embassy residence, and provided it free of charge to the then Korean Embassy in Japan for a 10-year period. Later, on Aug. 15, 1962, during a visit to Korea as part of the Korean Residents in Japan Delegation for the Liberation Day ceremony, he donated the Azabu No. 1 land and building to the government, along with a deed of donation.

Furthermore, in 1970, he purchased a building and land in Shirokane, Tokyo, and donated them to the state in 1975. These properties, which the government found difficult to acquire at a time when the per capita GDP was less than \$130, became the foundation for the current Korean Embassy in Japan and the ambassador’s residence.

Seo also spearheaded the movement to donate land for diplomatic missions in Japan. In 1963, when the Korean Consulate in Osaka was relocating, he and four other Korean residents in Japan raised 27 million yen to donate as a security deposit.

Dedication to advancing rights of Koreans in Japan and also national consciousness education

Chairman Seo also made profound contributions to advancing the rights of the Korean community and education for the national consciousness. Beginning in 1957, he served as the second chairman of the board of directors for the Geumgang Academy, an Osaka-based Korean school, personally funding its annual operating expenses from his private assets until his passing. He spearheaded the establishment of the Takarazuka Korean Academy and subsidized its operational costs. Furthermore, he donated 5 million yen annually to the Osaka Korean Residents Union in Japan and made a substantial donation for the construction of the Korean Pavilion during the 1970 Osaka Expo.

Seo's investments in his homeland gained momentum in 1961 during the implementation of former President Park Chung-hee's economic development plan. This marked the first large-scale investment in the homeland by a Korean Japanese, significantly contributing to Korea's textile industry and economic development at the time, making him a pioneer of overseas Koreans' investment in the homeland.

In February 1963, he acquired Taechang Textile, Korea's largest cotton mill located in Yeongdeungpo, for \$1 million and established Panbon Textile Co., Ltd. in the Mulla-dong area of Seoul. Four years later, the company changed its name to Banglim Spinning. In 1973, he invested approximately \$70 million in Gumi to establish Yunseong Spinning, installing state-of-the-art cotton spinning machinery and the latest spinning machines. The combined workforce of Banglim Spinning and Yunseong Spinning reached 4,000 employees. He established Banglim Girls' High School within the Banglim Spinning factory premises for young female workers, providing educational materials and tuition support to offer them opportunities to continue their studies.

Korean Embassy in Japan designates Nov. 1 each year as Seo Gab-ho Day

The thriving business, however, began to rapidly decline after a massive fire broke out at the Yunseong Spinning Factory in January 1974, causing damage worth 14.3 billion won. The factory, spanning over 66 acres, was destroyed by the fire, causing immense damage.



A commemorative photo taken after Chairman Seo Gab-ho (L, front row) visited the Blue House on Aug. 15, 1962, to present the deed for the land and building of the Korean Embassy in Japan to then Chairman of the Supreme Council for National Reconstruction Park Chung-hee (2nd from L, front row).



The children of the late Chairman Seo Gab-ho, who donated the land for the embassy, attend the opening ceremony of the new Korean Embassy building in Tokyo on July 18, 2013. The children in attendance were Seo Sang-wook (second son, 2nd from R), Seo Sang-un (third son) and Seo Gyeong-nam (third daughter), along with his granddaughter Seo Haeng-ja (far R). The name Dongmyeongshil was chosen to honor the deceased's pen name.

In addition, the economic downturn from the first oil crisis and soaring crude oil prices caused the profitability of the textile business to deteriorate. Ultimately, in 1974, Japan's Sakamoto Spinning defaulted on 300 million yen in promissory notes, leading to a 64 billion-yen bankruptcy and collapse. This also impacted Korea's Banglim Spinning and Yunseong Spinning, forcing them to sell off large portions of their assets and downsize their operations.

Seo tirelessly traveled between Japan, Hong Kong and the Philippines in an effort to recover his business but ultimately failed to do so, passing away in 1976 at the age of 62.

Recognizing his patriotism and contributions to Korea's economic development, the Korean government posthumously awarded him the Camellia Medal of the Order of Civil Merit in 1976. Upon the opening of its new building in 2013, the Korean Embassy in Japan installed a historical hall named Dongmyeonggwan (Dongmyeong Pavilion), derived from his pen name. In 2015, it commissioned and displayed a bust of him. Furthermore, the newly constructed ambassador's residence in 2024 was named Dongmyeongjae. Nov. 1 of each year is designated as Seo Gab-ho Day to honor the late chairman's noble love for his country.

"Chairman Seo's donations and investments went beyond financial contributions," OKA

Commissioner Kim Kyung-hyup said. "They elevated our nation's standing and played a vital role in the development of the Korean community in Japan and our country's economy. We designate him as the Overseas Korean of the Month for October so that his patriotism and dedication will not be forgotten."

The OKA identifies compatriots who have contributed to the development of the Republic of Korea or to enhancing the status of Koreans in their countries of residence, selecting and announcing them monthly as the Overseas Korean of the Month. The previous honorees include Kim Pyeong-jin (former president of the Jeju Development Association in Japan), Hong Myeong-gi (former chairman of the M&L Hong Foundation), Im Cheon-taek (independence activist), Park Byeong-heon (former head of the Korean Residents Union in Japan), Park No-hak (former president of the Return of Detained Sakhalin Koreans Association), Lee Ui-gyeong (independence activist) and Dr. Seo Se-mo (medical doctor). 장