

Leading the way in implementing human rights, equality, justice Also selected as journalist who defined the 20th century

Reporter Lee Kyung-won, who was the first Korean American journalist in U.S. mainstream media and helped exonerate Lee Chol Soo, who was falsely accused of murder and sat for years on death row, passed away March 9 from a chronic illness. He was 96 years old.

According to the Korean American media and the K.W. Lee Center for Leadership (Director Kim Do-hyung), the deceased, the son of Gov. Lee Hyung-soon, a patriot of the Independence Movement during the Japanese colonial period, was born in Gaeseong in 1928. After graduating from Korea University with a degree in English literature, the reporter moved to the United States in 1950, majored in journalism at West Virginia University and received a master's degree in journalism from the University of Illinois in 1955.

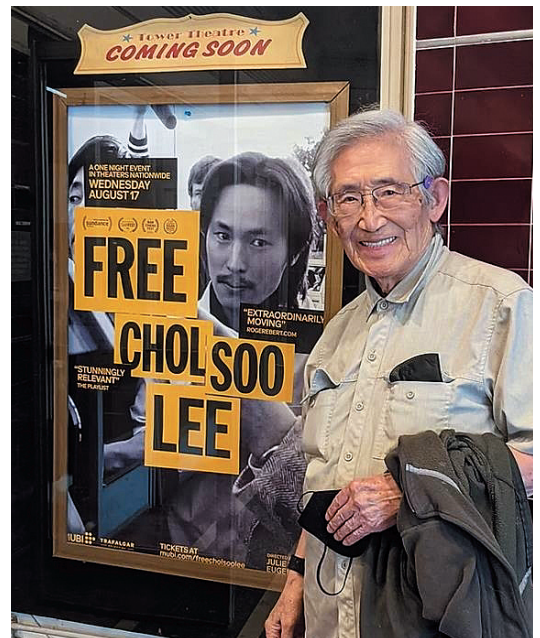
In 1956, when racial discrimination was still severe in the United States, he became the first Asian immigrant to join The Kingsport Times-News, a mainstream daily newspaper in Tennessee, as a reporter. After that, he moved to the Charleston Gazette and mainly covered black lung disease (pneumoconiosis) suffered by Appalachian miners, as well as other issues regarding poverty and the civil rights movement.

After moving to The Sacramento Union newspaper in 1970, he reported over 100 times on the story of Lee Chol Soo, who was serving a sentence for gang murder in San Francisco's Chinatown in 1973, and won his acquittal. Lee Chol Soo, who was only 18 years old at the time, was sentenced to life in prison due to the testimony of a white witness who could not distinguish Asian appearances.

After Lee Kyung-won, who came across this incident, persistently reported the story of injustice, a movement to save him spread like wildfire in not just the Korean community but the wider Asian one, leading to the release of Lee Chol Soo after 10 years in prison.

This story was depicted in the Hollywood movie "True Believer" and was also produced as a documentary about the rescue movement, "Free Chol Soo Lee," which won an Emmy Award, the most prestigious award in the American broadcasting industry, in 2003.

In 1979, the deceased also published the Koreatown weekly, the first Korean English-language newspaper, in Los Angeles to convey the voices of Koreans to mainstream society.



Reporter Lee Kyung-won takes a commemorative photo in front of the documentary "Free Lee Chol Soo." (Provided by K.W. Lee Center for Leadership)

The deceased, who was at the forefront of protecting the human rights of ethnic minorities throughout his life, served as the English editor-in-chief of The Korea Times English edition in 1990, then worked as an adviser to NBC and lectured on journalism at the University of California, Davis.

In recognition of his contributions to the realization of equality, human rights and justice, he received the Justice Award in 2007 from the Foundation for Improvement of Justice, a leading human rights organization in the U.S., and was also the first person to receive a lifetime achievement award from the Asian American Journalists Association.

The deceased also had the honor of being selected as the only Asian journalist among the "500 American journalists who shone in the 20th century" at the Newseum museum for journalism in Arlington, VA, just outside Washington, D.C.

The deceased's funeral was held privately in Northern California with only his family and close friends in attendance. 장