

The Impact of American Popular Culture in Korea: Embodied by Blue Jeans

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Abstract

The cowboy culture, characterized by wide-brimmed hats, boots, and jeans, embodies a free-spirited and rugged lifestyle rooted in the history of the American frontier. Notably, jeans emerged as a symbol of youth rebellion in the 1950s, especially when James Dean starred in films that personified defiance for its own sake, capturing the imagination of teenagers. Later, in Korea, American Western movies or films featuring actors like James Dean and Marlon Brando helped popularize jeans as symbols of breaking away from traditional culture. A new generation of young Koreans wanted to participate in global trends in music, movies, and consumption, and enthusiastically embraced youth culture represented by jeans, long hairstyles, and acoustic guitar music.

This rapid transfer and acceptance of American culture were facilitated by increased interactions following the Korean War. As part of the economic aid, many American companies entered Korea, and the number of transient populations—such as U.S. soldiers, their families, diplomats, and businesspeople—grew substantially. Alongside the expansion of study abroad and emigration to the U.S., America, once regarded as a distant land, increasingly came to be perceived as a neighbor rather than a faraway country.

The 1950s and 1960s marked the peak of diplomatic and civilian exchanges between Korea and the United States, driven by mutual interests: America's desire to dominate Asia during the Cold War period and Korea's post-war aspiration for internationalization. In this context, American culture was predominantly consumed under the overwhelming influence of material and popular culture. This presentation aims to examine the influence of American pop culture, exemplified by blue jeans, focusing on the period from the 1950s onward.

Biography



Dr. Kim Youngna is Professor Emerita of the Department of Archaeology and Art History at Seoul National University and a former director of the National Museum of Korea, which she led from 2011 to 2016. Dr. Kim holds a B.A. from Muhlenberg College and an M.A. and Ph.D. in History of Art from the Ohio State University. Although formally educated in Western modern art, she has extensively written on Korean modern and contemporary art. Her numerous publications include many articles and several books, such as “Korea’s Search for a Place in Global Art History” in the March 2016 issue of *Art Bulletin*, *Twentieth Century Korean Art* (Laurence King, London, 2005), and *Tradition, Modernity and Identity: Modern and Contemporary Art in Korea* (Korea Foundation, Hollyn, Seoul, 2005), *韓國近代美術の100年* (東京, 三元社, 2011). Her most recent book, *Korean Art since 1945: Challenges and Change*, was published by Brill in April 2024.