

Romanticizing Cowboys and Ranches in Korean Popular Music: Reception of the Country & Western Genre in the 1950s

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Abstract

The year 1945 was an important turning point in Korean popular music history: before then, Japanese influences dominated, but afterward, American influences rapidly expanded. There are many traces of this influence in Korean popular music of the 1950s, one of which is the frequent appearance of the theme of cowboys and ranches. In the 1930s, the ranch was used very rarely in Korean popular songs, and it was imagined as an exotic and modern space. The word cowboy was not used at all, and instead the Korean expression Mokdong (목동, 牧童) was used. “Mokdong” had a strongly traditional and localized image as shown in ink and brush painting or in folk stories.

In Korean popular songs of the 1950s, however, the use of “ranches” (목장) increased significantly, and the images became exotic and unrealistically romanticized. The word “Cowboy” (카우보이) was also used more often, almost replacing Mokdong. The word “Cowboy” in lyrics nurtured an exotic and stylish image in the listener’s mind. Although the use of cowboys and ranches as a subject matter expanded, it did not immediately lead to the establishment of the Country & Western genre in popular music. The musical distinctions among various American popular music genres were neither important nor easy for Koreans at the time. For many Koreans, the clearly recognizable images of cowboys and ranches were more important than the ambiguous musical style of Country & Western. The exotic and romanticized image of cowboys and ranches, far removed from reality in American popular culture, was the key to their popularity.

Biography



LEE Junhue is a scholar of music history based in Seoul, South Korea. He teaches history of popular culture and music at Jeonju University. He considers himself a researcher who finds songs, writes history in songs, and sees the world in songs. Professor Lee majored in East Asian history at Seoul National University and pursued a PhD in Chinese literature and musicology at the Academy of Korean Studies. His recent works are as follows: *Liberation Songs* (2025, CD), *East Asian Pop, Traces of Disappearance* (2025, book), “A Study on Domido Record in the 1950s Busan” (2024, paper). In addition to scholarly writings, Professor Lee planned and produced albums for popular signers such as “Nam In-su Complete Works (CD)” and “Lee Nan-young Complete Works (CD).”