

# The Background and Reality of the Emergence of “English Villages” in Apartment Complexes: A Case Study of an English Village Run by Apartment Residents\*

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(Abstract) Toward the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, when the English-language craze was in full swing in South Korea, a peculiar space known as an “English village” emerged. Originally, this referred to a place created to teach students English in an environment made to look like a village one would find in the English-speaking world, without students having to go abroad. With this objective in mind, there was a nationwide explosion of English villages established by local governments and educational institutions. This movement arrived in the residential domain with the introduction of so-called apartment English villages, a social phenomenon emblematic of the union of two powerful signifiers of class in South Korea: English and apartments. Based on field research conducted at one branded apartment complex situated in the greater Seoul area, this article presents a case study examining the sociocultural contexts that encompass apartment English villages. The apartment complex examined in this study attempted to increase the value of the apartments by merging the cultural capital of English with housing. While it is difficult to declare the attempt successful, the case illuminates how an apartment English village—something often regarded as a lure for prospective apartment buyers—can belong to and be utilized by residents. The apartment English village brings

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This article was originally published in 『비교문화연구』 [Cross-cultural studies] 26(1): 271–301. Translated from Korean by Grace Payer.

\* This article contains revised and supplemented research from the author's PhD dissertation. Many thanks to the anonymous reviewers for their invaluable comments.

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*Korean Anthropology Review* vol. 7 (February 2023): 101–128.

<http://doi.org/10.58366/KAR.2023.7.02.101>

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to light the complex reality of South Korean society—from the aspirations attached to the English language, to the desire to increase property values, to the relationships between residents of apartment complexes.

## 1. Introduction: South Korea's English Craze and the English Village Phenomenon

The position held by the English language as cultural capital in South Korean society is unparalleled. Since Korea's modernization in the late nineteenth century, English has been recognized as an instrument of power for upward mobility (Kang Junman 2014: 17–52), and with the era of globalization heralded in the early 1990s, an English craze swept across all of society. In the new millennium, English came to be regarded as “more than a means of communication; it is a measure for evaluating an individual's abilities, and the potential resources an individual has for success” (Yi Dongyeon 2010: 178). In contemporary South Korea, English has been established as both the signifier of class and a resource that ensures cosmopolitan citizenship in the age of globalization (Park and Abelman 2004; Park 2011).

In a social milieu that emphasized English to such a degree, social aspirations for English education swelled, and the English education industry exploded. Amid this explosion, one phenomenon worth paying attention to was the appearance of the peculiar space of the English village. An English village in South Korea refers to a “place made up to look like a village one would find in the English-speaking world, created for students to go about life together with native English-speaking teachers in order to learn English” (Jo Geumju 2006: 360) or a “short-term English immersion experience in a live-in environment where an English-only policy is strictly enforced” (Kang and Abelman 2011: 92). As the English craze spread throughout South Korean society in the 1990s, increasing numbers of parents sent their young children to study abroad. English villages were promoted as a way to circumvent the exorbitant costs of study abroad programs and avoid placing very young children in situations where they would struggle to adapt to a new environment.

It was within this context that the first English village in South Korea opened in August of 2004, in the city of Ansan, Gyeonggi Province. This

was followed by the frenzied construction of English villages all across South Korea, such as in Seoul’s Pungnap-dong and the city of Paju in Gyeonggi Province, under the direction of local governments and foreign language education agencies. As a result, by 2011 there was a total of 32 local, government-directed English villages in South Korea boasting an estimated 300,000 or more annual users served (Kim Jeongsu 2011: 131). These figures, of course, only account for English villages officially managed by various local governments. If unregistered small to midsized English villages were included, the number would far exceed that officially reported.

Yet despite their stated purposes of enabling students to have the experience of studying English abroad without leaving South Korea and of supplementing public education to increase South Korea’s national competitiveness, there has been much skepticism as to the practical efficacy of English villages. So far, no research projects or reports exist to prove that the number of students leaving South Korea to study abroad waned due to the use of English villages. In fact, since the number of users has not met the expectations of officials, English villages have consistently been in the red financially, and they have been used simply as political PR for various local governments (Yi Huieun 2007: 92; Kim Jeongsu 2011: 130). And yet, even as the English villages run by local governments wallowed in debt, there was another market that dreamed up a new source of revenue using the English village model: the pre-sale *bunyang* housing market.<sup>1</sup>

It can hardly be questioned that in South Korea, English has come to been seen as “simultaneously a symbol of class difference as well as the expedient bringing about and preserving of such difference” (Choe Saetbyeol and Choe Yujeong 2011: 211–212) and has taken on increased status as the primary indicator of social class. But there is another unquestionably vital component that reveals a person’s social class: one’s housing—in particular, one’s apartment. Notably, with the introduction of branded apartment complexes at the turn of the millennium, the apartment became even further appreciated as an indicator of class (Jeong Heonmok 2016a: 500–501). Against this backdrop, the market for apartments in South Korea in the late 2000s witnessed the introduction of a new sensation: the

<sup>1</sup> (Translator’s note) *Bunyang* (parceling out) is a system of selling apartments used in South Korea, in which prospective buyers apply and, if their application is successful, are placed in a lottery for the right to buy an apartment unit within a specific building/complex at a lower price prior to construction being completed.

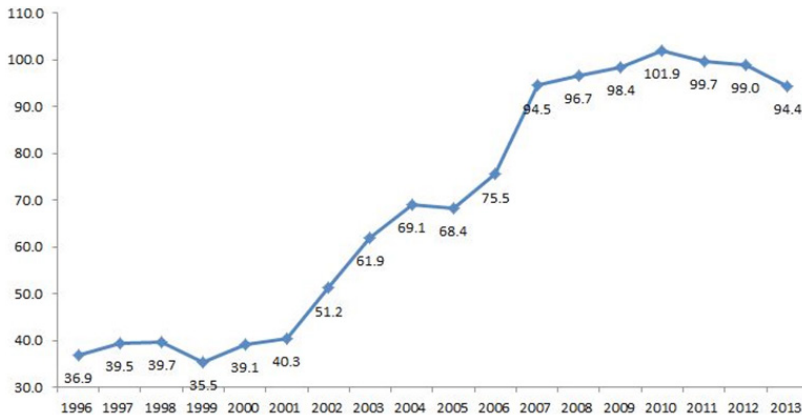
apartment English village. How should we assess the background and the significance of the emergence of the apartment English village, which signifies the union of two powerful barometers of class in South Korean society, English and apartments?

Based on fieldwork carried out at a branded apartment complex constructed in the metropolitan area in the mid-2000s, this article endeavors to explore the implications of the emergence of a new space called the apartment English village. Though it will be examined in more depth in the sections to come, the emergence of apartment English villages can be seen as a result of the spatialization of various desires, mediated by English education. Spatialization, according to Setha Low (2016: 7), means to “produce and locate—physically, historically, affectively, and discursively—social relations, institutions, representations and practices in space.” From this perspective, I consider what factors were in play in the particular apartment English village studied, as well as the significance of this phenomenon in the sociocultural context of South Korea.

I would be remiss not to make clear from the start that the case presented in this article cannot be completely generalized to all apartment English villages in South Korea. The reason lies in what one might call the inherent limitation of apartment English villages themselves, as they appeared around the late 2000s and early 2010s. Such a limitation can be glimpsed in the fact that as I revise this article in 2020, there is still a complete absence of research that seriously and scholastically considers the apartment English village. Despite their inherently fascinating and distinctive nature, one would be hard pressed to find a case worth carrying out in-depth academic research on an “ordinary” apartment English village. The mere fact that they have not been subject to scholarly examination illustrates the character of ordinary apartment English villages, and this will be covered in more depth in the following section.

## 2. The Lead-up to the Emergence of (Ordinary) Apartment English Villages

In the current year of 2020, it may be difficult to imagine the situation in the South Korean housing market in early 2015. Apartment prices had skyrocketed due to policies enacted by the Park Geun-hye administration, which were aimed at stimulating the real estate market. The years



**Figure 1.** Index of Apartment Prices in Seoul from 1993 to 2013 (Standard: June 2011 = 100.0). Created by author based on KB Kookmin Bank’s Housing Price Index.

immediately leading up to and following 2010 were a time of recession, especially for the housing market. Apartment prices stagnated and dropped, reflecting the financial crisis that rocked the globe at the end of 2007—a crisis originating in the United States which is now referred to as the subprime mortgage crisis. In South Korea, the crisis marked the end of a period of steeply increasing apartment prices that had persisted throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century. As a result, construction companies faced a crisis of unsold apartments on a massive scale, particularly when it came to mid- to large-sized apartments. In order to keep their heads above water during this crisis, the construction industry came up with an array of marketing tactics, and among them was the creation of apartment English villages.

The ploy of constructing English villages within apartment complexes was primarily pursued in areas outside of Seoul, by small to mid-sized construction firms rather than larger companies. Outside of Seoul, where, even as the prices of apartments in Seoul were skyrocketing in the mid-2000s, an ever-growing backlog of unsold apartments was becoming an increasingly serious problem, and many real estate developers competitively set out to establish English villages in their apartment complexes. Unlike the local government-run English villages, which were constructed on distinct, spacious land of their own, the new apartment English villages were allocated space in community facilities within the apartment com-

plexes. Generally, the construction firm covered the villages' operating expenses for the first one to two years following move-in after construction, with authority over management of the villages eventually being passed on to the complex itself. At the time, there were even reports that mentioned the allure of introducing such apartment English villages in parts of the metropolitan area and outside of Seoul, as a measure to resuscitate the stalled real estate market (Prime Kyeongje 2006; Kim Yeongtae 2008).

This is not to say that the emergence of these apartment English villages came without problems of their own. Once the English villages being constructed within apartment complexes became the subject of widespread attention, the Ministry of Education revealed that it found such entities to be illegal, thus slamming the brakes on the opening and operation of apartment English villages. According to official interpretations of housing laws and laws regarding *hagwon* (private teaching institutes), because apartment English villages are explicitly profit-seeking educational facilities, placing them in community facilities for residents was in violation of the law, and thus they must be moved to commercial space within the apartment complex and registered as a *hagwon* in order to operate. But profitability-driven construction firms and prospective residents, benefiting from the relatively inexpensive and convenient English education facilities, could not accept this interpretation of the law without a fight. The directive to construct English villages in highly profitable commercial spaces invited backlash from construction firms, which were suffering financially and believed that the Ministry of Education had not sufficiently considered their dire situation. In addition, the sudden announcement by the ministry had generated a situation where residents, who had made their decision to live in these apartment complexes based on the premise that there would be an English village, felt that they had been conned into buying apartments in those complexes. Faced with the unyielding position of the Ministry of Education, orders were given to close English village after English village that had already been operating within public facilities for residents; managers of the villages were charged with violating the Act on the Establishment and Operation of Private Teaching Institutes and Extracurricular Lessons or, as it is better known, the *Hagwon Act*, by the Ministry of Education.

Accordingly, apartment complexes that had either already been operating an English village or had announced plans for opening an English village in their marketing materials, strove to set up their English villages within the legal parameters. Chaos ensued. Claims were made that because English

villages were operating like daycare centers for preschool children, they were exempt from the *Hagwon* Act. Some English villages were set up in resident community areas, or their offices were installed in commercial spaces while lecture rooms were set up in the apartments’ community centers. Other operators even argued that their English village was not an educational facility, but rather a research facility, and thus not subject to registration (Bak Junhyeong 2008: 22–23). When, in 2009, rumblings over the illegitimacy and illegality of apartment English villages showed no signs of stopping, legislation was finally passed that exempted non-profit English villages from the *Hagwon* Act, allowing them to open in community facilities within apartment complexes. This outcome was brought about through a court battle fought mostly by apartment construction firms and residents as well as other stakeholders in the apartment English villages.<sup>2</sup>

Following this, up until 2014, when the real estate market as a whole began to surge again, apartment English villages drew attention as a new avenue for increasing the economic value of an apartment complex. In particular, in regions where the private education market had not yet developed, apartments in complexes that had set up internal English villages sold for higher prices than others in the vicinity (Jo Seongsin 2013; Yi Jeongeun 2013). While the original local government-run English villages suffered financially and were foundering, apartment English villages had succeeded by merging English education and housing. They had roused the interest of local residents who believed they had been precluded from the world of private education because they did not reside in Seoul. It is indisputable that the aspirations of the middle class, frenetically obsessed with the symbolic capital afforded by English for the sake of reproducing their economic capital, had already generated the malformed growth of English education best characterized by the inordinate scale of the private education market. What is more, the “peculiar cultural product borne out of the combination of a worldwide situation of what we call media convergence and a Korean yearning regarding English” (Yi Huieun 2007: 106) known as the English village had, through its apartment English village form, effectively penetrated the realm closest to everyday lives: housing.

It is necessary, however, to use a closer lens to examine the reality of

<sup>2</sup> For more on the situation surrounding the court battle at the time, see Shin & Kim LLC (2010).

English villages being adopted into living spaces. For positive reactions to the idea of apartment English villages, one can look to coverage in newspapers, primarily in the economics section; given that construction firms created English villages as a marketing hook to sell apartments, such placement in the newspapers is no surprise. As mentioned in the introduction of this article, the utter lack of scholarly research on the phenomenon hints at the reality of apartment English villages. As for English villages run by local governments, a good number of research projects (most representatively, Kim Ihwa and Kim Eok 2006; Jo Geumju 2006; Yi Hyesuk and O Jieun 2007; Yi Huieun 2007; Kim Jeongsu 2011), mainly focused on the methods used for enlivening English villages or on the effects of setting them up, were announced in the mid to late 2000s, when the villages were gaining the attention of society at large. Yet when it comes to apartment English villages, besides the advertorial “reports” found in the economics sections of newspapers, which verge on marketing material, one cannot find a single scholarly attempt to examine the phenomenon. In South Korea’s market for apartments, where property value has unparalleled weightiness, the apartment English village could, in fact, amount to no more than a marketing strategy that sprang up momentarily during the financial housing crisis era, when apartment prices were fluctuating.

In this context, around the time that all the “ordinary” apartment English villages run by construction firms were on the decline after their initial heyday, I came across a bit of fascinating news at the branded apartment complex where I had been conducting field work for quite some time: the complex was planning to start an apartment English village run by residents. Though the idea was met with disinterest by the vast majority of residents, I myself, who had been paying attention to and collecting data on resident activities intended to foster a sense of community within the complex, could not help but perk up my ears. In the following section, I will examine the meaning of this particular apartment complex’s attempt to merge the cultural capital of English with the residential environment of an apartment complex through establishing an English village.

### 3. An Attempt to Increase Apartment Value by Establishing an English Village

The primary data used in this study were collected while I was a participant



observer in the process of establishing an apartment English village at a brand name apartment complex called Seongil Noble Heights (hereafter, SNH), located in Seongil-dong, Kangsan-gu, Yeonju, a satellite city of Seoul.<sup>3</sup> SNH is a large-scale high-rise apartment complex comprised of roughly 50 individual buildings and upward of 4,500 units, with its tallest building reaching 35 stories. It is located on the same lot as the former Seongil Jugong Apartments, and reconstruction was completed in 2007. For roughly two years between early 2011 and early 2013, I conducted fieldwork, collecting data on the wide variety of collective resident activities that had developed since the completion of reconstruction and subsequent move-in. The case at the heart of this study is that of an attempt to establish an English village at this apartment complex, which was carried out in late 2012. I was able to closely observe and record the entire process, from collecting information about the complex’s backstory to documenting the details of how plans for the village were carried out. I had been conducting participant observation at this particular complex for nearly one year leading up to the establishment of the English village and was lucky enough to have one of the main volunteers for this venture as a key informant. The two residents (the chair of the association of social clubs and the director of a language academy) who led efforts to establish an English village, whom I will introduce below, were close acquaintances of this informant, and thanks to that, I was able to be involved in the efforts from beginning to end.<sup>4</sup>

This case has distinctive features, including a unique timeline for the creation of the English village, which was far different from that of other apartment English villages. As discussed earlier, the vast majority of apartment English villages were introduced as a means of marketing apartments to potential buyers before construction was even complete; but in the case of SNH, the residents’ attempt to set up an English village took place five years after they moved into their apartments. The fact that residents, not construction firms or developers, spearheaded the complex’s attempt to set

<sup>3</sup> In order to protect the privacy of research subjects, the names of all people and places as well as the name of the apartment brand have been given pseudonyms. Moreover, details about the complex, such as number of apartments, are given only approximately.

<sup>4</sup> As can be seen in the descriptions that follow, the primary resources for the current study are based on my own participant observation rather than formal interviews. Let it be noted that the excerpts from conversations with the chair of the association of social clubs comes from an informal interview.

up an apartment English village is a second key feature of this case. Additionally, residents' determination to establish the village demonstrates that even up until that point in time, in the early 2010s, setting up an English village within an apartment complex was an option worthy of consideration when it came to increasing apartment value.

In this context, where there was recognition that an apartment English village could contribute to raising the economic value of an apartment complex, some of SNH's residents began to push for the creation of an English village of their own. Among these residents, the one most enthusiastically promoting the English village concept was Mr. Seo Jeongsik (male, 50s), chair of the association of social clubs on a resident internet forum. Mr. Seo, who ran a midsize company at the time, joined forces with Mr. Kim Mungi (male, 50s), who ran a fairly large language academy in the Seongil-dong neighborhood, in the endeavor to set up an English village within the SNH complex. The newly appointed board of the residents' association, with a newly elected chair, Mr. Yi Myeonghun (male, 50s), at its helm, had eradicated corruption perpetrated by certain building representatives, which had festered for years since move-in, and were attempting to turn over a new leaf for SNH.<sup>5</sup> Mr. Seo and Mr. Kim had taken note of these efforts and, at a meeting of resident representatives in May of 2012, introduced their ideas for establishing an English village to the board executives and asked for their help.

All this led up to Mr. Seo and Mr. Kim, who would be responsible for the practical matter of English education, developing a program they called the "First Annual Seongil Noble Heights English Village Summer Camp (pilot project)" which they submitted for consideration at a meeting of the resident representatives. The main points are as follows.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> I have examined what such efforts meant in South Korea in the 2010s as well as their significance in other articles (Jeong Heonmok 2016a, 2016b). The case presented in the current study should be understood as belonging to this same context.

<sup>6</sup> In order to prevent the exposure of people and locations, some details have been modified or omitted.

1. Program Objectives

- Guide the children of SNH so that they can grow into gifted and globally competitive individuals.
- Increase the value of SNH apartments and the education level of Kangsan-gu.
- Make it easy for anyone to pick up English, by having mothers study English as well and become their children's helpers.

2. Course Content

- Kids' class (12 weeks total, three classes per day)
  - Pronunciation correction and building vocabulary (first 6 weeks)
  - Pick individual topics, then build presentation skills (final 6 weeks)
- Moms' class (8 weeks total, three classes per day)
  - Basic English conversation and pop song learning

3. Enrollment Information

- Open to residents of SNH
- Enrollment
  - Lower elementary kids' class – 45 students
  - Upper elementary kids' class – 45 students
  - Moms' class – 30 students
- Class Information
  - Location: SNH English Camp Education Center (located within the community center)
  - Schedule: July 2012 – September 2012
- Course Materials and Tuition
  - Introduction of educators [omitted]
  - Will use course materials created by authoritative professors and holders of doctorates in English
  - Kids' village: 15,000 won / month (45,000 won total)
  - Moms' village: 20,000 won / month (40,000 won total)

4. Event Information

- Kids' speech competition planned for October \_\_th (date subject to change)
- Judges for individual presentations [omitted]
- Benefits for completing the course
  - Certificate of completion for the first semester of SNH English Village
  - Winners of speech competition will receive award certificates and plaques
- Awards
  - Yeonju Mayoral Award
  - Superintendent Award
  - Chair of the Residents' Board Award
  - Chief of Kangsan-gu Office Award

Something worth pointing out regarding this proposal is that beyond teaching children, who are generally seen as the primary targets of education at English villages, mothers were included as well. There was no

need for mothers interested in taking the course to have a child in the kids' course, and one of the camp's goals was to provide an educational opportunity for adults interested in studying English. The organizers, including Mr. Seo, thought that this was a way to increase residents' interest in and rally support for the proposed SNH English Village. As for instructors, Mr. Kim and two teachers from his language academy would volunteer their skills. Thus, they prided themselves on the fact that the quality of their classes would not pale in comparison to regular English academies.

However, ahead of a full vote at the residents' association meeting where this proposal was reviewed, an air of opposition to the project became palpable. A few of the building representatives had expressed their uncompromising opinion that they could not accept the proposal because there were "ulterior political motives" for the pursuit of an English village led by Mr. Seo and Mr. Kim. This claim of "political motives" may seem odd, but Mr. Kim's personal background played a part in this accusation. They took issue with the fact that Mr. Kim had run for office in April of the same year (2012) for a position in the 19<sup>th</sup> National Assembly. He had registered as a candidate for the local seat with the New People's Union Party (assumed name) but failed to clinch the nomination. After the loss, he pressed ahead as an independent candidate, finally losing in the general election. As a result of this history, the building representatives who were opposed to the English village claimed that Mr. Kim had a personal incentive to build up a political base in the apartment complex he lived in for the next National Assembly election.

However, a number of factors make it difficult to link Mr. Kim's motives for establishing the English village at SNH to another attempt at winning a National Assembly seat. For instance, he had run in the election based on name recognition he gained through his management of his language academy and his appearances on local television programs, but the high barriers to entering the political arena limited him to an approval rating of less than three percent. No matter how much he wanted to become a politician, it made no sense for him to leave behind his long-standing career in English education in order to keep vying for elected office, especially when the prospects of being picked up as a major party candidate were now remote. Mr. Kim himself stated that it was a mistake to think that he had political intentions; he made it clear that he did not intend to run in the next election.

Mr. Seo had asked Mr. Kim to participate in running the English

village because one of Mr. Kim’s political platforms was to promote the concept of English villages in apartment complexes, which intrigued Mr. Seo. For Mr. Seo, an active member of the apartment complex’s community—not limited to being chair of the association of social clubs on the residents’ internet café—the idea of making that concept a reality in their own SNH apartment complex, regardless of election outcomes, seemed worthwhile. From Mr. Kim’s perspective, it was a prudent proposal, since it would help him shed the “politician” image he had picked up during the campaign and bolster his image as an educator once again, helping him return to his local community.

But Mr. Kim’s past political activity was just a red herring; internal politics were at play. A considerable number of building representatives opposed the opening of an English village because of their loyalty to the former chair of the residents’ association. They intended to rein in Mr. Yi, the newly elected chair of the residents’ association, who had won the seat from the previous chair and assumed the position earlier that year. Following his swearing-in as chair, Mr. Yi had pursued an agenda of making “life-friendly” reforms, such as fixing up facilities around the complex and expanding space to promote socialization between residents. Residents appreciated his efforts, and he was gaining popularity. Concerned that the success of an English village would be yet another achievement credited to Mr. Yi, supporters of the former chair staunchly refused to endorse the idea. And it was this group of people who used Mr. Kim’s attempt to enter political office as a pretext for their opposition.

However, opposition withered away after a shocking turn of events. On his way home after wrapping up a meeting on whether to move forward with plans for the English village, Mr. Bak Sangmun (male, 50s), vice chair of the residents’ association at the time, suffered a stroke. Certain residents—those close to Mr. Yi—felt that the stroke suffered by Mr. Bak was caused by the stress of the heated debate during that evening’s meeting, and they were outraged. At another meeting, held a few days later, they fiercely berated those who opposed the English village. Pushed into a corner amid the turmoil of all that had happened, the village’s detractors found themselves in a position that was difficult to defend. Ultimately, the residents’ association approved of opening an English village in the complex.

After many twists and turns, plans for the SNH English Village were finally set into motion, and the first official event was an orientation for residents in July of 2012. Held in a large meeting room in the community

center at the heart of the apartment complex, the orientation was led by Mr. Kim and was a success, with over 150 parents and children in attendance. Operation of the English village and related administrative responsibilities were assumed by Mr. Seo, who had played a pivotal role in the endeavor since its early planning stages. Other well-meaning residents joined in to lend a hand for the particulars of running the English village. Following the orientation, around 60 children and close to 20 mothers signed. Three instructors, including Mr. Kim, assumed responsibility for the classes, and each of them lead the courses for two hours each day, beginning in July.

Those in charge of the newly launched SNH English Village underscored that its primary objective was strengthening the English abilities of the complex's resident children. At the same time, there was symbolic significance in the fact that the village illustrated how the apartment complex was breaking away from the situation it found itself in at the time and was reorienting itself. In the year following move-in at SNH, which had undergone reconstruction, key executives who had handled the reconstruction were arrested for corruption, and ever since the move-in, there had been intense clashes over the various interests and leadership of the complex.<sup>7</sup> In this context, the newly elected residents' association board and the residents who supported it wanted SNH to become not a place of fighting but a living space where residents could come together. It was against this backdrop that the era of conflict and animosity was brought to an end through the endeavor of establishing an English village as an attempt to foster a sense of community on the basis of "future-oriented values." This is well illustrated by the following excerpt from a conversation with Mr. Seo:

Even just by looking at our apartment complex, [one can see that] we've erected our walls around us, and we've made *a sort of fortress* within those walls. A *single village* is what I would call it. What I mean is that *how we will foster a communal culture going forward, how we will make a culture of give-and-take with each other* within that fortress is important to consider. And so, after thinking it over for a while, I realized that fighting or battling isn't going to raise the value of our apartments. And so, my thought was, "Now's

<sup>7</sup> Such reconstruction-related corruption is not unique to SNH but is something that can be found in a considerable number of apartment complexes that were built from reconstruction (Kim Yunsu 2005; Kim Jongu and Jo Seonghyeon 2005; YTN 2005).

the time for education.” It just so happens that in the past I used to be active in the movement to promote English literacy. The reason being that I myself never had the opportunity to learn English, and it became a sort of *han* (lingering regret) for me. And so, I made English education my target, and then came to do it by bringing in Mr. Kim. (Conversation with Seo Jeongsik, emphasis by the author)

The five-year period (2007 to 2012) following the move-in at the SNH complex was beleaguered with various conflicts and was known as the “period of struggles.” During the reconstruction phase, there were battles between unions and executives. After move-in, problems arose regarding various needed repairs, and there were intense quarrels between some of the building representatives who had acted corruptly. As a result, not only the residents who had been actively involved in these struggles but other residents who had maintained an indifferent attitude, were fairly fatigued. It was precisely at this point in time that the push for establishing an English village within the apartment complex first emerged, using English education to catch the attention of residents, and it was considered to be a wise choice.

Of course, the fact that high-end apartment complexes in South Korea, like SNH, are structured in such a way that they are spatially closed-off plays a role in this endeavor.<sup>8</sup> As can be seen in the expressions “a sort of fortress” and “a single village” from the excerpt above, the majority of residents, Mr. Seo included, were clearly cognizant of this fact, and their endeavor arose out of concern over how they would create a communal culture in which they could interact with one another within those boundaries. And the “increasing apartment value” underpinned by the sense of community could not help but be aimed at achieving relative superiority over neighboring spaces—mainly other apartment complexes that were potential rivals in the housing market. Just like the English villages set up in other apartment complexes, the one at SNH was bearing this in mind.

My dream is that when kids who have gone through our English village meet other kids in the neighborhood, they’ll write their own names in English, then ask other kids, “What’s your name? Do you want me to write it in English?”, thus making them able to write the names of other kids in English. Because the other kids who are getting an early English education

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion on the spatial exclusiveness of South Korean apartment complexes, see Bak Cheolsu (2013), Bak Inseok (2013), and Jeong Heonmok (2015).

now all do so by memorizing everything, they only know how to read what they've learned [to read] and they can't write their own name, the names of their parents, or their friends' names in English. But if they're (the child from SNH) able to do so, that other kid's mom is going to ask, "Where do you live?" And when she does, the kid will respond, "I live at Seongil Noble Heights." And then when she asks what *bagwon* the kid goes to, what if the kid were to respond, "I don't. *I learned this from the English village at our apartment.*" *Now that would be a dream come true.* (Conversation with Seo Jeongsik, emphasis by the author)

But the push for an English village that had two objectives—raising apartment value and creating a new atmosphere within the complex—had unavoidable limitations from the beginning. At the center were the differing viewpoints of the various actors involved in establishing the English village and, moreover, the inherent nature of the South Korean apartment complex as housing space. In the following section, I will examine how the SNH English Village developed, paying special attention to these limitations.

#### 4. The Reality and Limitations of Resident-Led English Villages

First, let us examine the case of the moms' class that was offered alongside the primary target, the kids' class. Along with basic conversation skills, the moms' class took into consideration the age of the attendees and focused on education through (old) pop songs. But contrary to expectations, with each passing week, the number of students in the moms' class dropped dramatically. For the first class, there were 17 moms (five in their 30s, 10 in their 40s, two in their 50s), but the very next week there were less than half that number (8), and by the third week, only four remained in the class. The greatest reason for this was the lack of sufficient motivation to participate. Unlike the kids' class, which had the speech competition planned for October as motivation, the moms' class did not have sufficient drive to spur continued participation. Despite the fact that the moms' class offered plenty of fun (having sat in on the class, I found it to be quite entertaining), it was not enough to coax students to invest two hours of their time on a weekday morning.<sup>9</sup> And this was something that Mr. Seo, who had led the

<sup>9</sup> To add to this, we cannot forgo the fact that there were many moms who had initially signed up out of curiosity because the class itself did not cost much. Though one may



push for the English village, was well aware of himself. His own, different intention was a factor in organizing a moms’ class at the SNH English Village, unlike other English villages.

It’s true that there is insufficient motivation for the moms to show up. This is something that [Mr. Kim] and I were in disagreement over, but it was originally my aim to cultivate our own teachers, independently within the apartment complex. To teach the moms so that we could pay them 20,000 won an hour and have them volunteer in the complex that they live in and teach and spend time with the kids that live in their same complex. The aim of our English village is to correct kids’ basic pronunciation and make English fun for them, and so moms who have been educated would be more than enough to teach these kids in lower grade school. Not teaching their own pronunciation but playing professional lecturers’ pronunciations through a [TV] monitor, and teaching kids to repeat after that—that much they could easily do. But currently our moms’ class is focused on conversation [skills], and [the question comes down to] where are they going to use what they learned for conversation and pop songs? Even when you go on vacation abroad, guides do everything for you. So, rather than having the moms learn conversation themselves, I think that they would be much more motivated if we did it in a way that they learn, then teach the kids. (Conversation with Seo Jeongsik)

In order for the SNH English Village to last, not only did it need a consistent influx of students but also the self-enlistment of teachers. For the time being, it was able to operate in cooperation with Mr. Kim’s language academy, but whether or not Mr. Kim would continue to assume the education side going forward was an unknown. This was because his primary goal was recovering his image as an educator, which had been dealt a blow due to his failed campaign for a National Assembly seat; devoting himself to the operations of the English village came second. Aware of this, Mr. Seo dreamt of an English village that would be self-sustaining through the participation of residents at SNH. In preparation for a situation in which outsider recruitment of teachers became difficult, Mr. Seo had intended to turn the students in the moms’ class into teachers for the long run. Of course, this plan was idealistic and a bit far-fetched. It is over the top to expect homemaking moms to volunteer their time and

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be tempted to think that, unlike other activities, an English class would be unable to operate in a way that spurred social interaction between middle-aged women, this is difficult to deduce as being the reason for the class size rapidly shrinking to a quarter of its original size in the matter of only a few weeks.

effort as teachers in a local community where social networks based on resident participation are not amply established. Accordingly, Mr. Kim, who had taken charge of the education side, viewed cultivating moms into teachers as difficult and had no choice but to construct an unassuming curriculum focused on conversation and pop songs.

Unlike the difficulties that the moms' class suffered due to a nosedive in students, the majority of students enrolled in the kids' class finished their 12-week course and diligently prepared for October's speech competition. Because this competition was considered a crucial factor in evaluating the success or failure of SNH English Village, both Mr. Seo and Mr. Kim were especially concerned with how it went. For them, it was necessary to show off the educational achievements of their students, both within the complex and beyond, through the speech competition. Even if the competition only set to rest the outrage that had hounded the initial establishment of the English village, that would be considered a success.

What was emphasized most of all in the competition was the children's English pronunciation skills. As elucidated above, the notion of the English village itself was something that emerged against an extremely South Korean backdrop. The English village is a cultural corollary created by South Korean society, in which zeal over English, considered to be a prerequisite for youth to become so-called global leaders, surpassed the level of the individual and spread as a collective phenomenon. Yet as Yi Huieun (2007: 90) points out, two characteristics of the English craze in South Korean society are English's colonial nature and an excessive obsession with "source texts." In particular, the ability to speak with the best American accent possible functions as a key standard by which to boast about one's English abilities, as embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984). The core of the 12-week program was helping the children learn proper pronunciation in order to display their skills at the speech competition. When it came to acquiring a second language, fluent pronunciation was considered the best means to exhibit the "efficacy" of education to outsiders. This focus on correcting pronunciation corresponded with the position of those who had pushed for the English village, who needed to demonstrate the tangible outcomes of their program both within and beyond the apartment complex.

And thus, after three months had passed, one weekend in October of 2012, an event titled the "First Annual Seongil Noble Heights Apartment Children's English-Speaking Competition" was held in the large conference room of the community center. In addition to the children participating in



Figure 2. First annual Seongil Noble Heights Apartment children's English speaking competition (Photographs by the author)

the competition and their parents, various other guests were invited as well. This was done to demonstrate the “success” of the SNH English Village, not only to those who had opposed the village from the start but also to residents who had been waiting to see what came of it. The organizers needed to make it clear that this speech competition was not just an average event held for the kids’ sake. In order to do so, Mr. Kim met with the mayor of Yeonju himself and requested his attendance at the event; he had been given confirmation that the mayor would be there. Considering the status held by the large-scale luxury apartment complex SNH in Yeonju, refusing to attend the speech competition would be difficult from the position of an elected civil servant like the mayor. Naturally, when advertising the event both in and beyond the apartment complex, the anticipated attendance of the mayor was highlighted.

A total of 57 students participated in the speech competition. Between

the families of the contestants and other residents, there were about 150 residents in attendance. The chair of the residents' association board, Mr. Yi, along with local assembly members, the chief of Seongil-dong, and pastors of local megachurches all attended as guests. Some of the building representatives were in attendance as well. The event itself began 15 minutes behind schedule; the mayor had been slated to stop by briefly and give some remarks, but he did not arrive on time. It just so happened that on the day of the speech competition, there was an event<sup>10</sup> held in Yeonju that was attended by a large number of politicians, including the two prime candidates in the coming presidential election (December 2012), Moon Jae-in and Park Geun-hye. The mayor of Yeonju, who was also at this event, was delayed as a result. Because they could not continue waiting for Mayor Bak, they began the event with remarks from Mr. Yi, forgoing those from the mayor. Even following the start of the event, the organizers of the event were in constant contact with the mayor's team. But eventually, news came that, unfortunately, the mayor would not be able to attend. Although the mayor's attendance fell through, it did not cause too much distress; the organizers had already benefitted by simply advertising his planned presence.

The substance of the speeches given by participants were all fairly similar to one another. This was because they had prepared their presentations by choosing from several set formulas then filling in the blanks with the right nouns for their own personally chosen topic. It was apparent that they had all memorized their scripts, and living up to the English village's big promise, all of them spoke with excellent pronunciation. When it came time for their own child to take the stage, parents in the audience whipped out their smartphones to shoot videos and cheered them on, making the event's atmosphere cordial. Once all of the presentations had wrapped up, Mr. Kim and two English experts—acquaintances of Mr. Kim, one a university professor and the other a language academy manager, who were participating as judges—deliberated and announced the winners of the various awards. And while the winners, along with their families, celebrated, among the children who did not achieve the results that they had hoped for, a few shed tears or threw tantrums.

The speech competition had been pulled off with remarkable success, and posts using phrases like "the 12-week miracle," praising the improved skills of the participating children, went up on the online forum for

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<sup>10</sup> Details about this event have been withheld to ensure the anonymity of the location.

residents. However, discussions on the future of the English village disappeared without a trace after the competition. While there had been a bit of a scandal in the process of pursuing the English village, one would think that seeing its success as a pilot project in the form of a summer camp would naturally lead to discussions of how to keep the English village going in the future. But this was not the case. We should ask then, what exactly happened once the opening of the English village and the speech competition—both rather large events that had riled up the apartment complex—had come to an end?

Before delving into the demise of SNH English Village, it is necessary to take a look at the ways “ordinary” apartment English villages were run in South Korea. As previously discussed in this article, the majority of apartment English villages are planned prior to occupants’ moving in; and, rather than residents operating the villages, they are managed by the construction firms or developers who oversaw construction of the apartment complexes themselves. Given that one main reason for the appearance of these English villages was to break through the stagnation of the pre-sale *bunyang* housing market, in most cases, the construction firms take it upon themselves to bring in English villages as a marketing tool for selling apartments. The firms remain in charge of their operation for several years after the move-in of residents. As a result, such “ordinary” apartment English villages have a considerable advantage in terms of marketing, operations, and even the professionalism of education, and are thus able to appeal to prospective and current residents.

SNH English Village, on the other hand, was pursued about five years following move-in; it was planned and operated by a handful of individuals rather than a construction firm or developer. As discussed earlier, there had been some cooperation from the residents’ association board, which had attempted to overhaul the apartment complex, but plans were temporarily stopped by the opposition, who worried that the English village would be credited to the new chair of the board, and thus the English village was unable to receive the full support of the board. Without a single cent of support from outside sources and only receiving 15,000 won per month in tuition per person enrolled, the enterprise had no other means than to operate on volunteerism by Mr. Kim, Mr. Seo, and some other participants. Considering that apartment English villages planned by construction firms prior to move-in and operated not as self-sustaining and independent enterprises of the apartment complexes but as contracted-out operations,

the push for the SNH English Village was an impractical attempt without adequate social capital.

Similarly, the differing views held by stakeholders about the future of the SNH English Village turned out to be another impediment to future operations. As soon as the first class of students completed their education without any hitches, Mr. Seo began to plan the expansion of the English village. He wanted to provide the chance for child residents of SNH to go to the Philippines to study English, and to extend the English village into a sub-organization under a national education volunteer organization that he had personally participated in. On the other hand, Mr. Kim, who had shouldered responsibility for education at the English village, with a focus on rehabilitating his own image, made it clear that committing himself further would be difficult. Moreover, other volunteers who had participated—with the aim of contributing to “increasing the value of [their] apartments” through the English village—made it clear that they did not want to expand the operation beyond the apartment complex. As the positions of those directly involved in the operations of the English village started to split, the momentum behind the English village was lost. Furthermore, the residents’ association, which still strongly opposed the village, had a lukewarm attitude about independently managing the English village as an apartment complex. And so, in spite of its initial success, the SNH English Village met its end after the pilot program.

An effort must be made to examine the actual efficacy of the ordinary apartment English villages that were used as marketing highlights for the sale of apartments. To date, the “success” of apartment English villages—success in raising apartment prices and increasing apartment sales—has only been recorded in marketing advertorials. Comprehensive scholarly discussions of how apartment English villages were run and how effective they were post move-in are hard to come by. Merely based on what has been introduced in the media, it would be correct to view apartment English villages as being similar to marketing factors like “location close to a [train] station” (*yeoksekwon*) or “large complex,” which function as a check mark on the “pro” column when it comes to making the decision to purchase an apartment. However, the case of SNH English Village has a slightly different significance, beyond use as a marketing tactic. The English village there was pursued as an avenue for increasing the value of their apartment complex—several years after move-in—via the most representative symbolic capital that rules contemporary South Korean

society: English. The development of the SNH English Village, which folded after the pilot program, shows us that trying to put new ideas into practice is no easy task when led by residents in an apartment complex following move-in. Though it began with noble intentions and even eked out some success, the limitations of the attempt to open an English village at SNH were clear.

## 5. Conclusion

In the year 2020, it is obvious that interest in English villages—spaces borne out of South Korea’s distorted thirst for English—has waned. Compared to their popularity in the mid- to late 2000s, when English villages run by local governments were popping up across the country, it would not be an exaggeration to say that media and public interest in English villages has almost completely vanished. The situation for apartment English villages is even worse. Apartment complex English villages—which gained attention at a time when the real estate market was slowing in the aftermath of a worldwide economic crisis and the Lee Myung-bak government was pushing English immersion education—rarely feature in today’s advertisements for *bunyang* apartments. We can say with confidence that the true nature of apartment English villages, leading up to and following 2010, was “*bunyang* bait,” as astutely characterized by the media (Song Changseok 2008). The villages were open only for the blink of an eye, while the construction companies initially covered the expenses then disappeared.<sup>11</sup>

Against such a social backdrop, the case of SNH English Village is intriguing. A few residents and the residents’ association, who focused on the role apartment English villages played in the pre-sale market, attempted to open an independently run English village in their own apartment complex; and despite residents’ disinterest in other issues within the

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<sup>11</sup> Another thing to note is that despite their designation as “English villages,” the truth is that these apartment English villages were closer to “English academies” (*bagwon*) opened for the children of residents in the complexes. This is not only true in the case of SNH, but of other apartment English villages as well. There are various reasons for this, but it appears that in the process of apartment English villages competitively opening, the term “English village” was catchier from a marketing standpoint than “academy.”



complex, they were able to eke out a successful pilot program, short lived as it may have been. It is safe to say that the foundation for this short-lived success was built upon the significance and prestige of both apartment ownership and the English language in South Korean society. Additionally, something important regarding the case covered in this study is that through the intermediary of two factors—apartments and English (education)—diverse forms of desires and positions intermingled with one another and came to be *spatialized*, which enabled the emergence of the SNH English Village, and ultimately, its eventual disappearance.

From the standpoint of spatialization (Low 2016), we can see that the numerous complex and layered factors mediated the process of opening an apartment English village at the SNH. Residents stepped up collectively to improve the atmosphere in their apartment complex and increase its economic value through the intermediary of English education, and began the work of setting up an English village. In this process, the varying views of individual residents came into conflict, and issues that had piled up since the apartment complex's reconstruction set the scene for contentious relationships between residents.<sup>12</sup> These social dynamics were the key reason that the English village, which ran for close to five months, ended after the pilot program. With the physical space of the SNH as the backdrop, the multilayered context became involved in the process of spatializing the SNH English Village.

There are some limitations to the materials and scope of this study. In order to develop theoretical analysis, one would need to broadly consider the political and economic systems and social relations that are involved in the construction of the spaces of South Korean apartment complexes as a whole. Cultural perceptions on housing, built environments, and, moreover, the association (Latour 2007) of diverse factors comprising humans and non-human objects would all have to be considered as well. It would also be necessary to include not only the English village introduced here but the complex's historical and social contexts that functioned in the background. This is research I intend to further pursue in the future.

Finally, let us broaden the scope of our discussion and take a look at the

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<sup>12</sup> In order to understand the “historical” background that played a role in these conflictual relationships within the complex, it is necessary to examine the overall dynamics of reconstruction that took place in the mid-2000s. For more on this, see Jeong Heonmok (2015: 95–133).



ordinary significance of the apartment English village that became the context for this study. The fact that the lion's share of apartment English villages, SNH included, received attention not in places highlighted by the real estate market like Seoul's Gangnam but on the outskirts of Seoul or in smaller cities, is an important factor that figures into our understanding of apartment English villages. In places such as Gangnam, Mokdong, and Bundang, where the private education markets have developed both quantitatively and qualitatively, it is difficult to find any attempts to open an apartment English village. The opening of apartment English villages took place primarily in regions that were thought to be trailing behind the epicenter of Seoul in competitiveness of the private education market. The apprehensions of residents of these areas located on the periphery of the education market, English education included, interlocked with the macro-level economic condition of stagnating apartment sales in the late 2000s, to create a highly peculiar space known as the apartment English village.

As previously stated, the case covered in this study cannot be generalized to all apartment English villages. However, it is meaningful in that it appropriated the apartment English village—something, in fact, resembling a lure for prospective buyers of apartments—and adopted the method of being resident-led in order to use it as a mechanism for increasing the value of their apartments. These aspects would take different forms at different times, but the mechanism of spatialization that operates in the background seems to remain a common factor. This is precisely why I am looking at the significance of this case at a time when apartment English villages have become a relic of the past; whatever the circumstances and whenever the era may be, human groups respond to large-scale social change by using whatever cultural traits are available to them (Sahlins 1981). While it is true that the conditions apartment complexes currently face in 2020 are somewhat different from those of a decade ago, thanks to the rapidly changing housing market, the mechanisms of residents taking action in response to change still occurs in a similar frame. From South Koreans' fervor for English to the desire to raise the value of their real estate, to the relationships between residents of an apartment complex, the SNH English Village provides a cross section of the complex reality of South Korean society in the 2010s.

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