

Commentary

The Background and Reality of the Emergence of “English Villages” in Apartment Complexes: A Case Study of an English Village Run by Apartment Residents, by Jung Heon-mok

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Jung Heon-mok’s study of an “apartment English village” run by residents offers a valuable glimpse into the state of transmutation of English villages in South Korea. Since the early 2000s, when such English villages were actively promoted by regional governments as a way of countering the social inequality and waste of economic resources caused by *jogi yubak* (or early study abroad; Lo et al. 2015), the idea of a space that simulated a monolingual English-speaking country for immersion-based English language learning has gradually lost its appeal. This was partly due to the decline in the popularity of *jogi yubak* itself, and the concomitant expansion of the domestic English language education market, as well as the high cost of operating such English villages on a large scale. Yet, the concept of the English village still lives on, fascinating at least some Koreans as a signifier for a promise of acquiring native-like fluency in English. Apartment complexes that have incorporated this concept as a means of enhancing their market value are a recent iteration of this fascination, and Jung’s unique

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ethnographic study of one such apartment English village is a rare opportunity for anthropologists in Korea to better understand the processes by which desires that permeate Korean society extend their longevity by evolving into new forms.

Jung's choice of the keyword *spatialization* for exploring this issue is highly appropriate. As Jung eloquently shows, the creation of gated, branded apartment communities and spaces for learning and speaking English that are closed off from the Korean language are both about imbuing those spaces with new meanings of prestige and exclusivity, as much as they are about producing physically bounded spaces. This is so even though apartment English villages have abandoned the main conceit of the original English villages established by the regional governments, which was that the acquisition of proper English was impossible in the context of South Korea, and that the only way to gain good, fluent English was to be immersed in a monolingual English-speaking environment—which English villages provided at an affordable cost. While these government-driven English villages were heavily invested in this idea (e.g., distinguishing their spaces by designing the premises to visually simulate a Western village, making visitors go through “immigration” checkpoints to enter, and hiring white English speakers as staff, etc.; Park 2009), there were no such efforts at apartment English villages such as the one Jung investigated, as their programs more or less resembled typical English language education programs one might find at schools or language academies (*hakwon*) taught by Korean teachers. Yet for apartment English villages, too, the key lies in the spatialization of the apartment complex as a distinct space indexed by English that allowed its children to stand apart from children from elsewhere – as evidenced by Mr. Seo's vision of the apartment's children drawing awe from parents from neighboring apartment complexes through their ease with English.

A comparison of government-driven English villages and apartment English villages, in fact, offers insights about how such spatialization is mediated in important ways through the bodies that occupy those spaces. The original idea of English villages as an English-monolingual space does not simply rely on the exclusion of the Korean language, but more importantly on interacting and intermingling with (native-)English-speaking bodies. Similarly, what Jung's research shows is that, at least for Seongil Noble Heights, enhancing the value of the apartment complex depends on modulating the bodies of the children who live there to emulate those of

native speakers of English. In this vein, the initial plan of the organizers to enlist resident parents (particularly mothers) as teachers of English was not simply a reflection of a general trend in which Korean mothers are expected to take on a greater role in managing their children’s English language learning (Seo 2021), but a crucial link for reimagining the apartment complex as a community that derives value from active interaction among children as English language learners and mothers as supervisors of, and coaches for, their English language learning. The fact that the apartment complex is reconceptualized as a space for language learning, then, is perhaps unsurprising, because the branded apartment community, which figures prominently in the Korean middle class’s imagination of “home,” becomes a natural site for domesticating English language learning. That is, if English language education in neoliberal Korea is ultimately a biopolitical project for reconfiguring the bodies of young English language learners (Park 2021), what could be a better space than the apartment complex, where those bodies come from and are already located within a network of domestic relations and shared interests?

Jung’s research on the convergence between two key indexes of middle-class desire that characterize twenty-first century Korean society—branded apartments and English language competence—therefore points to the significance of the material foundations of those indexes. Just as branded apartment complexes inscribe desires of class distinction onto lived, material spaces, various mutations of English villages of the past decades reflect the embodied and interactionally grounded nature of Koreans’ anxieties about English. Though English villages, unlike the branded apartments that have become an indelible part of the Korean landscape, are not likely to be popular again, dreams of reconfigured spaces through which bodies of Korean learners of English may be reborn as native speakers will not dissipate easily, as long as the desire for English remains a central affect for the Korean neoliberal subject.

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