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## English Gangnam Style | Language on the Move

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5-6 minutes



*Panel devoted to Jeju Global Education City (Source: Jeju Weekly)*

Now that Psy's "Gangnam Style" has become a global hit, I wonder if you know what Gangnam is? The dictionary definition of 'Gangnam' is the southern part of Seoul – the capital of South Korea – but in actuality 'Gangnam' is much more than a place name: it refers to the most affluent and exclusive area of the country. "[Tower Palace](#)," a luxury residential apartment complex, is the pinnacle of its exclusivity. Built in the most prestigious section of the Gangnam district by Samsung between 2002 and 2004, it is literally a palace, in that its occupants are among the wealthiest and the buildings are equipped with amazing amenities ranging from a library, spas, a golf range, banks, and, yes, high-end boutique shops such as Channel.

[Education is part of Gangnam's attraction: South Korea's best](#)

[schools are located in Gangnam](#). And that includes English-language education. Gangnam parents are wholeheartedly devoted to their children's English education, as English proficiency is a key status marker in 21<sup>st</sup>-century Korea. They led the trend of [sending children abroad for English learning \(known as jogi yuhak\)](#) either alone or accompanied by their mothers as guardians beginning in late 1990s. The number of *jogi yuhak* children, [which peaked at 27,331 in 2008](#), has been on the wane since 2009. Apart from the Global Financial Crisis, family breakups as well as readjustment issues found among the first-generation returnees [are cited as reasons behind the decline](#).

Undeterred, Gangnam parents are now setting a new trend in English education of Korea: they have found a way to immerse their children in an English-Only environment without actually going abroad. English language immersion is now available on Jeju Island, the country's largest island. As part of Korea's globalization drives, the government launched 940-acre Jeju Global Education City, a self-contained community, in 2011. Designed as an English-only district, there are currently three international schools operating within Jeju Global Education City.

Tuition fees in Jeju Global Education City are hefty. If accommodation is included, [parents pay between 31,000 and 48,000 US dollars per year for schooling there](#).

Despite these high fees parents have little control over their child's education once they are enrolled in a school in Jeju Global Education City. [A recent report on a bullying case in one of the three schools there exposes what happens behind the ambitious global education project](#). The family of a victim student, who had been bullied by his roommate for one and a half years, was helpless at the school's inaction. [While that may not be unusual, what is unusual is that the victim's family could not take this](#)

[matter to the Korean education authorities or to police, since the school is “international” in nature and thus not subject to the Korean laws.](#) International schools operating in Jeju have neither internal dispute settlement systems nor a teacher-parent committee to discuss such issues as bullying, as such measures are merely recommended, not required. As is the case in other countries, the Korean anti-bullying regulations stipulate that primary, middle, and high schools put in place an anti-school violence committee composed of various education stakeholders of whom parents should take up a majority. In the absence of such schemes, parents take to the media to air their grievances.

The absence of a requirement to follow Korean laws is even more extraordinary when one considers that the Korean government made a huge financial commitment to woo foreign schools to Jeju. [For example, North London Collegiate School Jeju is committed to pay 56 million US dollars in royalty to their parent school North London Collegiate School in the U.K. over the next 21 years.](#) In fact, the government even promised to find money from tax revenues (paid by all citizens) in case the school (which caters to a tiny elite who can afford to send their children there) runs into deficit.

The bullying cases reported above occurred in an extraordinary constellation of a globalization-driven Korean government, commercialized international schools, and education-obsessed parents. Who is the ongoing expansion of Western schools in Asia actually serving? As seen in the Jeju case, international schools even get away with not protecting the children in their care from harm as they are granted exclusive powers to resolve any ‘internal’ matters.

Whether you can afford going Gangnam style or not, it is a losing game for everyone in South Korea. In their search for exclusivity,

Gangnam parents have ended up being excluded from their children's education in the island. As for non-Gangnam parents who work hard to pay for their children's extracurricular English education on land, they are doing so without realizing that their hard-earned money might only fatten the pockets of schools faraway.