

**WE  
WHO  
FEEL  
DIFFERENTLY**  
INTERVIEWS

***Sometimes the progress will be slow and dull and sometimes it will be revolutionary. We do not know yet which path to take, but we know where we are heading. (CHOI Hyun-sook)***

## **An Interview with CHOI Hyun-sook and MONG Choi**

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**Carlos Motta:** Could you both introduce yourselves and tell me about the work you are doing regarding LGBTQ rights in South Korea?

**CHOI Hyun-sook:** I joined sexual minority activism in 2004 and have been an activist ever since. My past work mainly includes founding the *Sexual Minority Committee* in Korea's *New Progressive Party* (NPP), and agendizing sexual minority issues in institutionalized politics. I proposed several special acts considering LGBT identities, for example, on the legal recognition of sexual reassignment and same-sex marriage. All proposals were declined, but the *New Progressive Party* in the presidential and general elections later adopted these as policies.

In 2007, I fought against the Anti-Discrimination Act for not including discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation. And that same year, a decision was made in the Party to put forth an out-homosexual candidate in the following year's general elections, so I started working on that. I ran for office in 2008.

I didn't win the election. But after the elections, I have been working on the policies I stood for as a candidate: an agenda considering all kinds of minorities, not just sexual minorities but also the elderly and low-income communities. I am trying to put these into practice in local areas. Nowadays, I am especially focusing on social service workers. There needs to be an organization of caregivers that work for children and patients. I work as a caregiver myself. My activities mostly take place in Jongno.

**MONG Choi:** I entered a lesbian rights group in 2004, which led me to become a sexual minorities activist. Later I came out and tried to build a more public lesbian organization, which did not work out well. I went on doing seminars on sexuality and lesbian citizenship. In 2007, I also participated in the fight against the Anti-Discrimination Law. There I formed an organization called *Mujigae Hwaldong* [Rainbow Action] along with many activists.

After that, I worked with CHOI Hyun-sook during the elections. I discovered a certain potential: politics may be able to solve the discrimination that individuals or private organizations cannot. I worked on the foundation of the *Sexual Minorities Committee* within the *New Progressive Party*, and became Chair after CHOI Hyun-sook, who was the former chair, started working in local areas.

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I am dealing with several issues now. First, one that considers labor laws for people living with HIV; the *Korean Confederation of Trade Unions* is bringing in, for the first time, ILO's international standards, and we are trying to adjust them to Korea's environment. I am also working on the labor and housing rights of sexual minorities, attempting to form these into a concrete policy. It will consider not only sexual minorities but also all forms of family, such as single person households.

**CM:** Can you describe the political establishment of Korea and how you, with a *queer* agenda, fit into that? How does that establishment view the things that you are proposing?

**CH:** If I may draw a big picture of Korean politics, until the 1960-70s, post-war Korea went through a hard time, and it was only after the 1980s labor movement that the people started to speak out. Sexual minority rights movements began in 1993, mainly focusing on identity issues. In 2000, the first progressive party [the Democratic Labor Party] was founded; and in 2004, the *Sexual Minority Committee*.

Until 1987, it was often the case in Korea that the most conservative party continuously regained political power. We couldn't call it a single-party system though, because democracy was mature to a certain point. Then in 1997, the Kim Dae-jung administration came into power- the so-called first government transfer by the leading opposition party. This party [the Millennium Democratic Party] was in power for about 10 years, and now the conservative party has again become the governing party. We assume that the government will stay within the conservative parties for the time being. Of course, some of these parties consider themselves progressive, but in our view, they are fundamentally more or less conservative.

The parties that are politicizing sexual minority agendas are the *Democratic Labor Party* and the *New Progressive Party*. Both are left wing; only the left-wing parties act on sexual minority issues. It is difficult to say that Korea's sexual minority movement itself is leftist; but the sexual politics movement is engaged with leftist politics.

**MC:** I think the rise of the sexual minority movement in Korea has a lot to do with the government transfer of 1997 and the liberal paradigm. Before that, even left-wing parties were indifferent to sexual minority issues and even sometimes hostile to them. Within the *Democratic Labor Party*, there was a protest against the party's nationalist and sexually conservative coloring. This later became one of the official reasons we quit DLP [After the 2007 presidential election, some members left DLP and founded the NPP].

**CM:** It seems like a fundamental issue here is the recognition of sexual citizenship and of a political identity for sexual minorities, which are the most basic steps in order to begin considering the implementation of legislation of LGBTQ rights. In that very conservative and traditional climate, how do you envision strategies to pursue the advancement of citizenship rights? What do you look up to for inspiration; is it an international model that you are following, or is it a local strategy that you are inventing?

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**CH:** Sexual conservatism is still widespread, even in NPP. Korean society keeps traditional Confucianism and extreme family values at its roots; but these factors are too limited to give a thorough explanation of contemporary Korean society. I think that, basically, sexual conservatism and family values function together with capitalism. Capitalism is the system that reinforces family values, heterosexualism, and patriarchy. Capitalism demands from families to constantly reproduce labor, something that reinforces a culture of family values, which in our context equals a male-centered patriarchy. The distinction between normal and abnormal according to family values is capitalism's running dog. This is why left-wing parties meet with anti-capitalists.

**MC:** Korea's sexual minority movement is quite similar to that of the USA. It has placed LGBT identities, coming out of the closet, forming communities, helping each other and taking political action when needed as its core mandates. However this whole identity-centered movement deserves to be criticized. People satisfy and confine themselves within their own communities with their happy and friendly personal lifestyles, and are not able to question their rights at a political and social level. They think: "Is that really a problem? Can't we just talk it over?"

We thought that we needed to go one step forward from this identity-based movement, and that is why we founded the *Sexual Minorities Committee* in DLP. But the sexual minority issues proposed by the committee had their limits too. They couldn't be made into a general agenda because they are restricted within the boundaries of the community's specialized needs. So nowadays we take action in a more general sphere, covering many kinds of minorities such as immigrant workers and immigrant women. We discuss minorities' housing rights and labor rights and those things that we need to protect from capitalism.

**CM:** What kind of political stance does the party take in relationship to LGBT identities being able to be formed only within the conditions set forth by capitalism? In other words, how do you both critique capitalism and at the same time draw from it in order to advance your cause by playing its game?

**CH:** I actually doubt whether it is capitalism that made possible the identity formation of sexual minorities. It is true that many cultural and academic discourses, especially feminist discourses developed within the capitalist system; and that thanks to these discourses, we were able to question the so-called *normality*, which only approved of heterosexuality. These discourses threw a light on the various and unique people who were living in obscurity. But they were always there and what they didn't have was a name.

LGBT identities are not something imported from the West; they existed at all times, in Korea, in India, in Thailand... Western theories just made it possible for them to identify themselves as LGBT. I think that Korean LGBT people have different identities, different cultures and different lives from those in the USA or Europe. I can't agree that capitalism itself played a major role on sexual minority identity formation; it can opportunistically stand on the side of sexual minorities, but it ultimately aims at reinforcing normative family values.

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**MC:** To be frank, we have never had a chance to thoroughly discuss this subject. I personally think that modern capitalism was an important moment for the disclosure of sexual minorities. But the important thing is to question what a “sexual minority” is, and what is to come in the future. For instance, should LGBT people adjust themselves, though somewhat segmented, to the existing system, such as the marriage system, or should they fight for completely new rights? The existing system and capitalism engage with one another. I think the main task for us now is to change this capitalist society.

**CM:** One of the interesting themes that surfaces here is the relationship between democracy and capitalism, which I think is one that is so intertwined in most of the world that it has to be taken into consideration. I also agree that our entire struggle is to achieve social change. But, how do you position yourselves as a party, as activists and as politicians? How do you achieve social change without having to modify *that* condition that is allowing us to perform our identities? How do you change the world within this world? I guess this is a classic question within left-wing politics.

**CH:** Actually, the biggest reason I became a social activist is because I am a Christian. I am a social activist, a feminist, and a Christian and these three aspects accord with each other perfectly within myself. Wherever I am, even if I am in a non-capitalist society, I believe that I will always be facing towards minorities. I may not be able to change the whole of society, but I will always choose the underprivileged and alienated people of society. This is my foundation. Because that is the most happy and most just way of life.

Returning to a more practical level, how we should reform this society? Whether that reform will be successful I can never be sure. It has only been 10 years since the *New Progressive Party* has raised its flag in Korea and marched undefeated. The results of the past elections prove that those 10 years didn't bring much change. Even though, when I meet activists like myself, those who seek justice, I see the potential lying within. The ecology movement, the human rights movement, the anti-war movement, the feminist movement, the anti-sex trade movement, etc, are gradually professionalizing, maturing, and forming diverse networks.

Capitalism seems to be the dominant system in the world, but it is also exposing its dark side, such as with the recent financial crisis. I believe that our actions are constantly making small holes in the capitalist system and that as these holes create a network, society will become a more just place. Sometimes the progress will be slow and dull and sometimes it will be revolutionary. We do not know yet which path to take, but we know where we are heading.

**MC:** This reminds me of the movie *Milk*. Actually, I wasn't really interested in politics either. But after CHOI Hyun-sook ran for office, I realized the importance of executing agendas and policies that would speak on behalf for all sexual minorities and of cultivating politicians that will represent our issues. During the election, I met many local politicians with whom we will be able to work. Moreover, there are many political movements that can't be reduced to a certain party; these have to network and colligate together.

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**CM:** Can you tell me what other issues you are working on now? What are the strategies that you are going to employ to achieve those goals?

**CH:** I am 54 years old. I have been a social activist for 24 years, a left-wing political activist for 10 years and an LGBT activist for 7 years. Just like always, my primary concern is the situation of local areas. The toughest moment of being a sexual minority activist is when I feel like I am grasping at thin air. It seems like there is no link between me and real people living real lives and undergoing real problems. However I keep on going, because Korean society calls for immediate action; and because I myself, desperately and earnestly, yearn for a change.

Nowadays I am trying to put into practice the policies I made during my candidacy. The voters may not recall my promises, but I have pledged them as a public figure. The rest of my life will be a quest, searching for the way to bring diverse left-wing issues, including sexual issues, into real life.

**MC:** A lot of activists around me tend to search within the realm of the party; how to raise an intra-party agreement on sexual minority issues, how to formulate a party policy... The party is important, of course, but the party will not last forever. The party's future is another problem. What I essentially want in the long run is to take our issues to another level, a more sound and steady level.

**CM:** Do you think that LGBT identities or communities of people can have a positive life in Korea, despite the fact that there is not a legislative system that supports LGBTQ rights and that there seems to be a very traditionalist society? Can you as LGBTQ communities live a healthy life and prosperous life?

**CH:** If they choose to remain silent in the face of discrimination, they can probably live an easy, comfortable life. But if they choose to experience discrimination as a real hardships and to try to overcome it, they will have hard times, but also confidence and happiness.

**CM:** Is there anything else that you would like to talk about?

**MC:** The difference between Korean and foreign LGBT people might result from their political and social backgrounds. Korea has huge online LGBT communities and the biggest gay bars in Asia, but an inexistent legal systems. A lot of Korean LGBT people are reluctant to taking action because they fear exposing their faces; they worry they might lose everything if they go public. The major task of activists is to work this out.