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An Interview with Cheon Jae-woo (Chorus Boy)

June 2, 2010
Chingusai Office, Seoul, Korea

Cheon Jae-woo: My name is Cheon Jae-woo. I am 40 years old, gay, and living in Seoul. I work as a doctor and I have been a member of *Chingusai* since its early days, which makes it about 14 years. Nowadays, I am an advisor for the group. I'm also part of a gay chorus called *G-Voice*.

CM: Can you talk about your involvement with *Chingusai* and the areas that you have covered in this organization?

CJW: I have been engaged in activism for a long time, and I have experienced many situations, first and secondhand: what it is like to be a sexual minority activist in a gay community, what it is like to be a gay rights activist in Korea... I use this experience to give advice to young people. I don't want to sit back just because I am already experienced. I still want to do what I can do. In an organization you always need someone who can bring people together, someone like a counselor; I guess I suit that position.

CM: Is there a point of reconciliation between your medical practice and your activism?

CJW: I have made some attempts, like forming medical groups and such. I don't know if I am grasping too much, but I want to try out things that are not related to my job. Frankly, I am not involved in any medical related activism for the moment. I did feel some sort of accordance between the two when I volunteered in Africa for HIV patients.

CM: Could you perhaps tell me, the way the HIV pandemic manifests itself in Korea, the way that it is approached by the government officials and the kind of activism that develops around these issues?

CJW: The dynamics of HIV in Korea are fairly different from those of the third world; it is more like in western countries. The first organization to deal with this was the *Federation for HIV/AIDS Prevention*, which was founded when HIV first became known to Korea and their primary subjects were foreigners and homosexuals. After that, international organizations began to set up Korean branches; and later on *iSHAP* [Ivan Stop HIV/AIDS Project; 'Ivan' is a Korean term signifying sexual minority] was founded. Needless to say, the stigma and

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prejudice posed upon HIV patients is almost global. Activism considering HIV in Korea also aims at dissipating these misconceptions. *iSHAP* is mainly concerned with the gay community and focuses on HIV prevention; organizations like *Nanuri+* attach more weight on the human rights of HIV patients and it has also campaigned for the compulsory license for Fuzeon. I am sorry that I can't be very accurate. I am not directly involved with these movements.

CM: It seems like the issue of HIV/AIDS concerning gay men, is an eminent threat, but the health of other minority groups such as lesbians and transsexuals for example would demand for the creation of institutions or of community programs. I understand that there is not such a thing, that these groups are left aside. Why do you think that is and what is the discourse around these themes?

CJW: First of all, there is no government-based institution that I know of which gives positive aid as *iSHAP*. Lesbian communities, along with other women or minority groups, are trying to build health cooperatives, hopefully in the next few years. Transsexuals or transgender individuals focus more on legal issues like changing their family register. Many transsexual groups speak out on social issues. Unfortunately, one of them which was quite active, has shut down. But I guess somebody from these groups can give a more proper answer.

CM: Is there an interest from the government in other social issues concerning the community, other than health issues?

CJW: LGBT communities can get financial support on a project basis from several governmental institutions: the city of Seoul, the Seoul Foundation of Art & Culture, the National Human Rights Commission, and so on. *G-Voice's* new yearly project "Sing-Sing-Gay" intends for a better communication between gays and the general public, and it received funding. But the one we came up with earlier, on publishing a guidebook on gay culture, didn't. Former projects considering teenagers got some too, though the amount wasn't much.

CM: It seems to be that the government's attitude toward LGBT issues is very pragmatic, in other words, it won't give support if it is something that may "risk" the well being of the larger population. Is there a discriminatory or homophobic under layer to this, to their discourse?

CJW: No, I don't think so. It's true that we have to tune our proposals to the specific institution's standards: if we apply for the funding from the Seoul Arts & Culture Foundation, we emphasize the enhancement of cultural life of all Seoul citizens; if it is the Human Rights Commission, we emphasize our contribution to the rights of the general population. Also, there are a lot of us who apply for the funding, but there seems to be a certain percentage, a quota assigned to sexual minority groups. If this group gets it, the others won't. There is nothing homophobic about it, though. But people say that cultural organizations, human rights groups and NGOs will have a tough time receiving governmental support from to the new administration.

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CM: Would you outline perhaps some of the more important activities that you have been involved in *Chingusai* over the last years since it was founded?

CJW: The gay Chorus: *G-Voice*. It is quite significant in many ways that it is the first gay chorus ever to be formed in Korea. Dozens of people reveal themselves and come out at once; but most of all that we don't sing ordinary songs, but songs that represent the stories we have kept inside. The main object of the gay chorus is to communicate gay pride to the general public. Most gay people assume that there is nothing else to do in our communities besides having drinks or going clubbing, and so does the public. Gay chorus gives gays opportunities to enjoy cultural activities. When young people who have been feeling insecure and depressed because of their sexual identities come here and sing in the chorus, they begin to really appreciate themselves; they gain strength to carry on, to grow up and get out into the world. At those moments I realize the importance of this work.

CM: Can you speak about the cultural representation of LGBT identities in Korea, and how you use that in the current scene? I assume that you are aligning yourself to certain ways of being gay...

CJW: When we choose our songs for the performance, we consider singing the songs of gay icons. But in addition to that we try to reflect the Korean gay identity, and moreover regional gay cultures of Korea, like that of Jongno or Itaewon. The common stereotype of a gay chorus is singing Madonna and dancing, as they do in Itaewon clubs; we do these things too, but not just that. We do much more. We try to present the Jongno gay culture, that of older gay men in their 40s and 50s, which is all about sitting in bars and chatting and singing Trot [an old form of Korean pop music]. For example, writing lyrics of an experience you had in a Jongno bar and singing it in Trot tunes. We sometimes dance to pop and the audience loves it. But we always try to make a statement, and I guess that is the most difficult part. It is also hard to meet the expectations of every audience. It is a really rewarding experience when we really become one with the audience.

CM: Is the gay chorus perceived as a kind of rarity or something that is outside of the mainstream? Or do you as an organization already have a place that exists outside of those prejudices?

CJW: Our situation in Korean society is not so different from that of the Korean gay community in general. Korean society still is closed to sexual minorities. Gays appear quite often in TV series and movies, in the press, but there are very few people who think that my friend or my son can be gay. *G-Voice's* performances are somewhat within those limits too. We can't—not that we wish to—be a part of the mainstream. Some people even take our chorus as some kind of a school talent show, or maybe something like the *Alcazar Show*. In our performance we play with sexual differentiation; we try to let people see that the woman-man stereotype is actually not fixed, that it is something changeable. And we also perform songs that any male chorus would, so as to show that sexual minorities can be right near you, like your friend or a family member. But our audience is mostly those who are already interested. I hope that more people will start to come see us.

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CM: Could you reflect on the cultural history in Korea and instances in which, for example, in the theater, the opera or any of the other performing arts, gender might have been performed or discussed?

CJW: In the 18th and 19th centuries, there were groups of men called Namsadangpae; they lasted until the early 20th century. They wandered about from one market fair to another, singing and dancing, performing short plays. Half of them dressed as men and others as women; they say that there were sexual relationships within the group.

Cross-dressing was a quite constant act in the 1970-80s. Drags would gather secretly in gay bars and sing, or sometimes lip sync. These days lesbian communities are bringing in drag culture more actively, applying it to festivals or performances.

CM: Lastly, what do you think your challenge is as an activist? What do you think is the challenge that this society is facing regarding these issues?

CJW: All sexual minorities in Korea are facing numerous issues. The military penal code, organizations or religious groups against homosexuality, the anti-discrimination act, just to name a few. I hope that all people, not just LGBT communities, will realize that these issues are important; that it is not just about us, but at the end about everybody.