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An Interview with PARK Kiho

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Chingusai Office, Seoul, Korea

PARK Kiho: My name is PARK Kiho; I am 41 years old and live in Korea. We are at the offices of *Chingusai* [Between Friends], a Korean gay rights organization where I am the director. *Chingusai's* core members are gay men and our activities focus on promoting sexual minority human rights, developing cultural diversity and human rights sensibility, etc. I first started working in this field in 1996 as a volunteer for the first *Korean Queer Film Festival*. A couple years later I worked at the *Korean Queer Culture Festival*. At that time it was almost impossible to earn a living doing this sort of activities, so I spent half a year working side jobs and the other half organizing and holding the festival. About 4 years ago my mind and body felt somewhat beaten down so I took a year rest. After that I came where I am now.

CM: Can you describe the social and political circumstances in Korea that lead to the formation or the need for an organization of this kind?

PK: *Chingusai* started as *Chodong-hoe* and was founded in 1993. The name "Chodong" is made of the initials of a Korean saying: "All that is blue is alike" [meaning those who live by each other share the same qualities]. It represented both gays and lesbians but after three months it branched into *Chingusai* for gays and *Kkirikkiri* [We Alike] for lesbians. We thought that separating would better represent the needs of each community. We went through a lot of difficulties during the founding period because homosexuals then rarely revealed themselves in public. There was very limited media coverage of homosexuality; it was limited to the small gossip sections. But a more liberal social atmosphere was made allowing people to talk about sexual diversity and culture, and sexual minorities began to recognize that they could not stay closeted. Some activists, though few, came out. After that the community took form.

CM: During the moment of the sexual revolution in the United States and Western Europe, mainly in the late 1960s and 1970s, what was happening here? Are there any early precedents of any kind of organization or articulation of sexual difference, rejection of tradition, etc.? Or it all began here in the 1990s?

PK: In fact there were, in the 1960s and 1970s, several groups such as the *Sexual Politics Committee* or the *Sexual Politics Party*. They played leading roles in changing common perceptions of homosexuality and served as a basis of future sexual minority groups. But they remained unpopular. Most of the activists agree that the foundation of *Chodong-hoe* in 1993 was the starting point of Korea's sexual minority rights movement.

CM: This might seem obvious to you, but could you describe the social and political circumstances that the LGBT community has faced in South Korea historically? If the

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movement was founded in the 1990s, what has changed in society, so that a movement of this kind could be formed?

PK: The lives of sexual minorities were tormented. They desired to be set free from all of this but no visible changes took place. It was only after people formally engaged in student movements and entered public life that sexual minority communities gained substantial momentum.

CM: So the movement consolidated itself as a political organization, more than a community resource?

PK: I guess it was the other way around. At the initial stages of *Chingusai*, public utterance or public works weren't the main issue. The places where sexual minorities, especially homosexuals, could gather or communicate were simply bars and such, but there were no public places to reveal ourselves and speak out. Our priority was to create such a space. We gathered in Seoul all the sexual minorities closeted in local communities. When this effort made some outcomes, we started talking about public issues.

CM: I suppose the organization has a political goal, or is that besides the question in the context of Korean politics? In other words, do you want to affect change at the level of the law?

PK: *Chingusai* is a rather unique organization. Some of us are regular workers here and are fully engaged in social activities, but our main goal is to guide gay people so they can develop a sensibility for human rights and self-esteem, and hopefully participate in political activism in the future. In other words, rather than acting as a political group altogether, we provide the conditions for individual members to develop new self-perceptions.

CM: Can you describe the trajectory and the societal changes that have taken place? Can you name specific things that you see reflected out in society? Do LGBT people have a better life now given the work that you have begun?

PK: I get that question very often: "What changes have been made in people's lives since you have started this?" But it is always very difficult to answer because those changes aren't quite apparent. Korea is a Confucianism-dominated and male-dominated society. Unlike in Western nations there has been no law or system newly made that could prove the actual improvement of lives of sexual minorities. Nothing legal has changed in the past 20 years. The changes that are visible to us are more at an unofficial level: *Chingusai's* office is much larger than before, more people visit us, and more people are speaking out... Now there are six or seven more groups like *Chingusai*, and the number of clubs, blogs and websites where sexual minorities can express themselves have increased explosively.

CM: For somebody from the outside to understand the local context, what would you say are the most pressing challenges that this community faces?

PK: Sexual minorities in Korea can't reveal themselves. Organizations like ours can help the people who come out, but we can't protect their entire personal lives. From the very moment of coming-out, the individual has to face all the consequences of their actions. They may be solely economic disadvantages, but mostly they accompany family and friend relationship problems. Ruptured relationships make individuals vulnerable; risking this it is not an easy choice to make. I guess this is the number one problem. Queer communities in Korea are trying to build self-respect and pride among sexual minorities, while widely informing the general public. Also a lot of groups are fighting for legal rights, especially for the new Anti-

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Discrimination Act that is to be legislated in October to include an article dealing with sexual orientation.

CM: You already mentioned that the tradition of Confucianism and also perhaps the idea of family values are very strong. What kind of strategies are you using or thinking about in order to combat these two major forces, which seem to be the ones that are making the LGBTQ community remain invisible?

PK: These two don't function independently from one another. Confucianism, familism, patriarchy, nepotism, regionalism... are all mixed into one big force that sways around the lives of individuals. We don't deal with these issues separately; rather, our goal is to find the key that will dismantle and incapacitate the whole. And we are still searching. *Chingusai* thinks of "coming out" as one of the major tactics and is trying to create a coming-out-friendly environment. Another important project is deconstructing the concept of the family and redefining it with a new language. The family may be the very key to resolving these issues. Some members of *Chingusai* actually try out new family models.

CM: The idea that you are mentioning echoes the internationalist model of LGBT politics.

PK: I guess that is right.

CM: Is that your role model? Do you think those tactics are effective in a context that seems to be so culturally repressive?

PK: Despite all, I will have to agree that we need to learn from Western discourses; they have more variations and therefore they can more efficiently analyze or explain the present lives of sexual minorities. But all the historical stages that Western societies went through step by step, didn't take place in Korea. Everything was imported at once somewhat recklessly, after which the Korean queer community faced a complex situation: our actual lives are still oppressed, but the media is flourishing with images of an open society. To really change people's lives, it is crucial to adapt Western discourses to the Korean terrain; and there is little difference between adapting and re-creating.

CM: I am interested in knowing your opinion about this statement: It seems like being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender as a category is a modern concept. In other words, it is something that exists within the framework of a specific set of political actions and the cultural motivations that have taken place internationally. So in that sense, is being "LGBT" an international category?

PK: Who was that Hungarian psychologist who coined the word "homosexual"? Personally, I think naming, identifying people as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transsexual is what makes divisions visible, and what brings about discrimination and prejudice. Before categories, we couldn't distinguish sexual identities, which made it so much better to live among others. Modernization and specialization created private lives, and this led to discrimination.

CM: These categories might pigeon hole us and consequently create discrimination, but at the same time, those categories are the ones that have allowed for political empowerment, correct? In the sense that it is not only about self-perception and self-representation, but it is also about having the same civil rights as everyone else, being able to marry, being able to live as a couple, etc.

PK: When we discuss the Anti-discrimination Act, some think that we should define

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discrimination category-by-category, case-by-case, while others seek for a more global, synthetic law. In my opinion, the process would be too slow and too tough if we considered all differences... We need to approach this with a broader "human" concept to be effective.

CM: Do you think that there is such a thing as being a gay Korean or a gay Colombian? Or do we exist within a frame that is completely determined by a global understanding of sexual politics?

PK: There are global difficulties simply by being a sexual minority, no matter in what region or state, and also those which differ from region to region. Surely there are issues that can't be standardized with the global context. For example, gay Americans don't feel the obligation to take care of their aging parents in their homes, but gay Koreans do. And they feel tremendous guilt if they aren't able to do so because they are gay. It is not just about one person; it is about your immediate community. I most certainly think that there are differences between nations, states or races.

CM: We are faced again with the issue of tradition... How do you reconcile the necessity to enact political empowerment on the one hand, and to face the strong divisions that are a consequence of cultural tradition on the other hand? It seems that being a political agent and being a good citizen within a traditional society is something that is irreconcilable.

PK: Actually it can be. Of course it won't be easy, as a gay man living in Korea, to take care of your own parents and also live a politically correct life. But that doesn't mean that tradition and history are bound to be bad and are something isolated from contemporary values. We need to conciliate and harmonize the advantages of tradition and the ones of the contemporary. For instance, if we go back to taking care of our parents, government intervention can unload the pressure of individuals who are having problems due to this issue. If the government provides some sort of facility or accommodation to take care of elderly people, parent-son conflicts won't have to lead to relationship ruptures. I think it is right to harmonize tradition and our present times, and that is what I am trying to do.