

**WE
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INTERVIEWS

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An Interview with Ruin

June 3, 2010
Hongdae Toz, Seoul, Korea

Ruin: My name is Ruin and I usually introduce myself as an MTF transgender lesbian. I'm also a vegetarian and a cat lover. I started thinking about gender issues in 2004, and two years later I became an activist. I wasn't quite aware of sexual identity issues before encountering feminism; through feminism I realized that the general notion of femininity or masculinity was completely different from my personal experience. So I started questioning: What am I? But I didn't immediately acknowledge myself as a transgender person. The stereotype of a transgender at that time was someone like Ha Risu [MTF transgender celebrity in Korea], who debuted in 2001, post-op and taking hormones. My original concerns weren't the medical treatments; they were about explaining myself.

I first outed myself in 2005, by becoming a supporting member of the *Korean Sexual Minority Culture Center*. The following June, I participated in the *Queer Culture Festival* in one of the programs that was a transgender forum, which later developed into the *Korean Transgender Activist Group Jirungi* [Worm]. It turned out that I was the only new face at the forum. Everybody else was either already acquainted with each other or had been officially invited. I was the only one who came in response to the advertisement. That is how I met the people with whom I have exchanged thoughts and with whom two months later I established *Jirungi*. I don't work at *Jirungi* anymore since June 2010.

Carlos Motta: Can you speak about your decision not to have medical treatment?

R: I didn't feel obliged to do it. Medical treatment is not what identifies one as a transgender person. There are many different ways to live as a transgender, even without having operations or taking hormones. I might change my opinion later on.

CM: Is that a political or a personal decision? In other words, are you thinking about reconsidering gender categories, which are often tied to the way the people, look physically?

R: It's kind of difficult to determine which is the case, but I guess I made up my mind not to have surgery first and considered its political effects afterwards. When I introduce myself as a transgender, I usually don't clarify whether I'm MTF or FTM. A lot of people mistake me as

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an FTM, others get confused thinking: "From how he/she acts, he/she is a woman but from the way he/she looks he/she must be a man..." I find these reactions very interesting so I make use of them often; but they weren't something I deliberately aimed at.

CM: Can you speak about what are the issues that transgender activists are dealing with in Korea at the moment? What is on the agenda and how are the strategies employed to accomplish their goals?

R: The biggest issue is the Resident Registration Number [The 13-digit national identification number system of Korea. The first six digits consist of the resident's birth date, in the form of *YYMMDD*, and the first of the latter seven digits indicates the resident's sex; an odd number if a man, an even number if a woman]. The RRN is almost a prerequisite for a *proper* life in Korea. They ask for it on all sorts of occasions. For transgender persons, the sex indicated on the RRN and the apparent or identified sex is discordant and therefore are looked at suspiciously. The RRN is also required when you look for a job, so transgender people are often unemployed or work temporary jobs. Some transgender persons look almost 20 years younger due to their hormone treatments and they are more than often asked for their RRN cards at bars and even when buying cigarettes. Sometimes they are even suspected of carrying someone else's card.

Another problem are the public bathrooms. Public bathrooms are divided by sex (male and female); sex perceived according to the person's physical appearance. We talked about re-categorizing the bathroom system with the feminist disability groups. Bathrooms for the disabled are all unisex in Korea. We need bathrooms that don't follow ordinary sex classifications. We proposed a joint activism, but changes are yet to be made.

In 2008 group homes also became an issue. For a transgender runaway that looks like a female after hormone treatments finding a group home to accept her is very difficult. Group homes are still hostile to homosexuals, which make it even more difficult for transgender people. We are considering two options: creating a new group home, or searching through existing ones that accept transgender individuals. Medical care is discussed often too. There is no insurance policy for treatments for transgender people, there is no regulation, and so the price can really hit the roof. Also, surgery results differ extremely according from doctor to doctor.

CM: I think the issue of bathroom politics is a particularly interesting one. How are you, as an activist collective and individually, thinking about addressing this issue to the authorities to achieve change?

R: It isn't a formed movement yet, but several activists are speaking out through the press. Bathroom politics became an important issue during a human rights activists conference in 2007. I participated as a representative of transgender activists, along with other members of *Jirungi*. The building where the conference was held had the common dual-sex bathrooms. We raised this as an issue and proposed that at least one floor should have a unisex bathroom. Even activists think that transgender issues will all be settled if we undergo

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surgery; but after this incident they came to know the scope of the problem.

Feminist disability groups tend to claim for sexual division of the normally unisex bathrooms for disabled people. But transgender activists insist for gender-neutral, non-segregated bathrooms. Making a separate bathroom for the disabled is in itself classifying and segregating the disabled. We think that classification is the fundamental problem; what we need is one bathroom for everybody, whether you're man or woman, disabled or not disabled.

We tried to make this bathroom issue public, pointing it out at events such as the Human Rights Film Festival, so that people would assume transgender issues as a part of their lives. In 2008, the *Women Student Council* of Yonsei University held a culture fest on alternative bathrooms. They questioned sex, gender, disability and the body, and staged performances. The visible changes stop here, but this is a great step forward.

CM: I remember, recently, in Thailand, some schools provided gender-neutral bathrooms. Are you aware of this?

R: No. I only heard that there are some in Los Angeles.

CM: What about the issue of health care? How are you as activists approaching it?

R: There are records that gender reassignment surgeries were performed in Korea as early as 1930, but official medical journals place the first surgeries in the 1980s. Nowadays there are some doctors that are renowned for gender reassignment. But there are no legal regulations whatsoever: none for hormone therapy costs or periods, none for psychiatric diagnosis... The after effects of surgery and medical accidents are also a huge problem. For these reasons many people go all the way to Thailand to receive treatment.

Insurance coverage of transgender treatments is a double-edged problem. Without insurance, the black market grows and stabilizes the price at a lower rate. In fact, isn't institutionalization also an illegal process of the things that were, until now, easily tolerated? It reflects the desire to control everything outside governmental supervision. So some activists are hesitant of institutionalizing, rather choosing to raise the black market itself and circulate it within the community, along with networks with several gender-conscious doctors.

CM: So transgender people are responsible for their own health? In other words, there is no type of institutionalized support?

R: No. None.

CM: Is it a desire of a transgender activist to achieve legislation that would cover these issues?

R: Well, in 2006 one member of the National Assembly proposed a special act on legal recognition to sex reassignment. The center subject being the RRN. How to make the RRN modification process more simple and systematic? Until now it was solely left to the judge's

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discretion. Some would permit it after hormone therapy or genital surgery; some would demand photographic evidence; others won't permit it even if all the above are satisfied. Since the cases are so varied, we thought some sort of legalization was needed.

Law specialist transgender activists conjoined, and constantly discussed how to make the law more favorable to transgender people. A couple of medical specialists, including psychiatrists and gender reassignment surgeons, also attended the public hearing. If this had gone through, some changes on the medical issue would have subsequently followed. But it didn't. Actually this bill was brought in before, and was rejected, so the overall movement was in low spirits. We talked about how important it is and how necessary it is to take action... Even so, it was difficult to get things going, because we all knew very well that it is not a simple task. Besides, the number of activists focusing on transgender issues was very small, about 5 or 6, and a bit over 10 if we include the supporters.

CM: How are transgender people represented in Korea nowadays?

R: There is a huge difference between life inside and outside of Itaewon. For example, if I go shopping for women clothing at Hongdae or Shinchon, the shop clerks would say: "Sir, men's clothes are on the other side;" or, "Are you looking for a gift for your girlfriend?" This is the normal perception in Korea. However, if I shop at Itaewon, they would say: "Try on the ones you like." They even call me Unni [A title used by women when designating other women older than themselves]!

In Korea, the rate of violence against LGBTs is actually quite low. People may talk behind your back—"is he a he or a she?"— but seldom to your face. But it is not likely out of goodwill but more out of ignorance. They just don't know how to react, how to express hate or how to use violence. I once walked about in downtown Seoul wearing a skirt. Startled, people kept on staring, but did nothing more. In Itaewon, it doesn't bother anyone. There is this silent consent that Itaewon is a different space with a different formula.

It is said that transgender people started to live in Itaewon in the 1950s. Bars and clubs opened then; the first official transgender club opened in the late 1960s. Nowadays there are about 15 clubs, and 500-600 transgender persons live in the Itaewon area. People of all ages visit the clubs, from teenagers to people in their forties and fifties.

CM: Does that mean that transgender people somehow, this is a generalization, work in the nightclub industry?

R: Not necessarily. According to a 2006 survey on transgender rights, relatively few transgender people work in clubs or bars, and many of them live outside of Itaewon. Nevertheless, a lot of us gather in Itaewon because this is the most easy and comfortable place for us. Itaewon people are used to transgender persons so they don't bother us, and the clubs make it easier for us to get jobs and earn a living. Many transgender people say that they will never come near Itaewon once they make some money and get married; but secretly they all keep certain affection for this place. It is some kind of a hometown, so to speak... Needless to say, they all do have the desire to be someone else somewhere else.

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Segregation is less harsh in Itaewon as well. Clubs (though it must be admitted that they are linked to sexual labor) do not perform the exploitation that seems to be a common case amongst non-transgender female sex workers. There are no "managers" or pimps; the worker makes a one-to-one contract with the client, and negotiates her payment.

Itaewon commonly passes as a nightlife area or a crime-ridden district packed with foreigners, but for us, it is the most comfortable public place. It is true that a lot of transgender people live in tiny rental studios to save money for operations; but they choose to live in Itaewon because it is a place where their way of life can be acknowledged. Most of us do not live according to social norms.

People joke that you hear 10 different languages during a 10-minute walk from or to the Itaewon subway station. This place is very different from the rest of Korea. Various ways of life coexist, but you learn to get along by intuition. I sometimes imagine what it would be like if all the other places became like Itaewon. Maybe every place is, in essence, the same; maybe they are just afraid, hiding, shunning.

My idea of activism is creating this kind of culture. What I really want to do is not activism that aims at legalization or institutional reform, but cultural activism that will change people's imaginations: people being able to imagine that I can, or my parents can be transgender. I'm still in the dark, searching, but someday a completely new perception, a completely new imagination may be possible, just like it occurs in Itaewon.