

## 12 The Korean gay and lesbian movement 1993–2008

From “identity” and “community”  
to “human rights”

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On November 8, 2007, a small group of protesters gathered outside the Central Government Complex in downtown Seoul to protest the recently revised “Anti-Discrimination Bill.” The bill, which had been introduced by President Roh Moo Hyun as one of his election promises, had been intended to strengthen the National Rights Commission Act, “which bars discrimination on the basis of most categories, including sexual orientation, by requiring the president and other levels of government to develop plans to eliminate discrimination” (Söngsosuja Ch’abyöl Pandae Mujigae Haengdong 2008). Instead, in response to pressure from conservative Christian groups and the Korean business community, “sexual orientation,” along with six other items, including “military status,” “nationality,” “language,” “ideology,” “family type,” “criminal record,” and “educational background,” were excluded from the revised bill and protection against discrimination.

In response, the “Emergency Coalition of South Korea LGBT Rights Groups Against Homophobia and the Distorted Anti-Discrimination Bill” (hereafter “Emergency Coalition”), representing a broad array of sexual minority groups, including gays, lesbians, and transgender people, called forward a series of “lightning meetings” (*pön’gaes*) and protests, including the one described above. These meetings and protests brought an impassioned response from the gay, lesbian, and transgender communities, as well as support from a broad coalition of feminist, labor, and cultural activist groups including *Unninet* (“Sister’s Network”), Democratic Labor Union, *Munhwa Yöndaes* (“Cultural Action”), and the Foreign Migrant’s Worker Union in Kyungi Province.

As part of their opening performance, members from the Emergency Coalition began knocking Styrofoam blocks, etched with the names of the seven items that had been excluded from the revised bill, off a pyramid of Styrofoam blocks used to represent the revised bill. In so doing, they were showing how the landmark Anti-Discrimination Bill had literally and figuratively lost its power – or “its teeth” (*ippal ppajin pöp*).

This event was remarkable from a number of perspectives including the fact that only 15 years ago, sexual minorities were all but invisible and completely marginalized within Korean society. During the height of the AIDS epidemic

in the West in the 1980s, a Korean news anchor even stated, “South Korea has nothing to worry about since we have no homosexuals” (Buddy 2002: 20). Thus, it is remarkable that, in such a short span of time, sexual minorities have emerged on the civil movement scene as both social beings and political actors to improve human rights in South Korea.

In this chapter, we will discuss the emergence and development of the Korean gay and lesbian movement in South Korea from 1993–2008. With the collapse of military dictatorship and institutionalization of formal democracy, South Korea has seen a flowering of new citizens’ movements, also known as New Social Movements (hereafter “NSMs”). In contrast to the labor and national liberation movements that rocked the nation during the 1970s and 1980s, the NSMs (of which the women’s and environmental movements are considered the most representative) placed less emphasis on securing state power and more on the deepening of democracy in everyday life (Armstrong 2002, Kim 2006, Koo 2002).

Almost completely ignored within this literature on South Korea’s democratization, however, has been the gay and lesbian movement. This oversight is also remarkable for a number of reasons. Not only has the Korean gay and lesbian movement built upon the Pro-Democracy Movement in terms of its rhetoric, activist strategies, and personnel, it has also contributed critically to overcoming its limits by placing new emphasis on the politics of identity, community, and culture, especially in relation to gender and sexuality (Bong 2008). In particular, in contrast to other NSMs, including the Korean women’s movement, with which it has most closely aligned itself and against which it has developed in response to, the gay and lesbian movement has strategically foregrounded the democratic ideal of “freedom” (of expression, information, association, etc.), as opposed to “equality” or “economic redistribution.”<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, the ongoing engagement and transformation of the legacy of the Pro-Democracy Movement can be seen no more clearly than in the discourses of “sexual citizenship” and “human rights,” with which the struggles of sexual minorities in South Korea are currently being waged.

Thus, it is one of the basic assumptions of this chapter that if the Korean gay and lesbian movement has been woefully under-represented in the literature on Korean democracy, it is not because of this movement’s insignificance, but because of the degree of sexual minorities’ oppression in South Korea’s deeply heteronormative culture anchored in the patriarchal family, and the unique barriers that they face in representing their issues in public.

This chapter is divided into three parts. The first part, “The Emergence of the Korean Gay and Lesbian Community,” will examine the history and politics of creating notions of gay and lesbian identity and community in South Korea. The second part, “Gay and Lesbian Activism,” will examine this movement’s fight against homophobic representation in school textbooks and state censorship of gay films, film festivals, and the Internet, as well as its efforts to create an alternative gay and lesbian culture. The final part, “Sexual Citizenship and the Era of Human Rights,” will examine the activism of the Emergency Coalition in terms of coalition building and inventing new strategies of resistance, as well as

the gay and lesbian movement's effort to institutionalize itself by supporting the campaign of the nation's first openly lesbian candidate for parliament. Together, these three parts aim to reveal how the gay and lesbian movement has built upon and transformed the legacy of the Pro-Democracy Movement to become an integral part of the contemporary political scene in South Korea.

## Theoretical review

### *"Citizen" and "civil society" to "sexual citizenship"*

Within the literature on democracy in South Korea, "citizen" and "civil society" have emerged as two key terms. While the term "citizen" (*simin*) has, above all, been used in contrast with the term *minjung*, a concept appropriated by Korean social movement activists since the 1970s" (Kim 2006: 102), the term "civil society" has been used to displace the binary of "state and society" (see Chapter 3 in this volume). As Charles Armstrong writes, "The opposition between 'state' and 'society,' in which the latter was often conceptualized in the 1970s as the *minjung* or 'popular masses' is no longer a useful framework for understanding Korea today" (2002: 2). Quoting the political scientist Larry Diamond, Armstrong defines "civil society" as "the realm of organized social life that is voluntary, self-generating, (largely) self supporting, autonomous from the state, and bound by a legal order or set of rules" (2002: 2).

However, even as a younger generation of Korean Studies scholars has embraced the terms "citizen" and "civil society" to frame new debates about South Korea's democratization, the terms have not been without controversy. For instance, Seung-sook Moon (2007) criticizes the masculinist assumptions of both terms. According to her, Korean men are able to participate in the public civil sphere as "citizens" precisely because Korean women have been already confined to the so-called proper realm of privacy – the family – through the prior "sexual contract." This became particularly true in South Korea following its "militarized modernity," after which the Korean civil society became increasingly masculinized. Thus, despite their claims to universality, citizenship and civil society are both gendered male, and anchored in the public/private divide. This chapter builds on this feminist body of literature in criticizing the masculinist contours of civil society and citizenship. It also extends it by analyzing how both terms are (hetero) sexualized.

In recent years, the term "sexual citizenship" has come into vogue to examine how "sexuality" and "citizenship" are linked (Bell and Binnie 2000; Richardson 2000; Weeks 1998). As Jeffrey Weeks notes, "On the surface ... the idea of the sexual citizen is a contradiction in terms":

The sexual is traditionally a focus of our most intimate personal life, an arena of pleasure and pain, love and violence, power and resistance, sequestered away, in theory at least, from the public gaze (Giddens, 1992) ... Citizenship, on the other hand, if it means anything, must be about involvement in a wider society. (Marshall, 1950, 1998: 36)

However, as David Bell and Jon Binnie write, “All citizenship is sexual citizenship in that the foundational tenets of being a citizen are all inflected by sexualities” (2000: 25). For instance, they argue that the invocation of the heterosexual, nuclear family, composed of a male/female dyad, as the proper realm of sexuality and intimacy and, moreover, as metonym for nation, “obviously draws on sexualized constructions of appropriate (and inappropriate) modes of living together and caring for one another” (2000: 25). Mainstream models of citizenship, however, marginalize homosexuality, while leaving unexamined this implicit heterosexualizing of citizenship (Richardson 2000: 153). The term “sexual citizenship” is thus used to flag the sexual rights of gays, lesbians, and other sexual minorities who have been marginalized and discriminated against within this civil sphere implicitly coded as both masculine and heterosexual through the public/private divide.

The term, “sexual citizenship,” however, is also used to signal the broader importance of sexuality in the contemporary world (Weeks 1998: 35). In what Anthony Giddens (1992) has termed the “transformation of intimacy,” the broader social-political and economic transformations, which have resulted in the decline of the patriarchal, nuclear family and given greater emphasis to egalitarian relationships between men and women, have also contributed to “the fundamental belief that love relationships and partnerships should be a matter of personal choice and not of arrangement or tradition” (Weeks 1998: 42).

In South Korea, such transformation of intimacy can be seen both in the abolition of *hojuje* (family head system) in 2003, which had legalized the patrilineal succession of family and family register (Yang 2002), and the passage of the “Healthy Family Act” in 2004 (Kang 2005), designed to compensate for the abolition of the former system. Set in the wider context of declining fertility rates, rising divorce rates, and an ageing society that have produced widespread fears of Korean family and nation in crisis, the Healthy Family Act, which makes heterosexual union, marriage, and having children, “no longer a personal choice but a national duty” (Kang 2005), highlights the increasing tensions between collectivism (especially as embodied in the institution of family as metonym for nation) that has defined the Korean nation since its birth (Steinberg 1997), and the more recent discourse of individualism (especially as embodied in the notion of creative and enterprising individual), promoted by current neoliberal reforms (Song 2006).

### **The emergence of the Korean gay and lesbian community**

Much speculation but little research exists on the history of homosexuality or “same-sex” sex within South Korea. This is not surprising given the country’s strongly heteronormative culture. Still, many newspaper accounts of gay and lesbian cultures during the Japanese colonial period and oral accounts of gay and lesbian communities during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s are said to exist (Interview with Lee Jung-woo 2002). For instance, an association of lesbian taxi drivers called “*Yöyunhoe*” existed since the late 1960s. The group, which

numbered in the hundreds, formed quasi-familial ties and aimed at mutual economic independence (Dyke 1998: 7).

### ***From “sexual subculture” to “identity” and “community”***

A gay subculture also existed in the area behind T’apgol Park (formerly Pagoda Park) in Chongno during the 1970s. The Nagwŏn neighborhood, anchored by the infamous “P” Theater – where gay men established a “salon” (i.e., a place to meet and cruise) – became the focus of a series of spectacular media exposés in the 1980s and 1990s that attracted more gay men to this area. It was not until the mid-1990s, when Westernised gay bars and dance-clubs began to form in Itaewon near the U.S. military base in Seoul and a lesbian bar opened in Mapo, that younger gays and lesbians in their twenties also began to take part in the gay and lesbian scene (Cho 2003). The term *iban* (also phoneticized as *eban*), which Korean gays and lesbians currently use to refer to themselves, along with the English terms “gay” and “lesbian,” is said to have originated in Nagwŏn-dong.

These, however, are recent historical changes. Until the mid-1990s, most Koreans, including Korean gays and lesbians, understood homosexuality to be a foreign phenomenon, part of West’s “decadent” culture. When the term “gay” was used, it was used to refer to transgendered persons, while men who had sex with other men were referred to as “homos” or *tongsŏngyŏnaeja* (“same-sex lover”). While both were derogatory terms, the first considered homosexuality to be a perverted behavior confined to a few exceptional individuals and the second considered it to be a free-floating desire that any man could be “tempted” or “seduced into” (Cho 2003). It became the task of the emerging gay and lesbian movement to transform this sexual desire into a “gay and lesbian identity,” and people with these identities into a “gay and lesbian community.”

### *Emergence of gay and lesbian organizations*

The first gay and lesbian organizations emerged in South Korea within a social context of contested values of love, sex, and marriage, as well as family. For instance, the Korean Sexual Violence Relief Center was established in 1991 and a sexual harassment case involving Prof. “S” at Seoul National University (SNU) grabbed the headlines in 1993. In 1995, rape also became reclassified as “rape and harassment” from a “crime against purity” within the criminal code. At the same time, as highlighted by the obscenity charge against Ma Kwang-su, a professor at Yonsei University, and his novel, *Joyful Sarah (Chŭlgŏun Sara)*, controversies raged over the issue of freedom of expression. The controversy centered around issues of “art” versus “obscenity,” and permissible forms of public sexual expression (Mah 1994). As expressed in the “Free Sex Movement” (*p’ŭri seksŭ chuŭija*) it also centered on the right to have sex outside marriage without social stigma (Kim 1995).<sup>2</sup>

Within this context, *Sappho*, the first lesbian group in South Korea, was established in 1992 by “Toni,” an African-American lesbian who worked for the

U.S. military in South Korea. Toni was part of a growing number of foreign gays and lesbians (of whom many were English teachers) in South Korea, who began to form a Westernised gay culture in Itaewon alongside young Korean gays and lesbians (Cho 2003). Targeting these foreigners, Toni placed an ad in the English-language newspapers, *The Korea Times* and *The Korea Herald*, and at U.S.O, an information services center for the U.S. military in South Korea. Eight people replied to the ad, including three Korean lesbians and a Korean-American gay man, Chang Gene-suk, who went on to establish the first Korean lesbian and gay organization, *Ch'odonghoe*. Within weeks of its founding, however, the group broke up due to conflicts between the gay men and lesbians. The lesbians were frustrated by the gay men's sexism; they also felt "powerless and inferior" in a situation where gay projects were being privileged over lesbian ones because most of the funding came from gay bars in Chongno and Itaewon (*KiriKiri* 1999).

After *Ch'odonghoe's* breakup, the gay men immediately established a gay men's organization, *Chingusai* ("Between Friends"), in February 1994. However, it almost took a year for the lesbians to recruit enough members to establish the first Korean lesbian organization, *KiriKiri* ("Amongst Ourselves") in November 1994. Not only did they lack *Chingusai's* community base in gay businesses, they were also hindered by South Korea's patriarchal ideology, which viewed women as non-sexual entities (Suh 2001). Thus, even though both organizations shared the broad objectives of providing support, education, counseling, and a social outlet for their members, they differed significantly in their ideological goals and orientations.

*Chingusai*, for instance, aimed at transforming Nagwŏn-dong and creating a "wholesome" gay culture. Viewing themselves as being no different from heterosexual men other than the fact that they were "men who loved other men," they defined their organization as "a friendship group based on a dignified relationship between homosexuals" (Suh 2001: 72). Lacking a larger feminist analysis of patriarchy, they tried to assimilate into the mainstream society as *men*.

*KiriKiri*, meanwhile, tried to strengthen its social and political base by networking with Korean women's organizations. However, it was not easy. According to Kim Ji-hye, "feminist sexual discourse in Korea focused on rape, sex crime, sexual harassment and so on ... leading feminism to naturally concentrate on the difference in power between men and women" (*KiriKiri* 1999: 171). This, in turn, meant that "sexuality in feminism has come to mean *heterosexuality* ... forestall[ing] a criticism of patriarchal heterosexism" (*KiriKiri* 1999: 171).<sup>3</sup> "After being isolated between the patriarchal character and arrogance of the gay rights movement and exclusion of lesbians by the feminist movement" (Cho, 2005: 93)," the Korean lesbians "finally declared separation from both in May 2005" (Cho 2005: 94).

#### *"Sexual politics" movement on the campus*

In 1994, *Ch'ingusai* became a focus of greater media attention after one newspaper reported the "covert spread of a secretive *tongsŏngyŏnaeja* organization" (Buddy



2002: 18). With its members deathly afraid of being outed, however, most of *Ch'ingusai's* efforts were geared towards internal community development and it was not until the coming out of Suh Dong-jin and Lee Jung-woo that the public became more aware of homosexuality.

As Namhee Lee (2002) points out, along with laborers, students have played a leading role in the Pro-democracy Movement in South Korea as a “force of conscience” (*yangsim seryŏk*). According to Lee, “They were ‘morally superior’ because they spoke what was in everybody’s mind, without considering the consequences” (2002: 95). Following this tradition, Suh and Lee – both students at the elite colleges of Yonsei and Seoul National University, respectively – became the first faces to present “gay issues” to the public.

With student activists feeling a “vacuum” in student activism in the 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Bloc and the decline of the Pro-Democracy Movement, Lee felt that he and Suh should team up with the “Young Feminists” to “accomplish something.” As young feminist student activists, Young Feminists worked to expand politics into the realm of everyday life through events such as the “Sexual Politics Festival” (held on Yonsei campus from October 11–13, 1995), which sought to politicize issues around women’s body image, campus rape, lesbianism, family, etc. (Jung 2000; Kwŏnkim 2001).

Within this campus environment, many gay and lesbian university groups appeared after April 1995, including *Come Together* at Yonsei University; *Maum 001* at SNU; *Hwarang* at Kunkook University; and *Saram and Saram* at Korea University. The effect was electrifying. The representatives of these university groups, including Suh and Lee, became instant media celebrities invited to television talk shows, radio programs, and university lectures. Meanwhile, with some people believing these groups to be “sex clubs,” one newspaper bemoaned the “diseased ivory tower” (Buddy 2002; Interview with Lee Jung-woo 2002).

By putting faces to the “ghostly” figure of the homosexual – often discussed but rarely sighted – Lee and Suh kick-started the Korean gay and lesbian movement on campus. As Barry Adam *et al.* write, “The very idea of a movement by homosexual people becomes imaginable only if people have sexual identities” (Adam 1995 quoted in Adam *et al.* 1999: 350). Not only that, Suh also became instrumental in pioneering a new field of studies called “sexual politics” (*sŏngjŏngch'i*). According to Suh,

[Korean] homosexuals have a vague sense of ‘social’ injustice; yet, they are unable to understand the sociological causes of this injustice, and how, apart from sexuality, this injustice is related to the diverse power structures that constitute social authority.

(2001: 74)

Drawing upon Michel Foucault, especially, *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1*, Suh provided a framework to understand sexuality as a discursive construct that acted as a key transfer point of power within modernity. Through being inserted within grids of normality/abnormality, created by modern disciplines such as

psychiatry and medicine, people become disciplined and governed. Suh thus helped to reinterpret sexuality, largely understood as a natural drive or instinct operating within the frames of kinship and reproduction, and usher in a period of “sexual politics.” Meanwhile, helping to further expand and diversify the Korean gay and lesbian community was the advent of new information communication technologies, such as personal computers and the Internet.

*BBS and the expansion of the gay and lesbian community*

Until 1995, South Korea’s gay and lesbian community developed at a rather slow pace. The pace picked up after 1995 with the public recruitment campaigns of gay and lesbian groups on campus after the coming out of Suh Dong-jin and Lee Jung-woo. After the further coming out of Jeon Hae-seong and Lee Ji-hyun on an episode of “Women Who Love Women: Lesbians” by SBS’s “Song Ji-na’s Investigative File,” the phones of both *Chingusai* and *KiriKiri* rang with callers wanting to know where they could meet others like themselves – or, in some cases, how to turn straight. Thus, the chief concerns of most gays and lesbians seemed to be the desire to meet others like themselves and acquire information about being homosexual.

The gay and lesbian community also grew rapidly when small gay and lesbian discussion groups formed on the Bulletin Board Systems (hereafter “BBSs”) of Korea’s three major Internet servers: *Hitel*, *Chollian*, and *Nownuri* in 1995 (Suh 2001). BBSs were computer systems with simple text-based chat features and discussion boards that allowed the users to interact with others using the same server. To the gay men and lesbians who first encountered it, they were a Godsend.

Among the gay men who became mesmerized by the world of gay cyberspace was “Joong-jun” (a screen name), a gay man who had “debuted” (entered) the gay community in the late 1980s. Hearing about the gay and lesbian BBS groups, he logged on with “skills that he didn’t really have” on a computer that he had bought for work and taught himself how to use. The online world that he discovered was very different from the world of gay bars in Nagwŏn-dong. In contrast to the bar scene where gay men got drunk every weekend night, the gay men in the *Hitel* discussion group that he joined discussed everything from gay identity to HIV/AIDS. As he put it, “Men, who had been alone and agonizing over their sexual identity, and men, who had been getting wasted every weekend night, were now able to meet in one spot. The discussion group was very precious at the time” (This, along with the following quotes by Joong-jun, are from an interview with John Cho in 2002).

By enabling gay men and lesbians to communicate with each other and exchange information (news, personal stories, academic journal articles, etc.), the BBS groups helped to raise their self-awareness as gay men and lesbians, overcome the geographical limits of the Seoul-based gay and lesbian organizations and college groups, and further diversify the gay and lesbian movement. Under the leadership of the so-called “second-generation” gay and lesbian activists<sup>4</sup>, the BBS groups held regular offline meetings called *chŏngmo*, in places like Namsan



Mountain in downtown Seoul. According to Joong-jun, ordinary gay men and lesbians may have dropped by these meetings to check out the other members; however, they still got an earful of politics, having to listen to lectures about gay and lesbian activism and HIV/AIDS (Interview 2002). As a result, the Korean gay and lesbian communities expanded and diversified rapidly.<sup>5</sup>

The gay and lesbian BBSs presented new possibilities for gay and lesbian interaction, organization, and culture. However, gay men like Joong-jun were still disgruntled by the fact that BBS companies prevented gay and lesbian users from posting self-introductions or personals online. He fumed, “Why is it that heterosexuals can proudly (*ttöttöt’age*) introduce themselves and meet each other, whereas we can’t?” So one day, he went ahead and posted his self-introduction on the *Hitel* bulletin board.

Joong-jun knew that his action endangered not only his own membership in the *Hitel* discussion group, *Tto hana ūi sarang* (“Another Type of Love”) but also the existence of the discussion group itself; the group could be cut from the server. So, the very next day, on June 6, 1997, he opened South Korea’s first gay site, *Exzone*.

*Exzone* enabled the gay men to connect with others like themselves from all over the world. They could also change their nicknames at will, giving them tremendous freedom to engage in online activities, including anonymous sexual encounters. For these reasons, groups such as *Chingusai* criticized *Exzone* for being an unwholesome site where gay men only engaged in hook-ups. However, Joong-jun thought differently, “If you grant them [gay men] freedom, they will come.” And come they did. Promoted mainly through word-of-mouth, the number of *Exzone* members quickly shot up into the thousands, easily surpassing those of BBS groups, which had, at most, numbered in the hundreds. For gay men, the anonymity of the Internet partially lifted the burden of their stigmatized sexual identities, which had made it difficult to find others like themselves.

*Exzone* provided a space where gay men could interact with other gay men without revealing their offline identities. However, Joong-jun also emphasized the twin principles of “Open Meetings” and “*Exzone* Family.” While the first principle emphasized open and honest communication between its members, the second principle conceived of *Exzone* as a “family.” As Joong-jun said, “I considered *Exzone* members to be a family since we could tell each other things that we couldn’t tell even our own mothers and siblings.” He imagined gay men as “brothers” (*hyōngje*) who would “wake up even in the middle of the night and run over to a gay man’s house with medicine if he was sick,” thus “sharing not only good times but also bad times.” Through such family-like relations of care, Joong-jun said that he hoped to create a world “where being gay was no longer a reason to be unhappy; where gay men could be happy even without boyfriends, fathers, and mothers.”

Working diligently with a team of volunteers, Joong-jun strove to put these two principles into practice and make *Exzone* a wholesome site. Not only did he delete postings that were considered too sexually explicit, he also refused ads from gay bar and club owners in Nagwōng-dong and Itaewon. “As you know, selling

underwear and accepting bar ads are nothing but just a way of making money,” he said. When business owners persisted in posting ads on the bulletin boards, he finally relented and created a separate board just for them. Still, if he had received an ad request from a large Korean conglomerate, such as *Samsung*, Joong-jun said that he would have gladly accepted, as it would have been a measure of how far Korean society has come in accepting gays and lesbians.

Despite *Exzone*'s principles of “Open Meetings” and “Family,” many gay men lurked online or came offline only to engage in one-on-one or small group meetings for fear of being outed. Joong-jun said that unlike

some other politically-motivated community such as People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy where there is a direct link between the on and offline, the development of the gay community is very slow because the social relations in *Exzone* are related to sex and hampered by the fear of coming out.

Still, with growing popularity of the Internet in South Korea after 1998, the online membership of the country's three principal sites – *Exzone*, *Ivancity* (previously *Hwarang*), and *TG-Net* (the premier lesbian site) – grew by leaps and bounds. That growth, however, was not reflected in the offline gay and lesbian movement, which remained relatively impoverished, represented only by a small group of committed activists, especially after the Asian financial crisis in 1997. Having said that, 1997 was also the year when lesbians and gays became bolder and started to come out onto the streets en masse.

## **Gay and lesbian activism**

### ***Fighting homophobic representation***

On January 14, 1997, gays and lesbians held one of their first public gatherings to support the nation-wide labor strike against the revision of the Labor and National Security Laws. Organized by the “Homosexual Coalition Committee,” about 72 gays and lesbians participated in the strike over a period of a month, waving a rainbow flag, with reports of the strike posted daily on gay and lesbian BBSs.

This experience, in turn, became the basis of another protest in front of T'apgol Park in June 1997 against middle and high school textbooks that disparaged homosexuality. For instance, according to one textbook, “With the growth of AIDS, homosexuality (*tongsöngyönae*), prostitution, sexual violence, drugs, etc., the collapse of sexual morals is causing social problems.” Another textbook stated, “Love and sex between members of the same sex are responsible for a number of side-effects including AIDS.” Employing the tactics used by other NSM groups in South Korea, the protesters made speeches and handed out pamphlets to passers-by. They also carried placards that read “Queer and Proud” and “Silence=Death.” As slogans that were coined by the gay and lesbian movement in the United States and around the world, they positioned the Korean gay and lesbian movement

squarely in the middle of a “worldwide movement” of gays and lesbians (Adam *et al.* 1999).

Despite their “pride,” however, many of the protesters wore hats or sunglasses to cover their faces. Nor could the mainstream media take pictures of the protesters directly from the front. Just like their Taiwanese counterparts, Korean gays and lesbians were “caught between the family and the state” (Erni and Spires 2005: 238). They thus relied on the strategy of “collective coming out,” which made them visible as a political group, while still protecting their individual identities. Still, as the protest progressed from public performances in front of the park to a march around Nagwŏn-dong, many gays and lesbians, who had been observing the protest from the sidewalk or from across the street, joined the march, expanding the number of protesters from around 50 to 150.

### ***Resisting state censorship***

Along with these street protests, the gay and lesbian organizations also resisted state censorship of gay and lesbian culture. One of the most publicized cases involved the Korean Public Performance Ethics Committee’s censorship of director Wong Kar Wai’s award-winning film, *Happy Together*, in October 1997 because of its portrayal of love between two men. Comparing homosexuality to bestiality and declaring homosexuality to be contrary to national values, the Korean state strove to exclude gays and lesbians from the nation. For similar reasons, the first Seoul Queer Film and Video Festival was also unceremoniously canceled in the same year (Y. Kim 2007).

On November 1, 2001, the issue of homosexuality and state censorship finally came to a head when the Ministry of Information and Communications (MIC)’s Information and Communications Ethics Committee mandated the blockage of all gay and lesbian sites from youth. The blockage was based on a clause in the Youth Protection Act passed in 1997 that defined homosexuality as a “harmful influence” on youth. Incensed by the government’s move, which forced all gay and lesbian sites now labeled “obscene” to either deny access to minors (including, ironically, gay and lesbian minors) or face shutdown, Joong-jun called for a nation-wide strike by the three largest gay and lesbian sites in South Korea mentioned above. With the help of the Lesbian and Gay Alliance Against Defamation (LGAAD) and the Lawyers for Democracy, on January 10, 2002, he also launched a lawsuit against MIC for unconstitutional blockage.

The lawsuit lost its three lower court appeals before finally reaching the Constitutional Court in 2003. In two of these lower court appeals, the judges upheld the censorship but still left open the possibility that MIC’s action could be found contrary to the constitution. In the Constitutional Court, Joong-jun, once again, lost. However, based on the opinions of the lower court judges, in 2003, the Human Rights Commission recommended the removal of the offensive clause from the Youth Protection Act; and in 2004, it was deleted. Despite Joong-jun’s loss of the lawsuit, the gay and lesbian community hailed the deletion of this clause as a victory.<sup>6</sup> Not only that, in recognizing gays and lesbians as legal

entities for the first time in Korean history, the lawsuit also ushered in a new era of “human rights” for the gay and lesbian movement (discussed in third section).

### ***Creating an alternative lesbian and gay culture***

Following these battles, efforts to create an alternative gay and lesbian culture began. In 1998, Han Chae-yoon, who became active in the gay and lesbian movement through *Hitel's Tto hana ūi sarang*, published *Buddy*, the nation's first gay and lesbian magazine. The magazine provided valuable information about gays and lesbians in a society where such information was heavily restricted or censored. Less than four years later, however, *Buddy* ceased publication and is now only available online.<sup>7</sup>

Nonetheless, other efforts to create an alternative gay and lesbian culture continued. The first Seoul Queer Film and Video Festival (re) opened without a hitch in 1998, and the annual Korean Queer Culture Festival, which includes the Gay and Lesbian Pride Parade, was launched in 1999. Such festivals sought to create positive images of gays and lesbians and claim public visibility for gay and lesbian culture.

### **“Sexual citizenship” and the era of human rights**

With *Exzone's* lawsuit against MIC, homosexuality became increasingly seen as an issue of sexual citizenship and human rights. However, the groundwork for this historic victory was laid down much earlier in 1998 when the Solidarity for LGBT Human Rights of Korea (*Tonginyŏn*), composed of 30 sexual minority organizations, worked to formulate the Human Rights Bill as part of the creation of the National Human Rights Commission in October of 2001, as one of Kim Dae-jung's campaign pledges (Cho 2002) (see Chapter 5 in this volume).

During the military regimes, Kim Dae-jung had suffered severe human rights abuses. Therefore, his presidential candidacy raised high hopes for social minorities, including gays and lesbians. In fact, in reply to a questionnaire sent by *KiriKiri* to all the 1997 presidential election candidates, Kim Dae-jung replied:

I haven't had a chance to access [gay and lesbian] culture. I don't agree with homosexuality but we should not view it as heresy since homosexuals, just like heterosexuals, engage in human love. We thus need to approach gay and lesbian activism as one aspect of human rights.

(KiriKiri 1998: 50)

As Matt Kelley writes, “Unlike some other Asian countries, the South Korean Constitution and Civil Penal Code do not criminalise homosexuality. However, gay men are banned from serving in the military and widespread anti-gay bias in Korean society compels most LGBT Koreans to hide their sexual orientation” (Mujigae 2008: 159). Moreover, Korean gays and lesbians suffer from frequent human rights abuses. For instance, when the Korean comedian, Hong Suk-chon,

came out in 2001, he was immediately fired from his job as the host of a children's TV show.

Given the lack of protection for Koreans gays and lesbians in this hostile environment, many human rights organizations around the world applauded the inclusion of sexual orientation in the Korean Human Rights Bill. The Korean gay and lesbian organizations were therefore shocked when, as mentioned in the introduction, the Ministry of Justice announced in October 2007 that it would delete seven items, including sexual orientation, from the revised bill. Many sexual minorities lamented the sad irony of a bill, initially designed to *protect* them, now saying that it was OK to *discriminate* against them.

Much of the pressure to delete sexual discrimination from the revised bill came from conservative Christian groups, spearheaded by Gil Won-pyung, a professor at Busan University. Along with several others, he argued that if homosexuality was legally protected, it would cause havoc within society by spreading AIDS and lowering the already low fertility and marriage rates (Mujigae 2008). He warned that if gays and lesbians received legal protection, they would go on to demand more rights, including the rights to marry and adopt children. Worst of all, if passed, the bill would make it illegal to carry out anti-gay education in classrooms, making it impossible not to accept homosexuals "as members of Korean society."

The Korean gay and lesbian groups' run-in with conservative Christians was nothing new. During the Sexual Politics Festival at Yonsei in 1995, for instance, a Christian student trashed the "Phallus Pyramid," an outdoor installation poking fun at patriarchy, and about ten Christian students stormed and disrupted the screening of a sex education video. Holding a large red cross, they shouted, "Homosexuality is a sin!" (Kim 2000). However, the virulent anti-gay organizing of the conservative Christian forces in South Korea, emboldened by the conservative views of the future president, Yi Myōng-bak, was on a scale larger than anything the gay and lesbian groups had seen before. Shattering the illusion that it was enough for the Korean gay and lesbian movement to educate the Korean public in order for it to accept homosexuality, it signaled a new terrain of politics for sexual minorities.

### ***Emergency coalition***

Given the high stakes and strong feeling of dread felt by sexual minorities, the response of the gay and lesbian community to the deletion of sexual orientation from the revised bill was swift and furious. Appropriating the concept of lightning meeting, usually used by gay men on Internet sites to spontaneously meet offline for drinking and partying, they called an emergency meeting of the Korean gay, lesbian, and transgender community. Even though it was a weeknight and the meeting was called on a short notice, the first meeting was jam-packed with about 40–50 people. Many of those present were from gay, lesbian, and transgender organizations. But many were also unaffiliated individuals, who had shown up out of curiosity, a sense of urgency, or both. After a lawyer from the Human Rights Commission explained the changes in the bill, the people present in the meeting formed the Emergency Coalition.

At the second lightning meeting at Yonsei University, the coalition broke into 12 teams, including “Korean Human Rights Citizen Groups Coalition Team,” “Online Promotion Team,” “Government and National Assembly Team,” “Election Response Team,” and “Youth Team.” While the “Coalition Team” was responsible for networking with domestic human rights groups, the “Online Team” was responsible for recording the events and uploading them onto the Internet. The “Government and National Assembly Team,” meanwhile, was responsible for forwarding questionnaires and protest materials to government organizations; the “Response Team” for alerting the presidential candidates of this issue; and the “Youth Team” for addressing youth-specific issues.

One of the first public protests organized by the coalition was in front of the Central Government Complex in downtown Seoul. Highlighting the seriousness of this issue for all social minorities, this protest (described in the beginning of this chapter) emphasized sexual orientation as a human rights issue. As Bak Sun-Jin of *Sarangbang Group for Human Rights*, wrote, “the coming together of sexual minorities and the anger that sprung forth were, in themselves, a great form of ‘coming out’ for human rights activists” (Mujigae 2008: 62). Ironically, this feeling of solidarity was felt, not only by human rights activists, but also by sexual minority groups *within* the LGBT movement, who had been largely estranged from each other. For instance, at a retreat for sexual minority activists from February 1–3, 2008, many gays, lesbians, and transgendered people remarked on how it was the first time that they had such an opportunity to work closely with each other.

Another impressive event by the coalition was the “Flash Mob: ‘Operation: Find Him/Her,’” organized by the Youth Team. Flanked by older lesbians and gays, who were there to protect them in case of homophobic attacks, gay and lesbian youth in their tens gathered in the theater district of Daehang-no in Seoul on November 8, 2007 at 7 p.m. to protest the bill. They started by marching down the street shouting, “We are South Korea’s proud sexual minority youth in their 10s! We no longer want to be discriminated against in this country!” They then put up posters describing their experiences of discrimination in schools, homes, and from their peers. After that, they engaged in an “operation” (*chakjön*), in which they shouted, “scatter!” – perhaps mimicking the need of gays and lesbians to hide from the state – at which point they ran away, before regrouping to pass out leaflets explaining the revised bill to passers-by. Adding a spirit of energy and spontaneity to the emergency meetings and protests, the gay and lesbian youth identified the Korean state as an entity that they needed protection *from*, not to be protected *by*.

On November 19, 2007, between 10–11 a.m., the activists held another protest called “Rainbow Intersection Surprise Protest” at the Kwanghwamun intersection in downtown Seoul. Overseen by the statue of General Yi Sun-sin, on a boulevard that leads directly to Kyōngbok Palace, behind which is the Blue House, the area is physically and symbolically replete with state power. On a busy weekday morning, when the light turned red, the protestors took turns running into the middle of the street to shout slogans and unfurl two 10-meter banners that read,



“No! To an Anti-Discrimination Bill that Discriminates Against People,” and “The Human Rights Regime Will Pass and a World of Discrimination Will Come.” After the protest, they marched to the office of the Human Rights Commission to protest its inaction on the weakened bill.

From November 12–21, 2007, the coalition held a third event called the “One-Person Relay Protest Against the Discriminatory Bill” in front of the Central Government Complex. Over twelve days, about 40 people from various backgrounds (including women’s organizations, Christian groups, and individuals), took turns standing in the cold weather to protest the bill. What would have been a solitary and lonely protest, however, was turned into a poignant statement of individual defiance of state power through a documentary video that was made of this and other protests and uploaded onto the coalition’s homepage.

In contrast to the fast, upbeat music that accompanied the video clips of the “Rainbow Surprise Intersection Protest,” the music for clips of this protest was quiet and reflective. It seemed to show the willpower of individuals to challenge the state. The video, which included close-ups of the individual protesters, also brought up the issue of “coming out.” The individuals who engaged in the one-person protest had to think deeply about how much they were willing to come out, not just to the passers-by, but also to the unknown people who were watching the video on the coalition’s homepage and in other screenings.

In short, the Emergency Coalition’s recent protests seemed to mark a new level of maturity in the gay and lesbian movement. This maturity was reflected both in the broad coalition building carried out by the Emergency Coalition and the sophisticated tactics that it employed in these protests. Meanwhile, the Korean gay and lesbian movement’s continued reliance upon and transformation of the legacy of the Pro-Democracy Movement could be seen no better than in the discourses of sexual citizenship and human rights with which it fought for the rights of sexual minorities in South Korea. This chapter will end by examining the final trend within the contemporary Korean gay and lesbian movement – its efforts at institutionalization.

### ***South Korea’s first lesbian candidate for parliament***

In March 2008, Chae Hyun-sook announced her candidate for South Korea’s parliament. As the first openly lesbian candidate in Korean history, her election bid not only signaled the greater efforts to institutionalize the gay and lesbian movement, but also the changing terrain of sexual politics, in which homosexuality was now an open object of attack as well as acceptance in Korean society.

Like many gay and lesbian activists before her, Chae had been active in social movements before becoming a sexual minority activist. In the late 1980s, she had been active in the struggle for the rights of long-term political prisoners. In 2000, she also joined the Democratic Labor Party (DLP) and became mainly involved in the Women’s Committee. However, it wasn’t until 2004 when she became involved with another woman that she became interested in sexual minority politics. After filing for divorce, she joined an informal group of gays and lesbians

called *Pulgun Iban* (“Red Homosexuals”) within the party. During an election of the DLP’s executive members in 2004, this group sent a questionnaire to the candidates asking them about their attitudes to homosexuality. One replied that he considered it to be a “creepy product of capitalism” and another replied that she simply considered it “wrong.” After carrying out a successful campaign to defeat their campaigns, the *Pulgun Iban* became an official group within the party.

With the revised bill and the election of Yi Myōng-bak, the members of this group became further involved in mainstream politics. Chae said that it became evident that it was no longer possible for gays and lesbians to stay outside the political mainstream while they were becoming objects of direct attack. Moreover, she said that she felt that sexual minorities needed to go beyond sexual politics and align themselves with progressive forces within society, especially to oppose the neoliberal policies of Yi Myōng-bak. Therefore, in 2008, she ran on the proportional representation system of minor parties for election in Chongno as the Progressive Party (*Chinbo Sindang*) candidate. In reply to a question whether a “divorced lesbian is qualified to be a lawmaker,” she said, “Only a member of minority can work for minorities and deal with them properly” (Kim 2008).

Chae Hyun-sook did not win the election nor had she expected to. Instead, by becoming the nation’s first openly lesbian candidate, she had wanted to show that lesbians and gays were not only regular members of society, but also its political citizens.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, we have described and analyzed the development of the Korean gay and lesbian movement. As we have shown above, there has been a clear development of the movement within South Korea, with homosexuality being initially considered a perverted foreign desire, confined to a few individuals, to it later becoming the basis of a growing sense of identity and community within Korean society. Later still, it has become the basis of alternative political and cultural movements. Now, with the activism of the Emergency Coalition around the revised bill, it has become a heated issue of human rights and sexual citizenship.

Having said that, the rapid rise of the Korean gay and lesbian movement would not have been possible without the larger socio-political transformations within South Korea and around the world, and the legacy of the Korean Pro-Democracy Movement. This movement has not only prepared the formal democratic ground on which the so-called “softer” issues of gender, sexuality, and family could be broached, it has also provided the gay and lesbian movement with much of its personnel, protest strategies, and rhetoric – the most important of which, as we have seen above, is the rhetoric of “human rights” and “sexual citizenship.”

Yet, even as the gay and lesbian movement has relied on this legacy to power its own movement, it has also expanded and deepened this legacy, introducing new issues of identity, culture, and community. Through fighting distorted images of homosexuality in middle and high school textbooks and state censorship of the gay Internet, the gay and lesbian movement has highlighted the importance of the

right to information and freedom of expression. At the same time, in building an alternative cultural movement that celebrates diverse forms of bodies, desires, and identities, it has contributed to the deepening of democracy in South Korea, especially in matters of gender and sexuality.

Despite these advances, however, one cannot but feel a sense of disconnection between the small team of committed activists and the broader community of gays and lesbians who seem increasingly estranged from any form of politics. Other than during the emergency meetings, it was hard to spot new faces, raising the question, “Why aren’t more gays and lesbians involved?” The answer probably lies in the continued powerful role of the heterosexual family in South Korea as the seat of social and national belonging, which makes coming out for most Korean gays and lesbians difficult, if not impossible.

As mentioned above, mainstream civil society theory takes the public/private divide for granted. It doesn’t question how this divide is both masculinized and heterosexualized. Thus the private sphere of the family is seen as the proper realm of sexuality, while the public is desexualized.<sup>8</sup> What this officially sanctioned realm of privacy obfuscates is how the public is, in fact, replete with open displays of heterosexuality (i.e., when someone displays a picture of his or her family in the office).

This heterosexism is also evident in academic accounts of Korean democracy. In his history of the role of the labor movement in Korean civil society, Hagen Koo writes,

Employees of large firms in the heavy and chemical industries enjoy a variety of company welfare services, including housing subsidy, commuter bus, medical insurance, children’s tuition support, funeral expense, and a variety of other family-related supports.

(2002b: 59)

One important qualification in his statement is how many of these benefits are enjoyed by company employees *only* if they are members of a heterosexual, nuclear family. Indeed, gays and lesbians, along with anyone else who does not belong to such a family in South Korea, face much discrimination, in terms of paying taxes, taking out mortgages, receiving inheritances, having hospital visitation rights, etc. That is because the Korean state has, since the Chosŏn period, privileged the family and, by extension, heterosexual culture, as the basis of the nation.

Thus, it is crucial, if gays and lesbians are to be fully accepted as members of Korean society, and not just be assimilated as faux heterosexuals, that they question this public/private divide that continues to privilege heterosexuality through the valorization of family as nation, and expand the idea of the public to include a variety of bodies, identities, desires, and pleasures.

## Notes

- 1 Of course, the issues of “freedom,” “equality,” and “economic redistribution” are inextricably linked. This chapter simply aims to note that the contemporary gay and lesbian movement has emphasized “freedom” over other democratic ideals.
- 2 Considering human sexuality to be a natural “appetite,” just like eating, the Free Sex Movement proponents tended to view sexuality in essentialist and masculinist terms.
- 3 This issue erupted in November 2001, when Kang Suk-ja, a member of KAWS (the Korean Association of Women’s Studies) described lesbianism as an “indiscreetly imported Western culture that did not exist in ... Korean history” (Kkirikkiri. 2004: 173).
- 4 The first-generation of gay-lesbian activists includes people like Chang Gene-suk, Jeon Hae-seong, Kim Song Hee-sook, Lee Jung-woo, Oh Jun-su, and Suh Dong-jin. The second-generation includes people like Han Chae-yoon, Kim Hyun-goo, Kim Ji-hye, Lee hae-sol, Lim Tae-hun, and Park Ki-ho.
- 5 Also popular around this time was a service called “153,” provided through Korea Telecom in which people could leave recorded messages on a central “answering machine.”
- 6 The authors wish to thank Jeong-Woo Koo, one of the contributors in this volume, for pointing out the intricacies of this lawsuit.
- 7 Before the Internet, the only places where Korean gays and lesbians could access gay and lesbian literature were in the offices of gay and lesbian organizations or gay and lesbian bars.
- 8 This public/private divide is a deeply contradictory one for gays and lesbians for whom the heterosexual family is not a space of privacy but secrecy. Instead, in order to engage in the supposedly private practice of their sexuality, they have to come out into the public spaces of gay and lesbian bars, clubs, organizations, and the Internet.