

Cancer at Samsung: comic book tribute to a father's fight

The drawing in the box is heartrending: a man sitting behind a steering wheel turns round, reaches out his hand and touches the vehicle's back seat. The words in the balloon read: "Sometimes, when there are no customers, I look at this back seat and have the impression that she's there." It's Hwang Sang-ki who's speaking. This taxi driver is mourning his daughter Yumi. The young woman died on the back seat of the taxi while her parents were on their way back to their small home town of Sokcho, in the north-east of South Korea, having taken their daughter to hospital for further treatment for her leukaemia.

"I learnt about Mr Hwang Sang-ki's story when Samsung was bleating on about the economic crisis in Korea", explains Kim Su-bak, author of this *manhwa* or Korean comic book. In Korea, all young people dream of working for Samsung, which is the standard bearer for the country's success around the world and the virtuous company *par excellence*, renowned for both its technological inventiveness and its benevolence, tinged with paternalism, towards its employees.

Like thousands of young Koreans from modest families, Yumi saw this as a great opportunity: starting her working life with a leading company that, although demanding, offered a good salary and bonuses.

In October 2003, having just turned 18, she left her small provincial home town close to the border with North Korea to move to Suwon, a town of one million inhabitants 30 km to the south of Seoul. This is where the main headquarters of Samsung Electronics are based, which have earned the town the nickname of Samsung City. In addition to the headquarters, Suwon is home to an imposing semiconductor plant. Yumi worked on line 3, box 3. It was a manual job that involved purifying the wafers¹ by immersing them in baths of unknown chemical products.

Within a short space of time, the young woman began to feel tired and increasingly nauseous and dizzy. In June 2005, less than two years after her recruitment, she was diagnosed with leukaemia. Following a bone marrow transplant, her condition improved slightly, but the disease took hold again and the young woman died in March 2007. She was 22 years old ...

During Yumi's illness and after her death, her father sought to prove that the leukaemia was caused by the chemical products used in her work. While his daughter was in hospital, he found out that another sterile chamber was being occupied by a young engineer from Samsung Electronics, so he started to do some research. He learnt about the death of a direct colleague of his daughter, once again from leukaemia. He contacted an association of lawyers specialising in employment law and managed to galvanise other victims' families. An initial demonstration "for the truth about leukaemia at Samsung" was organised in November 2007 in front of the semiconductor plant. Following this demonstration, an association for workers' health, called Banolim, was set up.

In addition to the moving fight of a father for his daughter, the comic book artist describes the self-protection mechanisms that Samsung has deployed to protect its reputation, and the legal and media firepower, in particular, that it has used to this end. Throughout the hundred or so pages of drawings that make up his book, Kim Su-bak chips away at the respectability bestowed by an entire population on its flagship company. Adopting the approach of an investigative journalist, the author allows rare dissident voices to speak through the language of the comic book. In particular, a university professor talks about "ideological domination" to describe the hold that Samsung has over

Korean society as a whole. The reader imagines a real State within a State or, to use the author's precise words, a "Republic of Samsung".

Several drawings show us mysterious visits to the Hwangs' home, by alarming suit-wearing emissaries from the multinational, to convince this modest taxi driver to abandon his fight, and then to try and mollify him by offering large sums of money to give up his campaigning.

In June 2011, Hwang Sang-ki won his first victory before the courts: an administrative court acknowledged that the deaths of his daughter and her colleague were due to their work at the semiconductor plant.

His association reckons that 200 former workers from Samsung Electronics have reported serious health problems due to their work: leukaemias and other types of cancer (breast, thyroid, brain), miscarriages, multiple sclerosis, etc.

The "whistleblowing" taxi driver is continuing his fight together with other families of semiconductor victims. He is now less alone. As a symbol of the resistance to the "Republic of Samsung", his story has recently been made into a film.

— Denis Grégoire

Le parfum des hommes

Kim Su-bak, Atrabile, collection Flegme, 2014, 128 p.

1. Thin slice of semiconductor material, such as silicon, which is generally disc-shaped.