A Single Spark: The Life of Tae-il Jeon

Today the media are overwhelming and people can delve into others’ personal life and their secrets easily, so it is not surprising, although still sad, that many people cannot answer when asked about the modern hero in the twenty-first century. I also had a hard time at first when asked who a Korean hero would be, but then an image of a burning body of one young man came to my mind like a sparkling message saying, “We sure have heroes who have made the world a better place!” The young man was Tae-il Jeon, a workers’ rights activist who sacrificed himself on fire to ignite nationwide labor protests at the time when Korea was developing fast and the government was ignoring its laborers’ rights and welfare. He is definitely a real hero in Korean modern history.

In 1964, at the age of sixteen, Tae-il started working at one of the clothing factories in downtown Seoul. He had a hard time and witnessed a lot of horrible things happening there. Because he was from a poor family and could not continue his education, he began the life of labor in a factory very early, like many other poor young people. Those clothing factories in downtown Seoul were notorious for their harsh working conditions. The factory owners treated their workers very badly, considering their employees as machines for making their money. There were no ventilation systems in the factories, so harmful germs made their habitats and caused many diseases related to lungs, such as tuberculosis, bronchitis, asthma, and so on, among the workers. Even worse was that employers gave them some stimulants to keep them awake and keep them working nonstop. As a bright and brave boy, Tae-il could not accept the reality and he rose up to improve the cruel conditions at the factories and bring better life to the workers. At that time Korea had already approved the Labor Standard Act, but the law was not followed. In 1969, as Tae-il turned twenty, he founded a labor movement organization called the Babo Society. Then he organized several rallies and demonstrations, protested very hard with other protesters, but to no effect at all. The government officials and factory administrators in charge did not listen to the protesters and called them unpatriotic communists. In order to attract the public eye, Tae-il decided to take an extreme measure, which was to sacrifice himself by burning himself to death. In the center of Seoul, on November 13, 1970, Tae-il performed the public burning of the Labor Standard Act and at the same time he set himself on fire and ran through the streets shouting, “We are not machines! Enforce the labor codes!”

 His tragic death was not in vain. The great self-immolation brought a lot of attention to the harsh labor conditions and aroused a nationwide public outrage. His death forced other workers, who had accepted their situation as unchangeable and had become the veterans of suffering, to take up the struggle, and stand against the oppressive government. In addition, his sacrifice invoked a university student movement to help the laborers. Some religious leaders and mass media also began to support the workers’ call to reform the working conditions. Eventually, these repercussions led to the creation of the labor unions that gradually secured the workers’ rights. If Tae-il had not sacrificed himself at that time, the horrendous conditions for workers would have persisted for many years.

 Tae-il Jeon is really a hero in Korean modern history, who willingly sacrificed himself at such a young, beautiful age to make others‘ lives better. Many Koreans still remember and honor him. His spirit lives in the minds of people and has become an inspiration for all workers in Korea.



A bust of Tae-il Jeon in Seoul