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Spirited defender

Karen Tse's human rights ministry is helping to eradicate torture.

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Winter 2007 11.1.07



The Rev. Karen Tse with prisoners in a Cambodian jail. (Courtesy of International Bridges to Justice)

The fetid conditions of Cambodian prisons were nothing new to Karen Tse in 1995. She had walked the dank corridors of many former Khmer Rouge lockups, consulting with Cambodian prisoners and advocating for their rights.

But still she was shocked one day by the hollowed brown eyes of a 12-year-old boy who gazed at her through rusting bars. Shirtless and barefoot, he wore only thin, blue drawstring pants.

Tse greeted the boy in Khmer: “Hey. How are you?” He responded with a shy, “Hi,” and Tse stopped to speak with him. The boy had been imprisoned for stealing a bicycle. He had been beaten by police, tortured until he confessed, and left to languish in a cell. He had no trial date. No lawyer. No hope of release.

Tse had been in Cambodia for a year, working for the United Nations as a young lawyer helping to rebuild a legal system that had been decimated by the brutal Khmer Rouge regime. She worked with adults and high-profile political prisoners. But the encounter with this boy opened her eyes to a new dimension of the problem. Who was there to advocate for an unknown 12-year-old? With all the organizations seeking to protect noteworthy defendants, who was safeguarding the rights of the invisible multitude of ordinary people with no access to lawyers and no knowledge of their rights?

Some of the answers that came immediately to Tse’s mind were from her days at UCLA Law School, and from her work as a lawyer with the U.N. But she sensed that the answers to her questions were not merely

legal. “I began to realize that the answers weren’t just about the law. It was also about the spirit,” says Tse. “If we’re really going to create a worldwide human rights revolution, it’s about the spirit.”

Tse (pronounced “Cheh”) took a break from her international human rights legal work to attend Harvard Divinity School. She had been deferring admission to HDS for a decade, choosing to attend law school first and work in the trenches as a public defender. In 1997, she sensed the time was right finally to combine her passion for reforming criminal justice practices with deeper spiritual questions. After graduation from HDS in 2000 and ordination as a Unitarian Universalist minister in 2001, she began to envision an organization that could help ordinary citizens who are subjected to torture. She began to build a human rights organization called International Bridges to Justice (IBJ).

Tse, 42, is a petite, energetic woman. She speaks quickly, her mind so full of ideas that they tumble out in rapid-fire succession. Based in Geneva, Switzerland, she spoke in a series of telephone conversations about her foundation. Although she launched it seven years ago with grand ideas and little money, IBJ has trained thousands of public defenders and police officers in Cambodia and China. And it has expanded to Vietnam and Burundi—its first African country—to train more, while also educating citizens and prisoners about their rights. “Our mission is to end state-sanctioned torture in the twenty-first century and secure due process rights for all,” she says. “We think it is completely doable.”

As lofty as her goals sound, people who have observed her at work don’t doubt her chances of success. “Her persuasive powers are amazing,” says Francis J. James, chief of the United Nations justice unit in Burundi and chairman of IBJ’s board of directors. “I always say, ‘Don’t bet against her. You’ll lose.’”

Tse and IBJ are “astonishingly effective in China,” says Aryeh Neier, president of the Open Society Institute of the Soros Foundation and former executive director of Human Rights Watch. “She has generated immense enthusiasm among the Chinese lawyers who are exposed to IBJ’s work.”

Having traveled throughout China, Cambodia, and Vietnam, Tse acknowledges that tremendous strides have been made in those countries, as well as around the world, in adopting laws that forbid torturing criminal defendants. What is missing is the implementation of those laws. Tse describes IBJ as a “practical nuts-and-bolts organization that seeks to build communities of conscience with lawyers, engineers, computer consultants, and others who can partner to build legal aid defender systems throughout the world.”

Torture continues to flourish, Tse says, because it is the cheapest form of criminal investigation. The key to ending it, she believes, is in creating public defender systems and training police officers and investigators in more effective and more humane techniques. “There’s a critical link between torture and the absence of defense counsel,” says Tse.

She envisions squadrons of defenders spread out across troubled regions of the world. With characteristic and unflagging optimism, Tse says, “We’ll go region by region. Country by country.”

Tse cannot remember a time in her life when the issue of torture did not plague her. As a young girl, growing up in Los Angeles’ Chinatown, she would have nightmares about watching people in prison being cruelly beaten. “I would wake up suddenly and be deeply disturbed,” Tse recalls. “At first I would be relieved that it was just a bad dream. But I knew that at that moment, my nightmare was someone else’s reality. I’ve always had an obsession with ending torture within me.”

Growing up in Chinatown, Tse encountered people from many walks of life, including refugees, whom she heard speak of persecution and fleeing their homelands.

Her family attended a Chinese Catholic church, where the Irish priest spoke only English and most of the parishioners spoke only Chinese. The congregants were a mix of Buddhists, Taoists, and Confucianists. “Basically, what we saw was community,” says Tse. “I grew up with a sense that religion was very fluid.”

She attended Scripps College in Claremont, California, which invited her back this past spring to be the commencement speaker. As a student, she wrote letters demanding fair trials for dissidents around the world. After graduation, she worked at refugee camps in Hong Kong and Thailand and applied to both law school and divinity school. She deferred admission to Harvard Divinity School and chose to attend UCLA Law first. As a newly minted lawyer in 1990, she worked as a public defender in San Francisco for three years before heading to Cambodia. When she arrived there in 1994, she says, there were just ten lawyers in a country of 13 million people. “The Khmer Rouge had killed all the attorneys,” Tse says. “There were still women in jail for crimes their husbands had committed ten years earlier.”

Her first project in Cambodia was to train public defenders. The twenty-five public defenders the program produced were the first in the nation’s history.

Tse was sometimes worn down by the fierce resistance she would encounter trying to train people about basic human rights. She sought the advice of a nun, Sister Rose, at an orphanage where Tse would volunteer each Sunday. Tse saw her as an example of simplicity, purity, and love. Sister Rose urged Tse, even when dealing with people who doubted her or resisted her, to look for the Christ or the Buddha in each person. “She really believed in the transformative power of love,” says Tse. “She showed me that to really change the world, it’s about love and hope and faith. You can’t change the world if you don’t have faith.” That faith does not have to be in a supreme being, says Tse, but it does have to be a faith in people and their ability to transform.

Tse began to pay closer attention to her urge to attend divinity school. “I had a very deep sense that I had to go to divinity school, but I didn’t know why,” says Tse. “I knew that to integrate my life and my work, I had to go.”

She didn’t intend to become a Unitarian Universalist minister. She didn’t even know what Unitarian Universalism was until her first year at divinity school. During a class on UU polity that a classmate had urged her to take, Tse realized without ever having attended a UU service that she was a UU. The feeling was confirmed when she started attending—and conducting—UU services during her two-year internship at the Universalist Unitarian Church of Haverhill, Massachusetts. The church ordained her in spring 2001, cementing Tse’s love for parish ministry. She had a deep desire to be a parish minister after divinity school, and she hopes someday to be one. But she also felt driven to train public defenders and end torture.

“First and foremost, I am a spiritual being,” says Tse, and IBJ is now her ministry. “The legal frameworks are the tools by which we work. But it’s really the spirit that moves us. It’s the understanding of the interconnectedness and our inherent worth and dignity that really builds the foundations of our work. I couldn’t do this without being a lawyer, and I wouldn’t have started it without being a minister. Being a minister creates the possibilities of hope and faith.”

As Tse imagined what IBJ could be, she consulted with another Unitarian Universalist minister-lawyer, the Rev. William “Scotty” McLennan, who now serves as the dean for religious life at Stanford University and

is on the advisory board of IBJ. “Karen has an open vision that goes beyond Christianity,” says McLennan. “The core of her vision is that she is serving the whole person, not just the person who happens to be tortured or detained or deprived of basic legal rights, but also the larger issues of social justice and society as a whole. In addition, she has the religious urge to see all of us in the image of God and therefore sacred.”

Tse created IBJ in 2001 with more will than money. She decided that China was the place she should start to address defendants’ rights—despite the fact that she had only been there on tourist trips and knew very little about the country. She had one contact, a Chinese university professor who helped her arrange an appointment with the chief of China’s legal aid program. Tse scraped money together to fly to China and borrowed a friend’s business suit to look presentable for her single appointment—which the official abruptly cancelled after Tse arrived.

She would not take no for an answer and insisted on a 15-minute meeting the next day. The official assented, and based on that initial meeting, agreed to let her begin to train lawyers and educate prisoners and citizens about their rights. The official laid down one condition: She must supply 400 personal computers for legal aid offices. Tse said she would. Then she tried to figure out how her one-person human rights organization could fulfill that promise.

She scrambled to network with friends. Some threw her a Hong Kong fundraiser that attracted an anonymous \$25,000 donation. At the same time, she became a fellow with Echoing Green, a foundation based in New York that provides seed money and support to young social entrepreneurs. Another friend introduced her to an officer with the George Soros Open Society Institute. The philanthropic organization granted \$300,000 to the fledgling IBJ. Emboldened by her success, Tse began to schmooze with more potential donors and received a \$5,000 donation from computer mogul Michael Dell.

Now she could make her move into China. Working closely with the Ministry of Justice, IBJ has helped to organize training conferences for more than 1,000 defenders and distributed posters and brochures that promote legal rights in Mandarin, as well as other regional languages, such as Tibetan, Mongolian, and Uyghur. Tse’s foundation has conducted rights awareness campaigns aimed at both adults and juveniles across thirty-one Chinese provinces; created a how-to manual for public defenders and a website for local Chinese legal aid centers and lawyers; and organized roundtable discussions that bring together police, defenders, prosecutors, and judges to promote cooperation.

Similar operations in Cambodia and Vietnam have trained defenders and educating citizens about the rights guaranteed to them under their countries’ constitutions. In Cambodia, a former police officer, who used to order his subordinates to torture confessions out of people, is now an IBJ fellow who trains police officers not to torture. Such transformations convince Tse that change is possible on a world scale, as long as people work with individuals to tap into their deeper value systems. “The ghosts of the past remain if something doesn’t come in to change the system for ordinary people,” says Tse. “Unless someone comes in with a new vision, torture will continue for generations to come.”

On the heels of her success in Asia, Tse traveled to Africa in 2006 to meet with officials in Burundi, Rwanda, and Zimbabwe to begin to develop a human rights campaign in Africa. The first official project is under way in Burundi, where IBJ has helped to create and distribute posters in both French and Kirundi that say: “You have a right to a defense lawyer, the right not to be tortured, and the right to a fair trial.”

IBJ has grown to a staff of twenty-one, with an annual budget of just over \$1 million. In addition to its headquarters in Geneva, it also has two offices in China and fellows in Cambodia and Burundi. Tse established the organization in Geneva, which is widely viewed as a neutral location and a headquarters of international diplomacy. She lives there with her husband, a director at the World Economic Forum, and two young sons.

Tse says she has been receiving inquiries about bolstering legal rights work from countries around the world. She is hopeful IBJ can eventually grow to meet the demand. She has set her sights on having 108 trained fellows—who can then train more defenders—throughout the world.

The number 108 has great significance for Tse. She subscribes to the theory in Malcolm Gladwell's book, *The Tipping Point*, that an idea reaches critical mass when 100 people are talking about it. Add to that the number eight, which is the lucky number for Chinese. There are also 108 beads on the Tibetan prayer mala, and a Chinese folk tale tells of 108 heroes who saved their country.

Tse was not at all surprised to learn recently of the results of a risk assessment IBJ staff members conducted to evaluate the number of countries where they could have a great impact: 108. "There's wisdom and there's intuition and there's the intellectual," says Tse. "One hundred and eight is just right."

To bolster her defender program, Tse is seeking partner organizations—including congregations—that could sponsor the training and mentoring of defenders. IBJ requires \$10,000 each year to support each fellow, who, once trained, would create defender resource centers in their home country.

Tse is hoping that some Unitarian Universalist congregations might elect to sponsor a defender. "UUs should know about what she is doing," says the Rev. Ellen Brandenburg, who met her when Tse was in divinity school and Brandenburg was the ministerial education director of the Unitarian Universalist Association. Now, Brandenburg is living across the border from Geneva in France, and she has been observing Tse at work. "It's quite important work on a global scale that most UUs don't really have the opportunity to get involved in."

McLennan also thinks IBJ is a good fit for Unitarian Universalists. "Unitarian Universalism ultimately is concerned about liberty and freedom," he says. "We've had a long tradition of international engagement, and internationalism and issues of human rights should be very appealing to UU congregations."

Building these networks, Tse believes, can change the world. "People think that human rights work has to be about the extraordinary," Tse says. "But it's really about the ordinary daily grunt work that ends up making a tremendous difference. If we can inspire ordinary people to do extraordinary things, the world will change."

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