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KAREN TSE | LEGAL RIGHTS ACTIVIST

THE POWER OF PERSUASION

By Elizabeth Weiss Green

It was 2001, and Karen Tse had just founded a human-rights group that so far consisted of a name, a business card, and a staff of one: herself. The man she was flying across the world to see, a Chinese government official, was her only contact in the country she wanted to serve. So when he suddenly canceled, she was desperate. "He was my only choice," she says. "I had to get in." So she begged his assistant to reconsider and was allotted 15 minutes.

Nobody who has spent 15 minutes with Tse would be surprised to learn that this was all it took to win her a full dinner date, then a meeting, and finally a business agreement. "I don't know why," the official, Gong Xiaobing, told Tse. "But I'm going to work with you." He was not the first person to be won over by Tse's charms—and he wouldn't be the last.

Ending torture. Vivacious, positive, and above all persistent, Tse is the director of International Bridges to Justice, a Geneva-based organization that trains public defenders and raises awareness of criminal rights in countries that have only just acknowledged them. With a staff of 21 and a budget of just under \$1 million, the organization has trained hundreds of defense lawyers in the 31 provinces of China, as well as in Cambodia and Vietnam. Thanks to Tse's efforts, posters in Chinese police stations that used to say, "Resist punishment: confess [for] better treatment," now read: "You have a right not to be tortured."

The end of China's Cultural Revolution and the onset of rapid economic growth brought accelerated demands for improved human rights, and in the 1980s, a slew of new laws granted those protections. Yet today, enforcement is spotty at best. In 2005, for instance, the Chinese gov-

ernment reported 87,000 riots; left out of the modernization, millions have taken to the streets. But during the same time, only 20 percent to 30 percent of accused criminals had a lawyer. And the few who did found their attorneys prevented from providing the most basic services: meeting with their clients, collecting evidence, and interrogating witnesses. Even defense lawyers themselves, seen as enemies of the government, have been detained, indicted, or tortured.

So in February 2002, when Tse walked into the office of one of the foremost American experts on Chinese law and announced that she wanted to improve the country's criminal justice system, it's no wonder he balked. "I thought, here's a

cute little girl, very nice, with this way-out idea," says Jerome Cohen, a law professor at New York University and senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. "She'll never get to first base." But Cohen, who taught his students about China's dysfunctional system, had also urged them to fix it. "They told us to, as lawyers, use your skills, use your training, to do meaningful change," says IBJ Board President Francis James, who studied law with Tse.

Tse had already taken similar advice seriously. Even as a child, the daughter of an immigrant dentist in Los Angeles's Chinatown, Tse was plagued by nightmares of human-rights abuses. In college, she wrote letters demanding fair trials for political dissidents. Then she studied to become a public defender at UCLA's law school. In 1994, after several years working in San Francisco, Tse went to Cambodia to train a new generation of lawyers in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge. But fewer than 10 attorneys had survived the murderous regime, and neither Tse nor her colleagues spoke Khmer. It would be an uphill battle—and a transformative one.

Explaining, Tse tells the



BORN: Oct. 20, 1964. **EDUCATION:** Scripps College, B.A.; UCLA Law School, J.D.; and Harvard Divinity School, M.Div. **FAMILY:** Married, two sons. **ADVICE:** "You have to start from your center. It's from that place of stillness where you'll know how to move forward." **DIRTY SECRET:** Sometimes reads the *Harvard Business Review* for fun.

story of Vishna, a 4-year-old boy born in prison, who gave hope to his fellow prisoners by crawling through the bars of his cell—only to stretch his hand back inside the bars of the other prisoners' cells and touch them. Then there was the Indian nun who inspired Tse after Cambodian prison directors threatened her life. "You must seek to find the Christ or the Buddha in each person," she said. "Then you must work with that Christ or Buddha."

All of the stories carry the message of what Tse calls "the power of transformative love." It's a philosophy that Tse has successfully channeled throughout her career, including with one of the first prison directors she worked with in Cambodia.

"He had a huge scar in the front of his forehead, and he was known to be very cruel," Tse says. "The first time I met him he said, 'If we see any of the prisoners coming down, we will hit them down like rats.'"

The prisoners, stuffed into dark quarters with no opportunity to challenge their sentences, were clearly suffering, but the director wouldn't let Tse inside. Looking for "the Christ or the Buddha," Tse decided not to fight. "I said, 'Can we go for a walk?' And I remember he looked at me—incredulously—and turned to his guards and said, 'Did you hear her?' And then he said, 'OK. Let's go for a walk.'" Eventually, Tse won the director's trust, and soon she was in the prison every day. Working together, Tse and the director tore down the prison's dark cells, built a garden, and started exercise classes—for both the prisoners and the guards.

By going to law school, Tse had followed the advice of Martin Luther King Jr. and developed a "tough mind." After returning from Cambodia, it was time to concentrate on the "tender heart." In law school, Tse says, "I thought it was about being adversarial and being competitive and being 'the best.'" But on her climb, she says, she had forgotten everyone around her—and about the things that really mattered: community, the larger world, her faith. So she went to divinity school, became an ordained minister—and, in the process, founded IBJ. The chronology is no accident. "It was in divinity school," she says, "that I began to understand that the hope for the human world lies in the human heart." She had found her life's mission, but to make it real she would need to raise money. Her 2001 deal with Gong depended on her providing the Chinese government with 400 working computers, and Tse had no way to pay.

Fundraising did not come easily; at first, even her parents turned her down. But after one \$300,000 George Soros grant and a chance encounter with computer mogul Michael Dell later, everything got a lot easier.

Candles and bells. Tse's success surprised exactly no one. "There are some people that, the purity of their intention is inescapable," says Mia Yamamoto, a criminal defense lawyer who serves on IBJ's board. "You're looking for the bullshit factor with just about everybody: 'This couldn't possibly be as altruistic as it sounds.' But I've known her for a long time, and she's really like that."

Whether it's called "values based" or "spiritual," persuasion

via human connection is Tse's signature leadership style. No one is excluded, neither businessman nor prison guard. "You've just made a friend for life when you sit down and talk not only to the oppressed but the oppressor," says IBJ's James. "Once someone sees that, the dynamics change."

At IBJ headquarters, the few days that don't start with a short meditation session by candlelight and the soft ringing of bells end with them. "If you sit within the silence of your soul, and give it the time and the space, I think you know where to go—you know where to lead," Tse explains. "You can read a thousand books and have a thousand people tell you what the right methodologies are—but to be anywhere, you have to start from your center and your core. It's from that place of stillness where you'll know how to move forward and how to move others with you."

For Tse, the ethereal answer has been to focus on

the mundane. China today has plenty of the laws necessary to protect human rights; what it's missing, Tse says, is implementation. "What needs to happen is for us as a community to stand up and say, 'We're going to do the ordinary work that makes this possible,'" she says. "It's not the glamorous work—it's the drudge work that makes the difference."

As IBJ's support structures expand, human-rights workers elsewhere have taken notice. A lawyer from Zimbabwe who volunteers in the group's Geneva office would not relent. "You must come to Zimbabwe. You must come to Zimbabwe," he told Tse regularly. "I said, 'I can't.'" But the man kept at it—in reports he wrote for IBJ, he'd add small notes to the top: "Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe." "And then I realized," Tse says, "oh my God, this guy is just like me!" ●

"If you sit within the silence of your soul... you know where to go, you know where to lead."



ADVOCATE. Tse helped secure better conditions for prisoners in Cambodia.

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