

TOUGH MIND, TENDER HEART

By Gail Mangold-Vine

A lawyer and ordained minister, Chinese-American Karen Tse created International Bridges to Justice to work proactively with governments in China, Vietnam, and Cambodia to implement new human rights legislation.

A photograph of the Cambodian child who inspired it all; a legal aid banner; posters – in languages including Tibetan, Mongolian, and Yuighur – from a recent Advise ment of Rights campaign in China.

"You have right to a lawyer after arrest. Tell the police that you want your family to get a lawyer immediately!"

"Police must notify your family within 24 hours after you are arrested."

"If you are poor, you can get a free lawyer from legal aid."

These displays on the walls of the main office of International

Bridges to Justice's two-room suite in Geneva instantly acquaint visitors with the issues that make the place tick.

Founder and executive director Karen Tse (pronounced Cheh) emerges from her office to say hello and introduce co-workers. In contrast to many of Geneva's non-governmental organisations, the atmosphere here is laid back.

But then, at how many NGOs does each working day begin with ringing a bell, lighting a candle, a poem, a song? "Something to remind us of a higher aspiration, so that we can bring our gifts to

where we are," Tse says. The good vibes linger.

Barely five feet tall, with shoulder-length black hair that does the right things though apparently unstyled, the striking Tse settles down to talk.

Taking off her shoes, she positions herself lotus-style on her chair.

The Beginning

How did it all start? From 1994 to 1997, after getting a doctor of law degree at the University of California at Los Angeles and legal stints as a criminal defence lawyer, she worked in Cambodia with the Defenders Project and the UN Centre for Human Rights' Judicial Mentor Programme.

On a prison visit, peering into a cell, she saw a young boy who had been detained and tortured. Would he even receive a trial, much less a fair one? He was just an ordinary citizen, not a political prisoner. Making the rounds with her was four-year-old Vishna – the child in the photograph – who

had been born in prison. Tse watched him putting his small hand through bars to connect with inmates. Moved by Vishna's "reach behind the bars of injustice", and her own new perception of "a huge gap in the system" and the need for "a way to bridge it", she knew she had to act.

But there were other forces at work in Tse's life; she was about to realise her dream of becoming a minister. If she had a law degree it was because of Martin Luther King's words about a tough mind and a tender heart. Law represented the former; it was now time for the latter. Enrolled at Harvard University's School of Divinity, she was looking forward to a "non-creedal" Unitarian Universalist ministry after graduation. That didn't mean she couldn't create a human rights entity – just that she didn't want to run one.

So Tse made her nascent organisation the focus of elective courses at the Kennedy School of Government and Public

Administration. Mission statement? Get it critiqued in class. Budget? Ditto. Forming a board? What better place than Harvard to gather choice candidates, like Roger Fisher, the "guru of conflict resolution"?

In her last year, Tse was basically running the bare bones of IBJ out of her student digs. The budding International Bridges to Justice even formed the subject of her final thesis. She was also realising that IBJ was "a calling, a life thing." By the time she delivered the commencement address at the graduation ceremony, she knew she had to get into the driver's seat after all.

Were any specific spiritual influences instrumental in shaping the IBJ approach? A church in Chinatown in Los Angeles (where Tse grew up, the daughter of a dentist). "Many of the parishioners were also Taoists, Confucians, Buddhists. So here was this Catholic church that had the beautiful energy of affirming community. I saw that people



Karen Tse with Xiaolei, an official of the Chinese Ministry of Justice's National Legal Aid Centre, at an IBJ criminal defence training programme in October 2003

could create things. You don't have to wait for structures. Get up and do it yourself" – a realisation that prompted her, aged 15, to call "a hundred" florists before one agreed to donate flowers on holidays to the old peoples' home where she was a volunteer. Other influences? A Buddhist monk who told her to "focus on the positive; it will grow." And a nun at an orphanage in Cambodia where Tse helped out in her spare time. "Find the Christ, the Buddha, in everyone," Sister Rose used to say. She really believed in the transforming power of love."

Fast Forward

2004 – Geneva, Switzerland, where Boston-based International Bridges to Justice opened a second office a year ago.

A funding stream had finally started to flow: a fellowship from US-based Echoing Green, which provides seed money to bring entrepreneurial spirit to the social sector; a grant from philanthropist billionaire George Soros's Open Society Institute; a fellowship from Ashoka, a US-based organisation that empowers social entrepreneurs through networking and

financial backing; private donations. (By all accounts, Tse is a formidable fundraiser, seeking resources large or small, in cash or kind. "You don't want to sit next to me on a plane, train, or bus!" she acknowledges.)

About Geneva, Tse says: "The international human rights organisations are based in Geneva and that's important for IBJ. A high level of expertise is available here in our sector. And, because Switzerland is a neutral country, having a base here is viewed favourably by governments especially those of the countries that we work with. But personally it was the last place I wanted to come to. I love the sense of teeming humanity you get in Asian cities, and I was put off by a place that I thought would be cold, formal, too clean."

And the first months struck her that way, despite the fact that she and her husband chose to live in the Pâquis section, which, with its cultural mix and 24-hour, 7/7 activity, is about as teeming as you'll find in Geneva. But by the time their son Noah was born, one-and-a-half years later, things had changed. "In the Chinese tradition, we had his 30 Day

Ceremony, and everybody was there, from our pharmacist to our travel agent."

Making a gesture that encompasses the neighbourhood, Tse says: "They take care of me. And it's three minutes by bike to the office, five minutes if I walk. I love my life here."

"I feel as strongly pro-Geneva now as I did anti-Geneva before," says Tse, who speaks Spanish, Cantonese, Khmer and "working" Vietnamese and Mandarin besides her native English, but sheepishly admits that her French is still poor.

In conversation, Tse speaks softly, leaning forward to engage an interlocutor in her small office with dragon-themed wall hangings (she was born in 1964, a Year of the Dragon), Chinese calligraphy on a scroll, cds of Tibetan music. Kiddie books and toys await her son's visits.

She exudes warmth: her energy is not bubbly, not brassy – more like gentle flame leavened by occasional goofiness and a lot of humour. Despite the empathy and passion, at no time does it escape notice that this woman who lists resilience, stamina, creativity, and faith in life as Personal



Karen Tse with Defenders, Kandal Court, Cambodia, 1997.

Strengths on her CV is simultaneously operating on a tough mind track.

The Challenges

"IBJ is fighting for the most basic rights of a just society – competent legal representation, protection from cruel and unusual punishment, and the right to a fair trial," Tse says. "This is a new era, an exciting time in the history of human rights. New, positive laws are not being implemented for lack of resources. So instead of just spending money on protest, you can spend it on creating awareness, on training."

Interfacing with government representatives, bar associations, and legal aid centres, the present focus is China. "Cambodia, where a lot of work has already been done, is a small country; China is huge, 31 provinces, 2,500 legal aid centres. We just have to break the job down. You train 500 lawyers and they go back and train some more. We can do this, step by step, brick by brick."

Besides trainer courses given by Tse and other – predominantly US – lawyers and academics, IBJ has developed a defender resource manual to familiarise Chinese criminal defenders and legal aid lawyers with procedures relevant to the new legislation.

There are also public awareness campaigns like the Advisement of Rights that took

place in 17 Chinese provinces last year. And resources are allocated to sending volunteers to teach English: "greater connectivity" in an internet-dominated age is paramount, says Tse. Getting everybody computers and websites, and broadening the network of volunteers to include lawyers from a greater number of countries including Switzerland, are also important items on the agenda.

Moving Fast

Although IBJ has received relatively little media attention so far, its work is beginning to get wider recognition. Tse recently accepted a Young Lion Award for IBJ's "pivotal contribution to social justice" from the New York-based Law & Policy Group, Inc.

And where does Tse get her drive, so strong it even had her making IBJ brochures on her wedding day? (At Harvard, Tse met and married Canadian-born Alex Wong, who is a director of the World Economic Forum). Of the brochure-making, and her present mind-bogglingly work-intensive schedule on three continents, she says: "It's not work." And then a remark that brings Vishna to mind: "Maybe it's just my childlike belief that everything is possible."

For more information about International Bridges to Justice, check out www.ibj.org



Karen Tse awards a box of Swiss chocolates to the legal aid lawyer who won IBJ's Accused Rights contest