Through a Lens: The Insider-Outsider Conundrum that NGOs Face Working in Beijing, China

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Definition of a lens: (noun)

- A glass or plastic element used in luminaires to change the direction and control the distribution of light rays.[1]
- A transparent optical device used to converge or diverge transmitted light and to form images.[2]
- (metaphor) A channel through which something can be seen or understood; "the writer is the lens through which history can be seen."[3]

Invisible Glass Boxes

On the morning of the Beijing roundtable, I spot a sun-browned, shirtless farmer idling by the reins of his donkey in front of the electronic gates of the Friendship Hotel. Through the cool glass of my taxi window, I see his rickety wooden cart loaded with pale yellow Asian pears. Mud coats the thick fur above the animal's hoof. But inside the conference room, a mere hundred yards away, I can't manage to find even a drop of dirt desecrating the gold and navy blue pattern of the carpeting despite my best efforts. No small wonder, with at least a hundred shoes worn by Chinese government officials walking the premises.

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It's been almost four full months since I started interning in China for my Ethics Center Student Fellowship with the American NGO International Bridges to Justice (IBJ). And since then, I feel as if I've smacked up in Acme cartoon style against countless invisible walls that fortify the lines between insiders and outsiders. These separations are something that people don't see, that people do not acknowledge – but somehow, everyone knows they're there.

These unseen divisions underlie class boundaries, glistening in glasslike partitions that separate the rusticated farmer from the milieu of Nike-wearing, metropolitan pedestrians that stream by, ignoring him, talking on cell phones. In a country that claims to be socialist, the GDP per capita for cosmopolitan Shanghai is 42,800 *renminbi*/RMB (apx. $6,266 USD) while the rural province of Guizhou has only a GDP per capita of 4,080 RMB (apx. $597 USD).[4] In reality the poorest of farmers may make less than that in the rural parts of China. The existence of such unspoken barriers seems to be no wonder when put in the context of such ever-widening gap in wealth.

Such tensions also seem to underlie cultural boundaries that I brush up against every day in my work assisting IBJ trying to effect positive changes in Chinese society. Promoting discussion among local stakeholders and government officials for the promotion of rule of law in China is what International Bridges does – and it is a difficult task. The system is fraught with sensitive egos and a resistance to admitting missteps and mistakes, which in China is akin to losing face. One slight or misinterpreted word could topple months of relationship building with the right officials in the right departments. All progress on a cooperative project on legal aid for Sichuan earthquake victims or a duty lawyer pilot project could be lost. But the desire by all parties for positive change in the criminal justice system continues to help IBJ bring discussion back to the table.

Inside the conference room of the Beijing roundtable ahead, I feel as if invisible glass boxes encircle the foreign directors who are to speak at the roundtable. Their pale skin, varying

shades of hair in a sea of black threads simultaneously isolates them and highlights their differences. It implies that they are "other" – that they are outsiders. This effect magnifies the hardship that they face in attempting to bring about change, but they persist nonetheless.

To me, behind the chilly glass of my air-conditioned taxi, the man from the countryside in his rough-spun clothing stands apart from the slick city inhabitants who surround him. He is clearly separate from them. On some level, to them, he is also "other"; he is an outsider.

He is who International Bridges to Justice seeks to help in the long view. The injustices faced by those who cannot afford adequate legal counsel are what IBJ hopes to remedy with its work. The widening disparities in social class and the "otherness" faced by outsiders are what IBJ hopes to solve by promoting equality in the face of the law. The marginalized of society are those that NGOs, outsider organizations, try to help. They do this in spite of the inherent challenges that they themselves face as a group of outsiders in a society that is alienated by foreign influence.

Mistrust and misgivings accompany any politically controversial outsiders in the tense climate before the 2008 Beijing Olympics, since both foreign reporters and foreign NGOs are infamously reputed to be rabble-rousers critical of the Chinese government.

The world's intent gaze focuses on China through the Olympic lens, making everyone nervous. It forces everyone to be on their best behavior, particularly in front of us foreign outsiders. Because to admit to weakness, to admit to flaws is to lose face in front of the entire world. Such a thing would be akin to disappointing the Chinese nation. This is China's chance to show the world how far it has come since Tian'anmen Square, since Communism, and since the Cultural Revolution. This sense of heightened self-consciousness only thickens the invisible barriers to action and communication. It increases the sense that we foreigners, we NGO workers, are outsiders in a place that we cannot call our own.

Because of all the barriers to action that I encounter, I wonder if such change can occur at all. The lens of my view is, of course, affected by the presence of these elusive, invisible walls. As a Chinese-American, my straight black hair and slanted eyes blend into the dominant population in China. But confused looks and bewildered expressions are my steadfast companion whenever I open my mouth. My thickly pronounced Chinese and unnerving habit of asking questions in accent-less English mark me as an outsider. Whenever I act as a member, an "agent" of IBJ, a foreign, interfering NGO, a halo of suspicion settles around me.

The world is watching China; I feel in turn that the Chinese people watch me.

Uncomfortable glances follow the heavy glass and metal lens of the digital SLR that I lug around with me to all official IBJ events. The camera erects an otherwise almost undetectable barrier between me and them. The rangefinder that I look through clearly marks me as an observer, watching those who watch me. The act of taking a picture, of documenting, strikes a nerve. My position as an observer behind the lens limits my role as a participant in trying to effect change as the outsider.

When I am introduced to Xiao Qing, one of the host students at my Inner Mongolian research trip in the middle of my summer, I am met with her plum-like lips forming a surprised O. The usual explanation of "Her family is Chinese and she's a *huaqiao*" – which literally translates to "cultural bridge" or American-born Chinese – is met with startles throughout my summer in China. And afterwards, I am always left with an open space to define myself to whomever I am introduced as either more Chinese or more American. More insider or more outsider.

However, there is something in my combined Chinese-American heritage that prevents me from wholly accepting either of the paths I see before me. The Chinese unwillingness to break rank, lose pride and face in front of outsiders is understandable to me. The resistance to foreign interference after being subjected to 100 years of exploitation post-Opium War is doubly understandable. I can appreciate,

through this context, the insistence of the totalitarian, opaque bureaucracy to preserve the right to make its own decisions regarding change within the legal system. However, international NGOs like International Bridges to Justice provide unique, more objective perspectives as outsiders on the endemic legal problems that the system faces. As an American, I want the Chinese to open up and accept that outsiders might just have a better solution, or something valuable to say. But with my heritage, I understand why they're hesitant.

This refusal to wholly accept either "way" leaves me feeling as if I am glassed off in an observatory, watching as the two cultures clash in International Bridge's work attempting to achieve change in the Chinese legal system.

The only thing I can think to do is raise my fingers wrapped about a camera and click the shutter, hoping that something will come out of the camera that is greater than me. That some answer will be found within them. That the documentation is enough.

There are so many definitions for a lens. As I look back on my summer spent in Beijing, China, I find that these definitions may be applied. I hope that my experience may be used as an "element" that can "change the direction" of people's understanding of social change in China. Like the prescription glass lenses that mediate my vision of the world, I hope that my words can be "used to converge" the "transmitted lights" and sounds of my experience to "form images" of the challenges that international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) face working as outsiders in Chinese society. And I hope that my description on paper, here, will be able to serve as a channel to my experience as a lens to this insider-outsider conundrum. And I am left with the question: can outsiders effect change in a society that is not their own?

Glass Islands

Each morning in Beijing, I groan awake to the energetic sound of my cell phone alarm at 8:25 a.m., grapple around my bedside table, recover my black-framed glasses, and stumble out of bed. I hastily exit my apartment after brief morning ablutions and wait impatiently for the old, slow elevator. Blinking sleep out of my eyes and pushing my slipping glasses up, I hurry out the elevator doors as soon as they slide open.

Chinese businessmen in casual work dress, starched white shirts and creased black pants zip past me on bicycles, kicking up hot dust on sidewalks of the main street that are always in the midst of reconstruction for the Olympics. Herds of white-collar commuters try to hail one of the glassed-off, air-conditioned taxis. They get honked at by the even wealthier commuters behind waxed windows of black and silver Hondas and Audis. Steam rises in the chilly morning air from the flat iron skillet used to make the crepe-like egg pancake *jianbing*. The tanned, wrinkled faces of the migrant workers cooking at the breakfast stands, sweating as they patiently smooth out each pancake, are the most alert of the morning crowd. Most of them have been awake since dawn, preparing for the breakfast rush.

I hustle past the elegant, tinted glass-and-metal symmetrical quad of Microsoft buildings. The Zen-like faux waterfall on the software company's grounds tinkles gently below the patter of people's feet. My sleep-filled brain focuses in and out like a seventies film camera with a manual focus, processing the bustle slowly. And I stare unabashedly through my black-rimmed frames at the occasional blonde-haired foreigner who inevitably walks out of the Microsoft's Starbucks, bleary-eyed and holding a disposable coffee cup. The glasslike divisions between the striations of Chinese wealth and society no longer faze me during my commute. To my not-yet-awake eyes, it seems almost like I am watching a panning shot of a movie's film set.

Boarding my bus to work, I slip through the crush of people to cling to a pole, as the drive knocks me into the shoulders of the packed crowd. We jerk through traffic in the technology district of Zhongguancun. Everyone standing sways with the movement of the bus, forward and back. People stare hypnotized in their morning daze at televisions installed in the front and the back of the bus. The muscled men and petite women of the Chinese Olympic gymnastics team somersault dizzyingly through the television screens. I watch as the same female voice recording announces which stop we are arriving at in just the same way as she does every other day.

The scene on the screen then blends to commercial after a short vignette of fade-out to the enormous, scorching flame of the Olympic torch high above the curving, arching, crisscrossing beams of the *Niaocao* Bird's Nest Stadium. The fire and the Bird's Nest are designed symbols of the phoenix fire in the spirit of China's rise once again onto the international scene. That frozen frame is what China wants desperately to show the world.

Sometimes, instead of watching the Olympics play on loop, I simply stare out of the foggy glass window of the bus, risking car sickness in the jerkiness of the movements. I compare and contrast the pink sparkly cellphone chotchkes sitting in the lap of the young, pale Chinese woman driving the BMW four by four to the burlap sack in the lap of the sun-browned construction worker sitting next to me on the bus.

At 9:30 a.m., I arrive at the glass and steel entryway of the International Bridges to Justice China Headquarters office. Cool air blows from the vents, and large glass windows span the front of the spacious office, allowing in the bright morning light. I walk in, letting the cool air wash over me as I absentmindedly clean the lenses of my spectacles that always manage to collect dusty and grit from the commute over.

It is as if the glasses that I wear every day to help focus the blurriness of my nearsighted vision do the same for the unspoken racial and socioeconomic lines within my commute every morning. I cannot help but see the glass lens that persists to mediate between me and the people outside. Me and the Chinese commuters I pass through the streets of Beijing with. With this lens as an outsider, I feel like I can see the glass island that IBJ is located in compared to the outside Chinese world that it is trying to effect change in.

A glass door and a wall of glass windows physically separate the IBJ office from the outside, and the air is filtered and conditioned. The building is shared with dozens of Chinese companies, but the office stands out with its name printed doubly in English lettering and then Chinese characters on its glass and metal nameplate. English is the lingua de franc of the office, however, as the Chinese program officers are completely fluent in English – even legal English. Chinese is one of the hardest languages to learn fluently (the tones, the characters – you need to know ten thousand characters to read a newspaper). I feel guilty that I'm not actively trying to learn more Chinese by speaking it more at the office, but the ease of speaking English in this small haven, this small island of complete understanding, for me is irresistible.
As it is, outside the office, I struggle with explaining to taxi drivers exactly which unknown destination I'd like to go. In going to conferences and meetings for IBJ, I often have to resort red-faced to exaggerated expressions, hand motions and mortifyingly calling someone who speaks fluent Chinese (and fluent English) at the office when communication finally reaches an impasse. The American directors know enough Chinese for passing conversation and Chinese is used at IBJ to interact with the outside world.

The directors are all attractive American, well-educated lawyers who used to be public defenders in the United States. There are three of them: Rob, Michael and Jennifer. Jennifer has been with IBJ the longest, over five years. Helping to start the Beijing office and the program in China, she runs the office with a gentle smile. Rob is the newest director, just arrived a few months ago after conducting trial advocacy seminars with legal academics in Japan. With silver hair and a laidback style, he has a long background in law school academics and now runs the clinical legal education program (putting clinical programs into Chinese law schools). Michael is the joker, always with a smirking smile and a teasing remark; he runs the training and legal-development initiatives in China. Thirty-five to fifty years in age, they dress in well-heeled, tailored suits, striding in with purposeful demeanors, Starbucks coffees in hand.

The purpose of IBJ espoused by these directors is to help resolve some of the issues brought to light by widening gap of wealth in China, as well as the rest of the world. International Bridges to Justice was founded in 2000 by an American attorney working for the United Nations, named Karen Tse. Though she is not related to me, we both initially found the inequality and the poverty in Asia to be jolting. In China's case, not everyone was left with the same amount of resources after the Communists let every man race for himself in the pursuit of prosperity during the return to the free market in the 1980s. This expanding disparity in wealth means that in reality justice is not always equal in the face of criminal prosecution, as not everyone indicted of a crime can afford an attorney. With only 110,000 lawyers officially accounted for in 2002, the ratio of lawyers per person in China is markedly lower than compared to the U.S. (with approximately 1 per every 263 people [total 1.14 million active attorneys], versus China with only 1 per every 12,016 people).[5] Therefore a system mandating right to counsel for criminal indictment is significantly more challenging for the Chinese criminal justice system. The directors inform me that IBJ's mission is to help ensure that China and other developing countries find innovative ways to enforce laws in the criminal justice system regarding the rights to competent legal representation and the right to a fair trial.

The directors treat Chinese legal issues like they are a court case. They prepare speeches for meetings that argue that IBJ's programs on juvenile justice, pre-trial discovery and investigation, and criminal clinical legal education help to enforce the laws that the central government of the People's Republic of China has committed to. They have the passion and the rigor of public defenders who stuck with the harsh criminal system of New York City for over a decade apiece. They approach problems with a positive attitude and an objective view, set apart from the daily machinations of the system. And their attitude persists in the face of a dilemma-filled system that is achingly slow to change.

Clear glass sections off the individual offices of the International Bridges to Justice directors from the Chinese program officers and interns who sit in the open space in the middle of the office. Each clear glass sheet is approximately 4 x 5 feet in length and height, set into the whitewashed plaster wall, surrounded by wooden frame-like molding that had been stained the color of amber. It gives the impression to those who sit outside of these individual offices that each

window is an image frozen in time. Inside, there are dark-stained hard wood desks topped with expensive MacBook laptops, surrounded by large, hanging frames of traditional Chinese calligraphy. And from there, those small windowed offices up on the 21st floor of our glass building, I know that they look out over the fast-paced technology district of Beijing. I feel that they see with the objectivity of one separate from but still amidst the milieu. In the image that they see of China, they find flaws and areas for improvement within the legal system. They want change, but they also want to preserve the integrity of the whole.

However, in the face of international scrutiny prior to hosting the Summer Olympics in Beijing, the official Chinese government position seems to equate the discussion of challenges facing the legal system as another attempt in a series of efforts by foreign journalists and NGOs to embarrass China. This intense suspicion simply leads to further reinforcements to the invisible partitions that divide discussions and communications between NGOs.

It is as if there are two images of China that are at war with one another. The first image is that of the Chinese government as it tries to promote on television, heralding the Olympics as officially marking China's rapid progress into the modern age. IBJ and other human rights organizations continually attempt to remind China of the other, clearer image that they see from behind a glass that separates them. This second image is of the distinct problems that many Chinese lawyers privately admit exist within the system of substandard legal enforcements of human rights issues.

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From my viewpoint, the Chinese government sees the first image as necessarily exclusive of mistakes and flaws. The pristine nature of the first photograph is crucial to the government's saving of face and protecting pride in country. Such Chinese logic doesn't jibe with the distinctly American thought in the second image that a government admitting its own mistake is the necessary first step towards recovery. But the essential difference, I have learned in my comparative studies of governance and politics between the U.S. and China, is that the U.S. government is one whose legitimacy is based on process – the guaranteed right to due process. Whereas the government of China's legitimacy is largely based on shown success and progress. To admit to mistakes, to lose face, is to show a crack in the façade and weaken the legitimacy of the government.

Somewhere between these two images, these two understandings, I stand transient, traveling constantly between the two worlds. A glass island in my own right, I squint into my black-framed lenses to see what I can, and relay it here.

A Picture of Inner Mongolia

The sky is like a bowl. Enormous, round, endless, and towering above me. After a month and a half of living in the ubiquitous miasma of grey smog that shrouds Beijing, gazing at a perfect sky for the first time since I've left the U.S. is refreshing. The clouds in the Inner Mongolian sky are cumulus cushions of fluffy flawlessness. However, dust-flecked glass and metal separate the perfect weather from me, holed up as I am in the darkened, cramped conference room at the back of the Hohhot Legal Aid Center. Pages and pages of printed interview questions are spread in front of me, as if my blue folder full of notes had bled them out in a rippling arc.

After weeks of preparing furiously in my glass island that is the ideal-holding IBJ office, I am poised to dive into action. The Beijing University Law School students, accompanying me as partners on the IBJ field research trip, flank my sides. Their heads bend as they scribble furiously, notating in rapid Chinese the responses to the carefully worded 11-page survey the other summer intern, Zhang Wei, and I have created.

The survey asks for the number of times that a defense attorney in Hohhot can request for the turnover of evidence during pre-trial stages. It asks whether a defense attorney can visit crime scenes, investigate a client's background, speak to non-prosecution witnesses, or even retrieve school or medical records of a client. Given the fact that Chinese defense attorneys are allotted no pre-trial discovery or investigative rights, and are in fact handed cases the day of trial, most of these questions seem impractical. They mark us, the interviewers, as out of touch, as clear envoys of outsiders to these legal aid attorneys we are surveying. Methods for and rights to an in-depth, well-prepared defense that has come to be expected and presumed in the United States simply do not exist in China at this point. Chinese lawyers know that.

However, Hohhot, the capitol of Inner Mongolia, is chosen by my bosses because of the success that the IBJ "Know Your Rights" Campaign had in December 2007 on the Chinese national "Know Your Rights" holiday. They suspect that the open community acceptance of the rights awareness campaign could lead to a successful implementation of one of the pilot juvenile-justice projects. My trip is slated as an

exploratory one, one to research the status of juvenile justice before any decisions are made in much later months. My theory before arriving is that the Mongolians in Hohhot, who are outnumbered 3.97 million to 18.75 million Hans, are used to welcoming outsiders amongst their midst.[6] However, after stepping off the 14-hour train from Beijing to Hohhot, I marvel at the sameness – the city is much like any other major Chinese urban center. Fruit carts and *xiao maibu* or closet-like convenience stores with Chinese versions of Gatorade packed in freezers lined the streets. Red posters of the Olympic gold-medal hurdler, Liu Xiang, advertising mineral water stuck to the sides of grey, stained concrete walls.

Similar to those concrete walls, questions from our survey throughout the trip are greeted with stiffness and friction, as they would have with officials in Beijing. The question of "What is the total number of criminal prosecutions for Hohhot?" is met with tense glances sent from one of the female, pony-tailed attorneys to another. They answer with edgy shrugs and "We don't know."

Martin Fackler, a former Associated Press correspondent for China, writes that "foreign reporters are alien observers in any country, almost by definition" (33). "Alien" is certainly the way I am perceived in this interview, agent, as I am, of a foreign NGO tagging along with the most prestigious law school in the country. The presence of Beijing University Law School students lends an air of authenticity and standing that allows these interviews to even occur. But me, I am different. I am American. I am clearly an outsider. Foreign, and "alien," I dare to ask a multitude of clarifying questions of my colleagues in a hodge-podge of Chinese and English. The act of asking questions or "sharing information, particularly of an even remotely sensitive nature," Fackler states, "[runs] against Chinese officials' political survival instincts [since it] wasn't long ago that people were verbally or physically abused during 'struggle sessions,' or worse, just for uttering the wrong propaganda line. ... In this environment, silence remain[s] the safest option (37)."

During this interview, I do not run up against a wall of silence but I might as well. My colleagues and I run up against a wall of "I don't knows." This leaves me unsure as to whether I should blame these answers on my Americanness or whether the Chinese government is disorganized and disseminates this information poorly. My Americanness labels me as an outsider unfit to share information with. And the Chinese bureaucracy is infamous for its lack of organization and its lack of transparency. Fackler claims that:

> One of the fundamental challenges of working in China [is] the Herculean effort required to unearth even the simplest facts, the sort that would be considered reasonable public knowledge in a more open society: when, where, how many hurt or killed, or even just whether something happened at all. Most officials [refuse] to disclose anything. You [run] up against a wall of silence (36).

Unspoken apprehension trebles as I dip my hands underneath the table, pulling out my fancy-looking SLR digital camera. It adds earnest weight to the conversation, looking semi-professional as it does with its five-to-seven inch glass and metal lens. On a level it legitimizes my presence, I feel. A photograph is evidence. It anchors my documentation, my words, and my observations to a thing that is more fact-based. But, since a photograph is evidence, it makes Chinese people inevitably nervous. It showcases, unmistakably, people's faces and their presence talking with a foreign NGO. The camera thickens the invisible walls that lay between them and me, and I imagine that responses will be even more vague, even more silent.

However, my NGO asks me specifically to document the interviews with photographs. Photographs are great things to send back to wealthy donors who can frame them behind even more glass and metal, watching International Bridges to Justice's promotion of rule of law in action from afar. Naturally, these things are better when the NGO volunteers are blonde haired and blue eyed, and prominently displayed in the picture. This foreignness visibly contrasts them against a sea of Chinese, leading them onto the "better" American way.

In reality, I feel that stereotypical image just makes it harder for such conversations to actually effect change. Everyone is aware that the image looks great – it looks like cooperation across national lines. However, the picture fails to show the invisible, glass-like partitions that loomed between the "American" way and the "Chinese" way.

The director of the Hohhot Legal Aid Office shoots a look askance at me through his sunglasses. Jerking into the conversation, he interrupts the flow of tense "I don't knows" to ask the question sitting on everyone's mind: "*Wait, who* is *International Bridges of Justice? What do they do – and why are they asking for this interview?*" The underlying tone asks me, Are you legitimate? Should we even be talking to you – will that just get us into trouble?

The bent heads of the Beijing University Law School students look up and glance nervously at one another. Chen Xi, a female student with intelligent eyes, smiles and – looking to me for assistance – attempts an awkward explanation. The precariousness of our outsider status is threatening to ostracize us. To associate with politically controversial outsiders, or pariahs of the regime, is still unwise, particularly

in the hyper-sensitive pre-Olympic climate. Pushing back my chair, I hurry to explain.

Taking out shiny, photographed brochures that introduce IBJ, I reply in rushed tongue-tied Chinese, "International Bridges is a non-governmental organization, concentrating on promoting rule of law in Chinese criminal justice particularly with juvenile delinquency. They'd like to know more about the current state of criminal defense, here in Hohhot, to find out what areas they could help to improve and how."

I pass the white brochures embossed with IBJ's blue scales logo to the Legal Aid officers. Their eyes alight on the shots of American directors speaking at All-China Lawyer's Association conferences. Pictures of IBJ directors shaking hands with the Procuratorate, the highest agency responsible for prosecution at the national level, legitimize beyond a doubt the NGO's ability to exist within a lawful framework.

Rigid stances relax as the eyes of the four attorneys from Hohhot Legal Aid move over the brochure, carefully. Heads nod, and the faint lines of smile muscles in the attorneys' faces begin to appear. The director of the legal aid office pushes up his shades and starts to speak rapidly on recent legal reform's changes to the job of a defense attorney, gesticulating fluidly with his hands.

I could feel my Beijing University colleagues release a collective breath of relief, before their heads bend back to scribbling notes. I let out a sigh that echoes theirs, raising my camera once again to adjust the aperture settings for a shot. And out of the viewfinder of my glass lens, I could see the still uneasy glance of one of the women Hohhot legal aid lawyers aimed my way as I click the shutter.

The Beijing Roundtable: A Banner and a Lens

Weeks later, returned to Beijing, I cup my camera in my palms as I stare at the handiwork of Zhang Wei, the IBJ office manager. Poppy anemone red, the traditional Chinese banner stands out against the richly stained grain patterns of the conference room's wood panels. It manages to stretch across the entire length of the wall, declaring in bright white English and Chinese lettering: "*Roundtable Regarding the Implementation of the Newly Amended Law on Lawyers 2008, Hosted by International Bridges to Justice* (IBJ) *and The Criminal Law Research Center of China University of Political Science and Law* (Zhengfa University)." The banners are always important at roundtables in China.

The red-and-white color block of the sign contrasts against the plush money-green felt that covers the tables. With its spotless marble floors and halls and its extensive garden compound grounds, the opulent atmosphere of the room matches the affluent front that the Friendship Hotel presents. It even contains its own grocery store with infamously expensive imported foods for the comfort of its foreign guests. During the days when Communism kept the gates of China's Great Wall shut to the outside world, it was well known as the only hotel in which foreigners could reside and it still retains an untouchable polish that belies the primitive state of rural conditions outside of urban areas. The walls of the Friendship Hotel had once been akin to a glass divider between foreigners and China, forcing visitors to peer through a black peephole aperture to see only what the government would have them see. As if the tiny measure of the hole would convince viewers that all that was left out of focus or out of the picture simply did not or could not exist.

Inside of the hotel's impressive conference room, I survey the participants of the IBJ Beijing roundtable. Thickset Chinese men with ironed cotton polos or starched, tie-less dress shirts and wrinkles on their pale, middle-aged faces mingle in that room with a smattering of younger business-like Chinese women in knee-length skirts and soft frilled shirts. They greet one another casually, making introductions, and wear relaxed smiles. The academic roundtables that I've attended are similar with professors smiling and joking jovially with one another before the talks begin. The attitude here is the same, but more subdued. The elegant settings in the expensive hotel obligate a more business-focused manner, and underline the importance of the guests: prestigious professors of the university hosting the event, judges of the Supreme People's Court, members of the People's Republic of China's (PRC) Ministry of Justice, All China's Lawyer Association, the Supreme People's Procuratorate, the Beijing Bar Association, the Langfang Legal Aid Society, the Langfang Detention Center, and the Langfang Justice Bureau.

These are the insiders. The movers, the shakers, the deciders. These government officials and local stakeholders are in control of the change that International Bridges wants to create with the Duty Lawyer Project.

The roundtable is being held to convince these insiders to officially climb onboard the project. It is being held after signing a memorandum of understanding with Zhengfa University regarding the duty lawyer project that International Bridges to Justice launched in 2006. It is a joint project slated to improve earlier access to counsel in the criminal justice procedure in China. Research with Zhengfa University's Law School showed that in most of China legal aid does not, in fact, receive assigned cases during this time frame. More typically, legal aid lawyers may be assigned a case on the day of trial, thereby potentially having a negative effect on the hearing of a defendant.

IBJ thus developed a project idea that would allow legal aid lawyers to be on "duty" and gain direct access to clients in detention centers at the beginning of a criminal investigation. This would significantly improve the equality in the judicial hearings and the right to counsel that is central to IBJ's mission. Ultimately, if the project succeeds, many of the poorest and most vulnerable in society would be protected. It is one of the most prominent changes that IBJ is attempting to implement in China. It is also extremely complex as it involves gaining coordination with, cooperation from, and ultimately a stamp of approval from practically all of the departments and ministries in attendance of the roundtable.

The project already went through one delay and a change of locale, due to a change of local management in the original pilot location of Shijiazhuang (a city located in the farthest northeastern province of China). It was moved to Langfang in Hebei province (the province directly south of Beijing). The roundtable is being held now to solidify relationships in Langfang, persuade partners to institute the duty lawyer program, and hopefully clarify any issues that individuals from the various related agencies might be having with setting a fixed date for the beginning of the project. The success of the project will be a huge step towards creating the change that IBJ is committed to in Chinese society.

Jennifer Smith, whose official title is director of IBJ's China Operations and Programs, sits at the head of the table. She is at the center of the tuning fork-shaped arrangement that the conference's long green rectangular tables have been set up in. It is only right that she be at the speaker's seat, since she is hosting (and her organization is footing the considerable bill for) the roundtable. Sitting with her at the table is her co-host, the honorable, white-haired, and renowned professor emeritus of Zhengfa University Law School, Chen Guangzhong. He had the connections to invite the more prestigious participants, and it is his academic research that backs the program's premise. Occasionally, he pushes back his thick, wiry glasses, bends his head and whispers gently into Jennifer's ear, as she nods empathetically to whatever it is he has said. Her skin, the pristine color of a pear's flesh, only pales in contrast to the whiteness of Professor Chen's hair.

The other two IBJ directors are scattered about the room, amongst the Chinese officials. Each stand out with their white, Caucasian skin and their starched black suits. From a distance, it would have seemed that the foreign NGO directors are the important government officials while the casually dressed officials are simply spectators. However, as soon as Professor Chen leans over to speak into a microphone set in front of him, calling the roundtable to order, it becomes clear that the foreigners are the spectators leaning in to listen intently to the IBJ Chinese office workers translating for them.

The effervescent senior program officer, Tu Lijuan, moves her willowy frame across the room, carrying a mike and waving cheerfully to me. Shifting a chair to sit just behind Jennifer, Tu finds no extra room at the head table. She pulls out a cluster of notes from her bag and sets them on her lap, placing the microphone gently atop them. She'll be translating for Jennifer, as two of the other Chinese workers in the office (Jia Hao, and my fellow intern, Zhang Wei) will be translating for Rob and Michael respectively.

This is a Chinese discussion, and ultimately a Chinese decision. Rob, Michael and Jennifer have IBJ translators who seem to me to be the physical manifestation of the invisible boundaries that exist between our NGO's work here and the change with the duty lawyer program that we are trying to implement. At this point, it feels to me that IBJ has been relegated to the sidelines, to the margins. True, the directors will get a chance to speak, to make their case, to argue for acceptance of the program, but it is up to the Chinese stakeholders and officials present to decide.

The rest of the crowd drifts quickly to their seats, and from my corner of the room in front of the red roundtable banner, I click a quick picture from behind my long, heavy lens. Two silent men from the hotel, smartly dressed in electric blue blazers, gold-colored buttons and black bowties, move through the dispersing crowd with silver teapots to fill the identical white porcelain cups perfectly spaced in front of each participant. It is a seamless movement, plucking off the scallop-edged ceramic cover with one hand and tilting the pot to fill the cup in the same motion with the other, before replacing the top. Professor Chen begins to speak in Chinese about the achievements made towards justice and the protection of human rights through the advancement of lawyers' rights with the recent amendments on the Lawyers' Law.[7]

Moving silently through the seated officials, I sit off to the side and set down the heavy camera bag I've brought with me. Through the long zoom lens, I focus in on the participants, snapping their expressions: attentiveness, interest, distraction. Two men in front of me shift uncomfortably, staring at the speaker and then their respective watches. Nodding to one another, they begin to gather up their belongings. One of them shoots a piercing glance and then a stare at me. I've been fumbling with changing my seven-inch lens, and I'm sure the camera is making him nervous. Turning to Zhang Yun, the sparky office manager who'd organized the roundtable, I gesture quietly to the two men as they are leaving.

Shaking her head, she whispers to me in her thickly accented English, "They are the Langfang police." I frown.

Police participation and allowance of duty lawyers' presence within public security bureaus or detention centers is key to the program getting off the ground. Their presence here at the roundtable is significant, and I wonder if it means that they have already decided to either reject or accept the proposal. I wonder if it means that they are to delay the decision, and delay the implementation of the program until far after the Olympics, when prying eyes and lenses like mine have disappeared. Their exit doesn't seem to affect the lively speeches being made and the talks being held.

"But they left their IBJ materials…" I whisper back, nodding towards the fresh and forlorn white and blue paper bags that had been knocked down halfway under the green felt of the tablecloth. I could still see the decal with the IBJ logo of the justice scale on their fronts from my purview.

Zhang Yun purses her lips in a familiar frown and shrugs wordlessly. Her eyes shift to the front wall, and she smiles at the banner. To her, I think, the banner is beautiful. It represents the culmination of the event and all that the event promises. The roundtable is well organized by her, and the dialogue is as scheduled. Jennifer, the IBJ China program director, will speak soon – after both the vice director of National Legal Aid Centers in the Ministry of Justice and the vice director of the Politics Bureau of the Langfang Commission of Politics and Law deliver their opening words. The departure of two tetchy police officers from a conference room full of fifty important government officials is almost immaterial. To her, I can see that the structured flow of discourse and discussion between Legal Aid and the Justice Bureau is what is important to this meeting. The fact that the police even showed up – that all of these important parties and important officials have been brought together to the table by an outsider organization like IBJ – is significant. These are important ingredients needed for change.

Impatient as I am, I wish that I could see these officials agree immediately to change their system of governance, their laws, and their criminal justice system.

Impatient as I am, I wish that I could see these officials agree immediately to change their system of governance, their laws, and their criminal justice system. But fearing the chaos that could result, they insist on slow and tedious dialogue. I understand – upheaval has been present in the lifetimes of many of these officials. My own parents fear sudden change as their families were forced to flee from their homes in mainland China because of the swift, violent takeover of the Communists more than fifty years ago. Change, they tell me, if it is to be peaceful and nonviolent, needs to be incremental. It needs to be slow and tedious. And on some level, I can see through Zhang Yun's eyes the words in the air wear away slowly at the thick glass between the participants and IBJ, like drips of water continuously corroding.

"Can you take a picture of the entire banner? It does not fit on my camera." I look back at Zhang Yun, her gaze still settles satisfied on the banner of the meeting. I nod, lifting the weight of my camera automatically to settle in front of my eyes and manually adjust the focus of my lens.

The edges of the banner are blurry, and overly round, with the fisheye distortion. Without it, though, I won't be able to see the whole thing all at once. The harsh poppy red of the banner will be faded with the high speed setting, as adjusted for the inside lighting, but it will do.

And I click.

A Glass Lens

My words are like a glass lens set upon paper. My voice magnifies my questions and my doubts. I ask if change can be made in China, a culture uneasy with foreign influence. Can outside organizations like International Bridges to Justice have an impact in this context?

In the larger context, social problems are beginning to crack the façade of the "harmonious society" that the Chinese government repeatedly calls for. The vast fissures of inequality that have sprung up in China since market reform in the 1980s have created class tensions that did not exist in socialist society before. The gap between haves and have-nots has widened as the Chinese economy sprints to catch up with the world. This imbalance has created instability in society, a potential rumbling for change that could topple the Communist government. Crime has skyrocketed from an approximate 500,000 cases in 1987 to over 4.5 million cases in 2003.[8] Academics state that the slow degradation of cohesive social values are forcing Chinese officials to move towards "perfect[ing] the socialist democratic legal system," as a 2006 plenary session statement says, where "the rule of law is to be carried out completely, and people's interests and rights are to be respected and guaranteed."[9] The matter of how this change is implemented is being fought out now.

Stepping back to look through my own experience as a lens, I see that this battle of method is fraught with the insider-outsider friction. Two frames, two images, two ways are in tension when international NGOs, like International

Bridges to Justice, try to effect social or structural change within the Chinese system. I see from both sides and understand both points of views as both Chinese and American. And with my words, here, I try to provide some descriptions of the problems on both sides to help bridge the cultural divide.

In the larger context, social problems are beginning to crack the façade of the "harmonious society" that the Chinese government repeatedly calls for.

During my internship with IBJ, I find that in China glasslike partitions exist in international NGOs facilitating conversations and attempting to participate in the instigation of change within the institution of government. Foreign NGOs face enormous challenges in crossing these unspoken barriers, in having the government even admit that there are problems to outsiders. These barriers create an isolation for outsider organizations. The outsider role tends to limit active participation of foreign organizations if they attempt to maintain the whole integrity of an organization's mission.

Creating change in any system is a slow, complex process. It is impossible to quantify. NGOs like International Bridges to Justice set the stage for change, bringing discussion to the table and creating channels of communication between different groups. These outsider organizations lay roots for large-scale social change.

However, whether the efforts of these outside groups will ultimately lead to the change they seek remains unknown. I find significant challenges and barriers to action for such organizations in China. The question of whether outsiders can effect change in a society not their own remains unanswered.

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