

## [Defender profile: Sharon Hom working on human rights in China](#)

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Sharon Hom recalls the racism and discrimination faced by her family during her childhood as a crucial motivating factor in her decision to enter work in human rights. As the recipient of a public interest scholarship, Sharon attended New York University School of Law. She worked on domestic public interest law issues, such as those affecting the homeless and the elderly before she was appointed to the faculty of The City University of New York School of Law. Sharon then received a Fulbright fellowship to teach law in China from 1986 to 1988.

'My first trip to Mainland China changed everything. I started to see the whole picture, that of a country beginning to rebuild. This was my entrance into international human rights; I saw an incredible opportunity to use law to make a difference.'

### **Moving to the international stage**

After more than a decade of training Chinese law teachers, lawyers and judges, Sharon felt there was more to be done from an international perspective.

'I felt I had reached the limit of what was possible operating from the inside. I wanted to link my domestic work with international advocacy.'

At the time Sharon was a board member of [Human Rights in China](#) (HRIC), then a small New York-based organisation focused primarily on direct humanitarian aid and advocacy for democracy activists. Initially an adviser in 2001, Sharon was appointed Executive Director by the board in 2003, a position she has held ever since. Her work with HRIC over the past 15 years has built on her experience with legal training in China. This has allowed HRIC to continue to do work at an individual level, with limited urgent assistance, but also to expand engagement with international UN human rights mechanisms on systemic issues in China.

As the majority of HRIC staff are originally from Mainland China or Hong Kong, Chinese-English translations and outreach to activists and petitioners within China are key elements of HRIC's work. It tackles a broad range of issues, from *'corruption, to environmental, to forced relocation, to crackdowns on citizens gathering to simply discussing issues.'* *'We put statements, letters—such as the letter of [detained lawyer] Li Heping's wife— legal petitions, photos and videos (many of which we have translated) onto our online [Citizens' Square](#). This is a valuable online, uncensored space to allow the voices and issues of domestic Chinese activists to be heard, rather than focusing solely on what international organisations are doing.'*

### **Risks and threats**

The shift towards an international perspective also meant a shift into the spotlight. Sharon is frequently viewed as the 'face' of HRIC, often making public statements at conferences, congressional and parliamentary hearings, and UN sessions. This has contributed to making her a subject of threats, attacks, and restrictions. She indicated that this is compounded by the fact that, although for the past 15 years, she has primarily worked outside of Mainland China, her Chinese ethnicity and Hong Kong status mean that she is specifically

targeted by Chinese authorities. Sharon recalls harassment she suffered during a trip to China in 2005 as part of the official EU delegation:

'The state security police came to my hotel and harassed and pressured me to go with them for a "chat". Chinese state media later reported that I had entered the country through nefarious means, but as I "confessed" they allowed me to leave.'

Sharon has been advised that any attempts to apply for a permit or visa to return to Mainland China would be futile, effectively blocking her from re-entering the Mainland. She spoke of the '*ecosystem of intimidation*' HRIC and other defenders face; a combination of direct and indirect threats from Chinese authorities and secondary pressure placed on other governments and institutions that creates an extremely difficult environment to work in. Attempts are made to block HRIC's participation in and accreditation to international forums, and to intimidate others from attending HRIC-related events.

### **Engagement with UN mechanisms**

Sharon's experience with UN human rights mechanisms has varied; she is cautious of the limited benefit on the ground stemming from the work of Special Procedures, but notes positive developments in the treaty bodies and the UPR processes.

'Due to the work of international NGOs and domestic Chinese NGOs, in China's 2013 UPR more Western governments raised issues about civil society, defenders, and individual cases than in its 2009 UPR. This shows the small differences that can be made through sustained, persistent lobbying.'

Sharon believes that the treaty bodies have been very helpful. '*The concrete, legislative and systemic recommendations can be directly followed up on. Focus and monitoring of China within treaty body mechanisms have increased, which has in turn resulted in more engagement by China.*'

Civil society has had a much more effective impact on the UN mechanisms, especially evident in coordinating HRIC's work on specific issues with the work of other NGOs.

'We've been encouraged to see that HRIC's specific recommendations in these processes have been reflected in the concluding observations and recommendations of various treaty bodies.'

### **Looking to the future**

Civil society collaboration is an idea that Sharon continuously returns to, especially when discussing her strategic future vision for defender work.

'We want to strengthen outreach to other groups. The progress in human rights that we've seen so far has been limited. We can't work in isolation or on disconnected tracts anymore. If Western democracies have not created a coherent, effective, like-minded group, civil society should do so.'

Sharon expressed her hope for this to happen both regionally within Asia, but also cross-regionally, such as between Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa.

'Hopefully we can build more solidarity among regions that are impacted by China's policies, but are not seeing effective counter-measures from their governments. We have a vision, but we need to develop it together. The most important thing going forward, so as to effectively address China in the international sphere, is to determine more diverse ways for us to work together on different levels tackling common issues.'

*Photo: Sharon Hom speaking at the 2014 Bernstein China Symposium, April 3, 2014, NYU Law © NYU Photo Bureau: Hollenshead*