

2010 ASIAN *of the* YEAR

Every year Reader's Digest honours those individuals who best exemplify what so many of our readers aspire to be – an ordinary person doing extraordinary things in the community. The Asian of the Year is a person working to shape the future in a positive manner. And we've also included three others whose work deserve special mention.

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PHOTO: MARC GERRITSEN

2010 *ASIAN of the YEAR*

WINNER

CHEN SHU-CHU

The Generous Vegetable Seller

This extraordinary woman thinks nothing of living a life devoid of luxuries in order to help those less fortunate than her

BY ESTHER LIANG

After the morning hustle and bustle, the atmosphere at Tai-tung county's Central Market quiets as every stall shuts for the day and their owners return to the comfort of their homes. A lone lamp shines on a vegetable stall. With head bowed, Chen Shu-Chu silently sorts out the vegetable leaves as she waits for the occasional afternoon customer. Decades of hard work have caused the fingers on the right hand to curl and joints to swell; her feet have deformed slightly.

Chen leads her life with a daily routine – waking up at three in the morning, she makes her way to the vegetable wholesaler and sets up her stall, which she tends till seven or eight in

the evening. Being the first to arrive and last to leave, the other stall owners have fondly given her the title of 'market manager'.

In the dark and damp market, Chen, nearing her sixties, holds the stall her father left her dearly. Yuan-Jin Vegetables is her everything. With her vegetables selling at "a bundle for 30 dollars, three bundles for 50", Chen earns only marginal profits. Yet, her frugality has allowed her to donate about NT\$10 million (\$321,550) towards various charitable causes, including helping schools, orphanages and poor children.

The selfless generosity of a woman with such humble income has placed her under the international spotlight. In March, *Forbes* magazine named her one of 48 outstanding philanthropists from the Asia-Pacific region. A month later, *TIME* magazine selected the year's top 100 influential people and Chen emerged under the 'Heroes of Philanthropy' category. Fellow Taiwanese and Oscar-winning director Lee Ang wrote her entry personally. "Money is only worthy if given to those in need," he quoted Chen. He also wrote, "Amazing, but of all she has given away, her greatest gift is leading by example."

Despite the honour of receiving the TIME award in New York, gaining global recognition, and a personal meeting with President Ma Ying-jeou, all Chen really cares about is her vegetable stall. If not for President Ma

and the foreign minister personally convincing her to go, she would not have agreed to visit New York as she felt "this is not a competition and I did not win anything". Amid the frenzy of applying for a passport and preparing for the visit, Chen's main concern was that her regular customers would not get their vegetables.

Chen has become a celebrity in Taitung county. Local authorities decorated her stall with congratulatory posters and banners hailing her as the 'Pride of Taitung' and the 'Model of Philanthropy'. There are fans who turn up at the stall with a vegetable basket and a camera, hoping for a picture with Chen. Despite all the attention, Chen remains humble. "I have done nothing extraordinary and everyone who wants to can do it. There are many other charitable people; we just don't know about them." Chen, who is unmarried, adds, "I do not place great importance on money. When I donate to help others, I feel at peace and happy, and I can sleep well at night." She also feels for the poor having experienced hardship in her younger days.

Born in 1950, Chen lost her mother after completing her primary school education. Her mother was admitted to hospital due to difficulties in labour and the family had to pay an insurance of NT\$5000 (\$160) before medical attention could be granted. Chen saw her father asking their neighbours for money but it was too



PHOTO MARC GERRITSEN

Chen's frugality has allowed her to donate over \$300,000 to many charitable causes

Spend only on what you need and you'll be able to save a lot of money, advises Chen

late to save her mother. The eldest daughter in the family, Chen had to grow up overnight. She gave up her studies and dedicated her life to helping at the vegetable stall.

When she was 18, her younger brother fell sick and the illness dragged on for over a year, gradually depleting the family's savings. Doctors suggested the family send her brother to Taiwan National University Hospital, but how could they afford the fees? Huang Shun-zhong, a teacher at Ren-ai Primary School, started a donation drive. Unfortunately, her brother could not be saved.

After experiencing the kindness bestowed upon her family, Chen made up her mind to help the poor once she was able. When her father passed away 17 years ago, Chen, a devoted Buddhist, generously donated NT\$1 million (\$32,140) to Fo Guang Shan Monastery. In 2000, she donated NT\$1 million to her alma mater, Ren-ai Primary School, to set up an "Emergency Relief Fund" to help poor children obtain financial help.

Assisting in the setting up and maintenance of the fund is Li Guorong, who teaches Chen's nephew. In 2001, Li had a plan to build a library for the school and estimated the cost to be between NT\$4 million and

NT\$5 million. When he approached Chen, in the hope that she might contribute NT\$50,000, Li was shocked when Chen said she would fund the entire project. While the school was sceptical, Chen was determined. In May 2005, the two-storey library was completed and named "Chen Shu-Chu Library" in honour of the 'Vegetable Market heroine' alumna. She had donated NT\$4.5 million.

Chen's ability to donate such large sums of money has led many to ask, How can a mere vegetable seller earn so much?

"Spend only what you need, and you'll be able to save up a lot of money!" says Chen. Since 1996, she has been donating NT\$36,000 (\$1150) to help three children in the Kids-alive International organisation. To achieve this, Chen explains that she empties her loose change into three little cardboard boxes at home every night. "This is a simple act that can be done by anyone, isn't it?" says Chen.

Chen leads a very simple life without any luxuries. Neither does she have any desire for material gains nor any form of enjoyment. Work, she says, is her enjoyment. "I love my work. If I didn't, would I be able to work 16 hours a day?"

All she needs is food and a place to sleep. Everything else is a luxury. She does not buy expensive clothes as "I do not socialise much, hence, there is no need for such beautiful clothes. The clothes from the roadside stalls

are good enough for me, and even then, I like to bargain". Her daily meals cost less than NT\$100 (\$3.20): a bowl of vegetarian rice and a bowl of noodles for NT\$55 (\$1.80). Freeze whatever that cannot be finished, spend another NT\$20 (\$0.60) on a can of gluten and add that to the rice with some hot water. "This becomes porridge and is very tasty," says Chen.

She also sleeps on the hard floor, a habit from her younger days when she first started working at the vegetable stall. The comfort of her warm bed made getting up early to go to the wholesaler very difficult especially during the cold winter months. Hence Chen made up her mind to sleep on the cold floor where she would not run the risk of being late.

Has business improved after winning the award? "Business is as usual," Chen says. "I still need to sell my vegetables, not much has changed." Advertisers have approached her to film commercials, financial managers have offered to manage her finances and other well-wishers have offered to donate money. Chen rejects these advances politely. "It is easy to return borrowed money, but difficult to return a favour," she says.

"I have to be very careful in handling money matters," she adds. Even when customers tip her, she refuses to accept. "Buying from my stall is already a form of support," she explains.

The only commercial Chen was

willing to take on was for the Bureau of National Health Insurance in memory of her beloved mother. Chen requested that all shoots be done beside her stall so as not to affect her business. The only payment she was willing to accept was a black T-shirt given by the Bureau.

Since her return from New York, Chen has been working even longer hours. She has a new goal: to collect NT\$10 million to set up a "Chen Shu-Chu Bursary" aimed at helping poor children pay for school fees and medical bills, things she could not afford as a child. "All I need is to sell a few more vegetables, save a little more money, in addition to a number of insurance policies that are near the end of their term. A lot of people are also willing to donate. I am sure there won't be any problems," says Chen.

Li, who treats Chen like a sister, says that setting up the bursary is actually a good way to let her retire from selling vegetables and start influencing society with her reputation, in the hope that there will be more generous "Chen Shu-Chus".

"My philosophy in life is simple: If doing something makes you worried, then it must be a wrong thing. If it makes you happy, then you must have done the right thing. What others say is not important," says Chen. She is content with what she has and feels that as long as she "lives a life she wishes for and does the things she wants, that is good enough".

2010
ASIAN
of the
YEAR

HONOURABLE
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Susan Lam believes
it is better to give
than to receive

2010 ASIAN *of the* YEAR HONOURABLE MENTIONS

We highlight three outstanding individuals who have lived up to the ideal of “ordinary people doing extraordinary things”

SUSAN LAM

The Elderly Befriender

Death has always been seen as taboo in Chinese society. Most people would not want to be involved in funeral arrangements unless the deceased is a close kin. But one Hong Kong woman has taken on this somber task willingly.

Susan Lam Kwai-ha lives by the Christian precept, “It is more blessed to give than to receive”. The 60-year-old quietly devotes her time, love and concern to assist a group of lonely and destitute elderly in Hong Kong. She even arranges their funeral rites so they can “come to the world in joy, live with dignity and rest in peace”.

Lam left school early because her family was poor. Growing up in a squatter area near Lei Cheng Uk, she spent many days listening to the sad stories of the lonely and destitute elderly who lived in her neighbourhood. She knew she had to help them.

She joined the Hong Kong People’s

Council on Public Housing Policy (PCPHP) as a volunteer in 1989 at the age of 39 and helped to resettle the destitute elderly when their homes in Tsz Wan Shan Estate were demolished. She assisted them with renovation work and paid them regular visits. Over time, a deep friendship between them was formed.

In order to continue helping the elderly affected by housing resettlement plans, Lam set up the “Banyan Elderly Services Association” with two friends in 1995. That year, she encountered the case of an elderly man who died in a car accident. No one had come forward to claim his body. The law states that when a body is left unidentified for more than six months, the government will give the deceased a serial number and bury him in a barren land. There is no dignity in such a process.

The Association took on the case and arranged a proper funeral for this unknown man.

Over the last 15 years, the

PHOTO ANDREW J. LOITERTON



Kousalya Periasamy is helping HIV-positive women throughout India

2010
ASIAN
of the
YEAR

**HONOURABLE
MENTION**

Association has helped more than 20 deceased elderly with their funerals and interments. An “Elderly Befrienders” scheme was specially set up in 2007 to deal with the arrangements for the elderly at the end of their life.

As the saying goes, “As you sow, so you shall reap”. Lam, however, does not think much of rewards. “In fact, I am grateful to these elderly for giving me an opportunity to serve them.

When they were alive, they were neglected and deprived of family’s love and concern. I only hope that at the end of their journey, there are volunteers to help them leave the world with dignity and achieve a good ending.”

BY HUNG WAI LOK

KOUSALYA PERIASAMY

Caring for India’s HIV-positive women

PHOTO: RITAM BANERJEE

After her husband died of AIDS in 2003 and she herself tested HIV-positive, D. Padmavathy, then 27, was so beset by the hostility of her in-laws in the village that she went to Chennai, 150 kilometres away. There she sought out an organisation called Positive Women Network (PWN). Padmavathy was especially struck by the fact that PWN’s founder and president, Kousalya Periasamy, had a story startlingly similar to her own.

Kousalya was just 20 in 1995, and three months into an arranged marriage, when she discovered that her husband was HIV-positive. Confused and knowing little about the disease, she moved away to her grandmother’s place. She discovered she was HIV-positive too and shortly learnt of her husband’s death.

She soon found work in Chennai, with a doctor who treated AIDS patients. “I finally found independence and a purpose in life, since I was helping patients,” recalls the slim, soft-spoken Kousalya, habitually pausing between her clear Tamil sentences. She grew close to four other HIV-positive women widowed by AIDS. They met often and discussed the many problems they faced. “The worst problem was misinformation,” says Kousalya. They later presented these facts at a conference on HIV. “But amid all those experts, nobody listened to us,” recalls Kousalya, who’d studied up to Year 12. “We knew little then. We only knew how to weep. But we also learnt that we had to organise ourselves to be heard.”

Kousalya rallied 16 more HIV-positive women together and registered PWN in October 1998. Their initial activities focused on obtaining medical treatment and jobs for affected women who had no support. PWN’s first break came quickly: an assignment to identify HIV-positive women in five districts. Today PWN, which has 17,000 members – a figure that is growing in its 13 state

2010
ASIAN
of the
YEAR

HONOURABLE
MENTION

Bungon Rithiphakdee
is tireless in her fight
against tobacco



units across India – is largely funded by similar field projects. Kousalya spends half her time travelling and ensuring these and other activities – awareness-raising and lobbying authorities, counselling, providing treatment and legal aid, and PWN’s many employment schemes – are done with both heart and mind.

Meanwhile, one lady, now a mature and busy 34-year-old, recalls the day she stepped tentatively into PWN’s Chennai office. “I met Kousalya and the other women there and they’ve since been my family,” says D. Padmavathy. As president of PWN’s

Tamil Nadu state unit for the past three years, Padmavathy has also grown in confidence and skills, having helped rehabilitate innumerable women like herself – just the way her mentor Kousalya had envisioned.

BY GITA NARAYANAN

BUNGON RITHIPHAKDEE

Fighting the Endless War Against Tobacco

It has been more than 20 years since Bungon Rithiphakdee stood on the frontline of the unspoken war

between influential tobacco conglomerates and the tobacco control network.

The crisis started in 1986 when the United States forced Thailand to open up its cigarette market. As a result, the then Anti-Smoking Campaign Project (now Action on Smoking and Health Foundation Thailand) had to accelerate its multiple projects. Bungon, who was the project manager, dedicated herself to this job; she conducted research, created strong networks, cooperated with the media and created domestic as well as international alliances.

Her dedication paid off and many other agencies started to play a more active role in the war against tobacco. Bungon then started to look at neighbouring countries that were still facing similar problems, believing that working together would strengthen tobacco control in the region. She established the South-east Asia Tobacco Control Alliance (SEATCA) and assumed the post of coordinator in 2001.

Her main responsibility in the organisation was to facilitate sharing of expertise and best practices as well as to look for funds. SEATCA has four areas of responsibility: public policy development, capacity building for local partners, best practices sharing and generating local evidence.

A graduate from the Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, Bungon does not have a diploma in public health. What she does have is a strong interest in working for the good of

society. She believes that in order to promote health, you have to look into the social aspects of the problem.

The number of smokers worldwide now number 1.2 billion people, half of whom are in Asia. In ASEAN alone, there are 120 million smokers. Statistics from World Health Organization (WHO) show that at present, as many as 5 million people die of tobacco-related diseases every year, that’s around 14,000 daily. “[Tobacco companies] are only concerned with expanding their tobacco market for the sake of profit although they are well aware of its deadly dangers,” Bungon says.

Bungon received a prestigious award from WHO in 2001 and the Luther Terry Award from the American Cancer Society in 2006. Despite the recognition, Bungon, who is now the director of SEATCA, says she remains in the frontline of an endless war. Cigarette producers are always active and they are now employing new methods in order to expand their market, including interfering in public policy and tobacco control legislation.

Their latest attempt is to make use of social networks, which proves to be a legal loophole in many countries. Despite all the problems, “I always enjoy my work, backed up by a strong belief that I am doing the right thing for the whole society,” says Bungon.

For more information, please visit SEATCA (seatca.org).

BY NUCHANAD NETPRASERTSRI

PHOTO MARC SCHULTZ