If a political prisoner in China is well known, then he or she is more likely to be better treated. Chinese authorities must treat dissidents in prison like Liu Xiaobo, a Nobel Peace Prize winner with extensive international media attention, very carefully. But most political prisoners are not that fortunate. They are not well known or have any voice in the media. Is there any organization advocating better treatment on behalf of these “obscure prisoners?” Fortunately there is.

John Kamm, a former businessman, founded Dui Hua Foundation in 1999 precisely to makes a difference in this area. For the following 16 years, Dui Hua has been working for clemency for political and religious prisoners; better treatment of women in prison and juvenile offenders; as well as systemic improvement in criminal justice in China like reducing the number of executions. It has uncovered thousands of names of previously unknown prisoners through open source research, built a data base on their cases and advocated on their behalf. It is these ordinary people's political rights that Kamm cares about and tries to protect through hard-sought dialogues with Chinese officials in Beijing and active outreach to international organizations in New York and Geneva.

Kamm, now Executive Director of the Dui Hua Foundation, traces his first intervention on China's human rights issues back to May 1990, when he testified in U.S. Congress in the run-up phase of renewing China's Most Favored Nation (MFN) trade status (MFN-treatment for non-market economies was a legacy of the U.S. Trade Act of 1974). In the early 1990s, the two-way trade between the U.S. and China was so insignificant that it was less than that between the U.S. and Belgium. But this trade relationship was very important to China, especially when China's foreign relations were at one of its lowest points in modern history in the aftermath of the June 4th crackdown on dissidents in 1989. Kamm was able to use his position as President of the American Chamber of Commerce in Hong Kong to persuade China to lighten up on human rights if they wanted to keep their trade intact or improve their trade relations. This experience foreshadows his dedication of 25 years for the betterment of China's human rights.

In addition to the political prisoner database, Dui Hua also has a mass incidents database. Any unauthorized gathering of ten or more people is considered a mass incident and is by definition an illegal assembly. Organizers can be charged with disturbing social order (DSO). China is a not common law country, so cases don't establish precedent. But Dui Hua continues collecting such cases in order to influence interpretation of Chinese law. DSO is a lighter charge than endangering state security (ESS), in part because ESS implies deprivation of political rights (DPR). (Note: Inciting subversion is an ESS crime.) According to China Law Yearbook, indictments for ESS surged markedly in 2013.
The on-going anti-corruption campaign under President Xi Jinping has dramatically reduced extravagant consumption and gambling. Xi promotes ideological purity by countering "poisonous" western values and interests, especially in universities and media channels. There has been more control over social media with the aim of suppressing criticism of the party and the central government. The authorities now require bloggers to use their real name and pledge, before blogging, not to criticize the communist party. Detention and investigation for corruption through shuang gui (双规 meeting and investigating the suspect at a fixed time and place) is a form of detention without trial for party members.

Although China has explicitly prohibited local government officials from interfering in the judicial system, it has not outlawed party interference through sentencing committees that determine verdicts in politically sensitive cases. Soon the U.S. State Department will publish its annual report on China's human rights record. Kamm predicts that China will reject and criticize it as usual. This pattern has become a ritual. Since 2012, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs has refused to accept the prisoner lists handed over by foreign countries. There has been a sharp reduction of clemency since Xi took power.

If China's human rights record deteriorates every year as the State Department says, why hasn't China become like North Korea? Why haven't there been massive protests and up-risings in China against use of the iron fist? Kamm explains that Chinese people's economic rights have significantly improved with rapid economic development and their civil rights have expanded in many ways (e.g. due process rights). But little progress has been made in the area of political rights (e.g. speech and association).

A good change within the purview of Dui Hua is that the percentage of juvenile offenders actually going to prison has declined in recent years. Women prisoners' conditions have also shown signs of improvement. Kamm believes that when you work with the Chinese government on issues of juvenile offenders, women prisoners and disabled people, you open doors for working with these officials on more politically sensitive issues. Now his organization is trying to help resume the bilateral human rights dialogue (HRD) between the U.S. and China, which was put on hold when President Obama met the Dalai Lama in February 2014.

Kamm concludes with a specific case, giving hope for an enlightened Chinese court system. This case is against the background that the number of executions in China has declined significantly - over 90% reduction of death sentences over the last three decades. Li Yan is a middle-aged woman from Sichuan Province. She was sentenced to death by both an intermediate court and the provincial high court for killing her husband, who had a track record of abusing women. Domestic violence is quite common in China. About a quarter of married Chinese women are abused by their husbands. In June 2014, the People's Supreme Court finally overturned the verdict and sent the case back to a lower court for review. This is a landmark case in fighting domestic violence and is an example of the reduced use of the death penalty.