

FEATURE

A Man of Character

Tracking UC Berkeley's former chancellor Chang-Lin Tien

FBI documents, interviews show nation's first Asian American chancellor fell victim to United States' fear of China.

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<http://www.dailycal.org/2012/10/29/trackinguc-berkeleys-former-chancellor-chang-lin-tien/>

For a moment in 1996, a political milestone for Asian Americans was within Chang-Lin Tien's reach. Former president Bill Clinton had placed him on the shortlist to be Secretary of Energy, and the chance to be the first Asian American to serve on a U.S. Cabinet was almost his.

But just days before Clinton's official announcement, the White House called to tell Tien, then chancellor of UC Berkeley, that the president had removed him from the running. A breaking campaign finance scandal had evoked fear nationwide that China had influenced the election. Suddenly, Tien's appointment became politically impossible.

"He didn't try to blame anybody," said Tien's former chief of staff John Cummins, who



Chang-Lin Tien, UC Berkeley chancellor from 1990-1997, sits in his office. Daily Cal Archive/File.

added that Tien — in typical fashion — took the loss with “great magnanimity.”

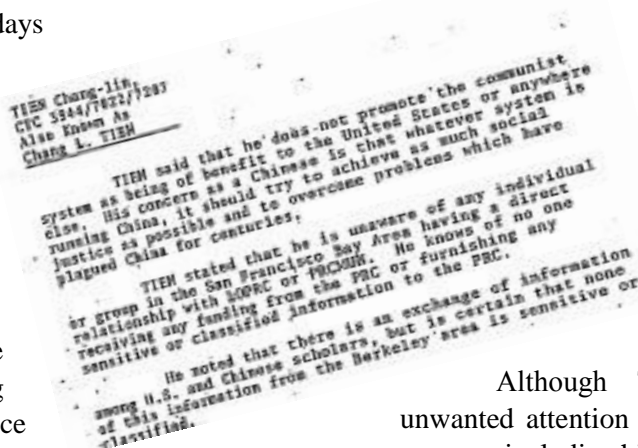
Tien had gotten caught up in something larger than himself. UC Berkeley's beloved chancellor had become, not for the first or last time, a token of the geopolitical tension between the United States and China.

Today, 10 years after Tien's death, recently obtained FBI documents (Tien declines invitation to be FBI informant (p. 122)) and interviews with some of his family and closest associates show that though Tien opened doors for minorities with his enormous success as a scientist and an educator, he was nevertheless a lightning rod for a fear of China that consumed the United States in the latter half of the 20th century.

A leader undeterred

Although Tien's ethnicity attracted unwanted attention from the FBI, his authentic persona, including his heavy Chinese accent, won him over with everyone on campus.

Long before he ran UC Berkeley, Tien confided to a colleague his ambitions to someday become chancellor of the campus. Mote, also a mechanical engineering professor, remembers



questioning how Tien could achieve the position with his accent, to which Tien responded, "I've got this figured out. It's going to work."

In 1990, Tien became the first Asian American chancellor of a major research university and went on to preside over some of the most successful years UC Berkeley had ever

seen. Legend has it that Tien, proud of his accent, refused to use a speech coach despite suggestions to do so. It was exactly that unassuming and positive attitude that endeared him to students

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