

THE PRICE OF KNOWLEDGE EPISODE 7/7

The Chen couple or geopolitical philanthropy of the 21st century

"The Price of Knowledge" (7/7). Attacked in China for having funded an American neuroscience research project, the two billionaires are now also directing their donations towards China, in a context of exacerbated scientific competition between Washington and Beijing.

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Tuesday, December 5, 2017. Under a marquee sheltering from the Californian sun in Pasadena (United States), a small stage brings together a most unusual Who's Who: alongside the city's mayor, Terry Torneck, and the president of the prestigious California Institute of Technology (Caltech), Thomas

Rosenbaum, neuroscientist Richard Andersen and biologist Stephen Mayo rub shoulders with a young billionaire couple, Tianqiao and Chrissy Chen, of Chinese origin.

These entrepreneurs, then living in Singapore, made their fortune by developing Shanda Interactive Entertainment, China's largest online gaming company. On that day, shovels in hand, they inaugurated the Tianqiao and Chrissy Chen Institute for Neuroscience, a fundamental research project.

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"Caltech is not the first university we're talking to, but the first we're collaborating with," the billionaire explained to a gathering of around a hundred researchers. Richard Andersen added: *"Understanding the functioning and dysfunction of the brain is one of humanity's great challenges . [The Chen family's contribution] gives us the resources and the space to have a global impact."* And how! The couple pledged \$115 million (€99.2 million) to the university in December 2016. Richard Andersen recalls the surprise email he received in the summer of 2015 *"following a television program about [his] research that the Chens had watched in Singapore. "* They *"met at Caltech and, given the amounts discussed ,"* he *"quickly referred it to [his] administration."*

Between China and the international

Since then, the pioneer of brain-machine relationships has headed the Brain Machine Interface Center, which has seven areas of expertise, from molecular neuroscience to artificial intelligence. *"This financial contribution has saved us precious time ,"* he says, citing the example of a less invasive brain-machine interface using ultrasound , work carried out in collaboration with the Frenchman Mickael Tanter. Online, a long list lists the research published in recent years in major journals, from *Nature* to *Cell to Science* .

At the same time, the couple created the Tianqiao and Chrissy Chen Institute (TCCI) to coordinate the billion dollars—two-thirds of their fortune, according to *Forbes* magazine —that they plan to dedicate to brain research. By comparison, the "Human Brain" program, launched by the European Commission in 2013, received just over half a billion euros.

In a 21st century that has seen the emergence of billionaire philanthropists, from Bill Gates to Mark Zuckerberg, while public funding for science is struggling, the emergence of the Chen family illustrates the geopolitical upheavals underway. The Chens are not part of the American Science Philanthropy Alliance, created in 2014, but are among the 56 co-opted members of the Asian Philanthropy Circle , founded in 2015.

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While the Chens' California investment has been well received in the United States, dissenting voices have been raised in China. *"Chen Tianqiao made a mistake in funding Caltech rather than a Chinese institute ,"* said Rao Yi, dean of the Faculty of Life Sciences at Peking University.

These attacks, which Mr. Chen had to respond to in May 2017, during a press conference, as reported by the China Development Brief. Six months later, the American couple, Mr. Chen of Chinese nationality, his wife of Singaporean nationality, announced an investment, through TCCI, of \$80 million in Shanghai in an institute for brain diseases in partnership with Huashan Hospital. Another followed in a mental health center. Since then, nothing seems to stop TCCI, which has navigated between China and the international scene, multiplying investments, grants, and awarding prizes, in order to make itself known, particularly among the best talents in artificial intelligence.

A "global ecosystem"

"Caltech was the first step in a long process to create what is now a global ecosystem ," explains Jason Reindorp, a spokesperson for TCCI. *"Our model is quite unique (...). We have a purely philanthropic strategy as well as a commercial investment strategy. Both approaches do not aim for an immediate return on investment and encourage risk-taking."*

The city of Shanghai is now home to two Chen Frontier Labs and the MindX artificial intelligence laboratory. Young researchers receive Chen Scholars grants *in* China and the United States. Europe is not far behind. "Dr. ^{Yan} Li [of the TCCI] *toured research centers in France in 2022 to promote her programs*," recalls neurobiologist Maria-Cécilia Angulo, then treasurer of the Neuroscience Society. The learned society received several thousand euros in prizes to be awarded in 2023 and 2024. The TCCI participates in operations with the University of Paris-Saclay and the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne, and was a "Gold" sponsor of the 2024 forum of the European Federation of Neuroscience Societies in Vienna.

In March 2025, the Tianqiao and Chrissy Chen Ideation and Prototyping Lab in Stanford, California, was announced, as well as the organization, in May, of a five-day *boot camp* with Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, on medical artificial intelligence. Mr. Chen also justified in an interview with the *Xinmin Evening News*, translated into English by the media Yicai, on July 23, the investment, four years ago, in NeuroXess, an invasive brain-computer interface company created to be the Chinese answer to Elon Musk's Neuralink.

"Resisting pressure"

In a context of heightened scientific competition between China and the United States, has Caltech established a framework for exchanges with Shanghai? *"It's more a matter of colleagues informally discussing science,"* replies Richard Andersen. For his part, the TCCI spokesperson states: *"We are aware of the current state of relations between the United States and China (...) and maintain the activities of the two American and Chinese organizations as distinct."*

For sociologist Anthony Spires, a professor at the University of Melbourne's Center for Contemporary China Studies in Australia, *"an important question in philanthropy is how much power the donor has over the research topics. The other central question is what is done with the data."* The author of *Global Civil Society and China* (2024, Cambridge University Press, untranslated) continues: *"No matter how sincere a philanthropic approach, one can question a donor's ability to resist government pressure in China."* A decline in philanthropy in that country was also noted in 2024, according to the website The Diplomat. The confidence of wealthy donors is decreasing "because of forced donations ["bijuan"] on topics chosen by government officials in exchange for the privilege of being able to continue their normal activities," explains the sociologist.

Across the Atlantic, an investigation published on May 7, 2025, in *The Stanford Review*, entitled "Uncovering Chinese Academic Espionage at Stanford", taken up by the Wall Street Journal, describes Beijing's methods for getting young scientists to repatriate information in sensitive areas, such as artificial intelligence.

In recent years, the TCCI has sought to gain respectability and scientific appeal. In San Francisco, on October 27 and 28, 2025, at the Chen Institute Symposium on Artificial Intelligence, organized in partnership with the University of Berkeley, \$50,000 in prizes will be awarded. Among the prestigious speakers from Caltech, Harvard, Princeton, MIT, Berkeley, and others, two American Nobel Prize winners, Jennifer Doudna (chemistry, 2020) and David Baker (chemistry, 2024).

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