

# Chinese officials urged Strangway to stop Goddess, FOI documents reveal

by Stanley Tromp

In 1991, the Chinese consul general in Vancouver urged then-UBC president David Strangway not to have the Goddess of Democracy statue erected on campus, according to correspondence obtained by *the Ubysey* under the Freedom of Information Act.

The ten-foot high marble statue near the Student Union Building was set up by UBC's student society, the UBC Chinese Students Association and the Vancouver Society in Support of Democratic Movement as a permanent memorial to the Chinese students killed during the 1989 Tiananmen Square uprising.

Even though UBC allowed it to be built on university property, it didn't officially endorse it.

But in a series of letters dating back to October 1990 Chinese Consul General An Wenbin, who had arrived in Vancouver five months before, wrote to Strangway to say he didn't want the statue put up at all.

He asked Strangway to "consider immediate measures to curb this harmful attempt [to raise the statue]," and said that members of the Society in Support of Democratic Movement were not made up of students but newly immigrated Hong Kong businesspeople "who are very much anti-China."

Two weeks later, Strangway responded: "75 years of active university and community involvement are a key element of student life at UBC... The only criterion that must be met

is to ensure that any structure erected meets the criteria of our art committee. We know that you respect the freedom we accord to our students."

Then in May 1991, An wrote again: "Mr President, it's really not a matter of student freedom which you and I have high respect. It's a matter which in the long-run carries grave consequences on the linkage between UBC and China. With foresight and sagacity, you would certainly not allow such a plot to

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**—An Wenbin, Chinese Consul General, on the Goddess of Democracy**

be materialised in your campus. Please find a way to stop it. In response, I will work harder to promote the academic exchanges between our two countries."

Strangway replied: "The students at UBC, as at many institutions across the world, were

deeply affected by the events in Beijing in 1989, and this project is an expression of their concern. The university does not wish to intervene in this matter."

At the statue's unveiling in June 1991, Senator Pat Carney and then-MLA Tom Perry said they had received calls from the consulate urging them to boycott the event.

Richard Lee, vice chair of the Society in Support of Democratic Movement, said the consulate's claim that most of the group's members are recent immigrants is false. "Most of these immigrants from Hong Kong are long-time BC residents, some of them third generation."

He added the statue had overwhelming support from Chinese students at UBC.

A copy of Strangway's letter was forwarded to then-vice president of student and academic affairs K.D. Srivastava, who said this week: "Politically, the Chinese had to say this. It would be surprising if they didn't say what they thought. But this certainly had no impact on UBC-Chinese relations to my knowledge."

Last year, the statue became the visual centrepiece of the APEC protests, at one point being doused with black paint. At a spring 1997 forum, some UBC students found it ironic that Strangway, in light of his rebuff to the Chinese consulate, would welcome the leaders of China and Indonesia to the university, nations the students reproached for their human rights records. One woman angrily said the statue should be renamed "the Goddess of Hypocrisy." ♦

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