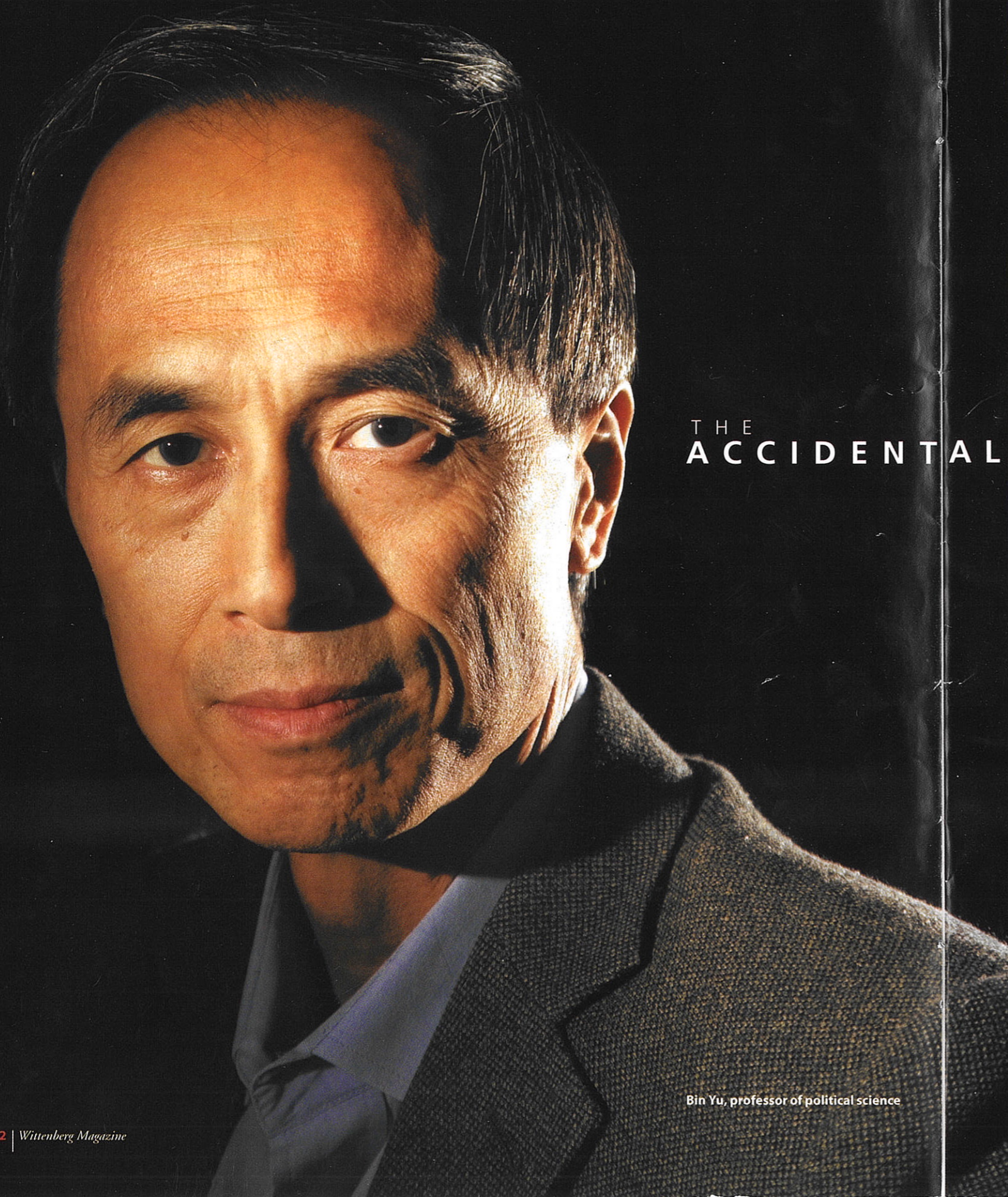


ROBERT GANTT



## THE ACCIDENTAL PROFESSOR

Bin Yu, professor of political science

**B**IN YU remembers being snuck into the Hebei Provincial University library near Beijing by an army buddy whose job was to keep people **out** of the library. Only 17 at the time, Yu was serving in the infantry, and China was in the midst of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) – a treacherous and chaotic time when the pursuit of education was scorned and often, severely

punished. Yet over the course of a year and a half, Yu secretly immersed himself in those library books, often slipping a different book into the plastic cover of Chairman Mao's book (the only reading that was allowed). It was one of many of what Yu calls the "accidents" of life – chance occurrences that brought him to where he is today teaching political science at Wittenberg.

"Purely by chance, I had access to so much knowledge at a time when the whole country had the 'freedom' not to study," he says.

It was, he explains, the beginning of a process of self-education. For one with only a seventh grade education at the start of the Cultural Revolution, Yu might have become one of the "lost," or uneducated, generation in China. Instead, he found himself reading

William Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, which sparked his first stab at comparative politics – comparing the Holocaust and the Cultural Revolution. It was the start of a lifetime interest in politics and foreign affairs, a passion that was also fueled by his service in the infantry along the Russian-China border where military confrontations had dangerously escalated.

It was through another of life's "accidents" that Yu learned English. Still in the military, Yu, a radio amateur who still had a one-transistor pocket radio he had built, picked up English lessons that the Chinese government broadcast in 1971 as a friendly gesture to American National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger (who

to make him a more critical thinker. He remembers how Yu would toss around unconventional ideas to push students' buttons and get them to think.

"You have to defend your opinion with facts," McCullough said. "And he pushes you to go beyond the obvious, and understand how things happened and why."

Yu is himself a model of what he teaches. A prolific writer, he has published more than 60 scholarly and policy articles in journals such as *Strategic Review*, *Harvard International Review* and *World Politics* and has written or co-authored six books. He views writing as an open, exploratory process that usually reveals a surprising outcome.

by Gabrielle Antoniadis

was secretly traveling to China to negotiate a diplomatic breakthrough).

"English opened up a whole new universe for me," Yu says.

To say that Yu got to where he is today purely by chance would be to ignore the intense curiosity that drove him to seize the opportunities that presented themselves and never let them go. If Yu's story is remarkable because of the circumstances which he overcame, it is also testimony to what he believes anyone can accomplish if they are open to the possibilities of life. This belief is at the core of his teaching philosophy.

"I want my students to maintain an open mind so they can explore all possibilities," he says. "In this age of multitasking and multimedia leading to multi-distractions, I encourage them to master the basics – reading, writing, thinking and asking questions – and to always keep their curiosity alive."

Mark Preston '08 recalls how Yu stressed these core liberal arts disciplines. "If you do your end of the work, he will provide you with ample opportunity to find different answers," he says.

Ben McCullough '09 appreciates how the classes that he took with Yu helped

"I write because I have questions; I look for answers," Yu said.

Yu's authority in international relations has made him a much sought after expert by foreign policy practitioners and prestigious think tanks in the United States and abroad, as well as the media. Before his death in April 2007, David Halberstam, author of *The Best and the Brightest*, came to Yu for a day-long interview on the Korean War, a subject on which Yu has published extensively. The ensuing book, *The Coldest Winter: America and the Korean War*, turned out to be the last for this great American writer whom Yu admires enormously. Yu brings these real-world experiences into the classroom in order to invigorate academic discussions.

Emerging from the dark days of China's Cultural Revolution, Yu today passionately believes that education is a lifelong process. He reminds students that there are no short-cuts in the search for knowledge and that they must never give up. That is the light that he hopes to pass on to his students.

"What I really hope is that students realize that after four years here, it's only the beginning." ■