Bin 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 interest in 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 some transmission skills under his belt, picked up English lessons from the Chinese government broadcaster in 1971 as a friendly gesture to the American National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger (who in turn made this a more critical thinker. He remembers how "Yu would come 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 articles and policy analyses in journals such as Strategic Review, Harvard International Review, and World Politics and has written or co-authored six books. He views writing at an open, exploratory process that usually reveals its surprising outcome.

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 Rise and the Fall, came to Yu for a day-long interview on the Korean War, a subject on which Yu has published extensively. The ensuing book, The Golden 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 shortcuts in the search for knowledge and that they must never give up. "I see in 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."