

Taiwanese Professor Helps with Asian Studies Launch

By Chris Floyd

Every year, the Republic of China Military Academy sends a number of cadets to VMI. This semester, it sent along a professor.

Dr. Wen-Jang “Sydney” Chu is spending the spring term in Lexington, teaching two classes in the international studies department. His courses, on Asian regional security studies and ancient Chinese political thought, are part of VMI’s new Asian studies minor.

“I know I am going to teach ... cadets that might not have the least idea about Asia,” said Chu. “I want them to know the ABCs, at least, on how to decode the Asian culture.”

Chu was offered the position when Lt. Col. Howard Sanborn, associate professor of international studies, went on sabbatical. The two met in Taiwan when Sanborn was there conducting research.

“Col. Sanborn is a good friend,” said Chu, who also taught some classes at the University of Virginia several years ago. “He went to

Taiwan to do his research, and I helped him to set up some programs. One day he sent me a letter ... [that] said, ‘Here’s a teaching opportunity.’ Why not? And I came.”

His journey to VMI began much earlier, however. Chu hasn’t spent his entire professional career at ROCMA; in fact, he hasn’t always been a professor.

Chu’s first job was with Taiwan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs as a foreign service officer. After several years in that position, he was promoted to secretary and given a position in Houston, Texas, his first assignment abroad.

“After that, I felt it might be interesting to be a billionaire,” joked Chu.

Wanting to take advantage of a financial boom in Taiwan in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Chu quit his job with the Ministry, moved back to Taiwan, and set up his own business. He was one of the pioneers of online bookstores in his country. The business didn’t take off as he expected, however, and he was forced to find other means of income.

“I ran out of money and decided to be a teacher,” he said. “I went south to join the academy. That was 12 years ago.

“I enjoyed my three careers,” he continued. “They were all different. But as a teacher, I am able to use my previous experience in the public and private sector.”

It is no surprise that Chu landed at VMI this semester. ROCMA has always had strong ties with the Institute, dating back to the 1950s, when Gen. Li Jen Sun ’27, a VMI graduate, helped design the Academy. ROCMA enjoys relations with many military schools in the United States, but VMI is the only one to which it sends two cadets every year. There are currently 16 ROCMA cadets on post.

“In a nutshell, the relationship between the academies is quite strong,” noted Chu. “Of course, the strongest is with VMI. When they return to Taiwan, [the cadets who attend VMI] have a very bright future.

“Taiwan sends its best cadets to VMI,” Chu added. “They all do a good job. In the last 20 years, we have a lot of cadets who have done their service really well.”

Chu, who works as an assistant professor of political science and head of international programs at ROCMA, hopes that he can be just as successful during his short stint at VMI. He spent a great deal of time preparing for teaching courses to students who have less knowledge of Asia and a much different mentality than his Taiwanese students.

“Asian people think long-term,” Chu said. “They accept the value of patience. They play the game differently. I want my students in these courses to learn how and why Asians think that way.”

Twenty-two cadets are enrolled in his two classes, which he said he “enjoys very much.” Of course, he loves teaching the courses, but, he said, the VMI cadets make that easy.

“The cadets here are very interested and eager to know what’s what in Asia,” Chu said. “Those who choose to attend the courses have that kind of determination and preparation. For me, I need to ramp up my knowledge about [Asian] affairs. I also have to know the ancient areas. It’s a mix, and I’m happy to share with them what I know.”



Visiting professor Dr. Sydney Chu teaches Asia-Pacific Regional Security, a class that will count toward VMI’s new Asian studies minor. – VMI Photo by Stephen Hanes.

New Minor in Asian Studies Already Engaging Cadets Across the Disciplines

The international studies department is the largest on post, and its offerings continue to grow. This semester the department has launched an Asian studies minor, and Lt. Col. Howard Sanborn, who led the initiative, is pleased with the number of cadets who have signed up in so short an amount of time.

"Our current enrollment is already five cadets over the last three months," said Sanborn, an associate professor in the department, "with at least three more who have picked up applications."

The minor has also attracted two more professors, for a little while anyway. Sanborn is on sabbatical this semester, so professor emeritus Col. Pat Mayerchak, who taught courses on Asia for nearly three decades at VMI, has returned to teach his Politics in Southeast Asia course. Dr. Sydney Chu, visiting from Taiwan, is also teaching a pair of courses, taking on the duties of security studies in the Asian region and ancient Chinese political thought.

"We are always looking for additions and substitutions to the curriculum to give the cadets the best experience possible, and these courses certainly fit the bill," Sanborn said.

"I believe that Asian affairs will be a very important topic for cadets to tackle," said Chu. "I want my students in these two courses to learn how and why Asians think [the way they do]."

Courses in the international studies department are critical to the minor, but they are not the only ones. Eligible courses also include offerings of the modern languages and cultures and history departments.

"The curriculum itself is very flexible," Sanborn added. "[We encourage] cadets to view the region from as many different perspectives as possible."



History department head Col. Mark Wilkinson teaches War and Society in Modern China, one of the electives offered to cadets pursuing the Asian studies minor. – VMI Photo by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.

Sanborn explained that a cadet could complete the minor requirement, for example, by taking two courses from the international studies department, two upper-level courses in Chinese language, and two Asian history courses.

"In this way, we give cadets the ability to customize their learning about Asia to their interests while also providing them the richness of a broad selection of electives," said Sanborn.

– Chris Floyd

Marksmanship Program, and Safety Training, Grow

By Chris Floyd

When Col. Bill Bither came to VMI in 2011 as marksmanship director and rifle coach, he took responsibility for turning a brand-new firing range at North Post into an optimal training environment for VMI cadets. In the years since, he has built the Corps Marksmanship Program from the ground up.

"The program started in 2012 based on some guidance from Gen. [J.H. Binford] Peay," said Bither. "It's getting better every year."

Cadets are introduced to the rifle range during their first year on post as part of New Cadet Military Training. When they return as 3rd Class cadets, they undergo marksmanship training, beginning with a pre-marksmanship classroom program, which introduces them to safety procedures and offers initial "dry-fire" – i.e., without ammunition – training, Bither said.

Then it's on to the North Post shooting range, where they learn to "zero" their rifles – adjust the sights so they can hit the target – and attempt to "qualify." Cadets qualify by meeting U.S. Army marksmanship requirements while shooting at targets from three different positions and firing 40 rounds from 25 meters away. A score of 23 or higher is good enough, and many cadets reach that mark under the tutelage of Bither and the marksmanship staff, which include members of the Army ROTC and commandant's office staffs serving as range safety officers and firearms instructors.



Master Sgt. Brian Motter, senior military instructor with Army ROTC, works with Nicholas Albano '18 on the North Post firing range. – VMI Photo by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.

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