Dr. Lai Po-yung is professor and director of the Institute of Tropical Agriculture (ITA) at Taiwan’s National Pingtung University of Science and Technology (NPUST). Dr. Lai has headed the ICDF’s cooperative scholarship program with NPUST since its inception in 1998. The program sponsors graduate and postgraduate students from foreign nations studying agricultural sciences in the ITA.

Dr. Lai was born in Taichung County, Taiwan in 1942. He was educated at Chung-Hsing University in Taichung, graduating with a bachelor’s degree in entomology. He earned his master’s and PhD degrees at the University of Hawaii, specializing in insect diseases and biological pest controls. Dr. Lai is a recognized expert on termite control. After graduating, he worked for 16 years as an entomologist at the Hawaii Department of Agriculture, where the research he was involved with contributed to the biological control of several agricultural pests. From 1991–1997, he was an assistant dean at the University of Hawaii, before returning to Taiwan to teach and head the NPUST ITA program.

Dr. Lai spoke with assistant specialist Joseph Huang of the ICDF Department of Education and Training.
Huang: Tell us about your background and education.

Lai: As I was growing up in the countryside, I didn’t know anything about what was good for the future. When I took the college entrance exam, I continued to just follow the tide. I remember when I got home that day after the exam, my sister asked how I did. I said I had done terribly and that maybe I would have to take the exam again. But I didn’t realize that the exams were graded relatively, and compared to other students I did okay. So I got into Chung-Hsing University in Taichung County, where I majored in entomology. At that time I didn’t even know what that subject was! One day my mother asked me “What do you study in entomology?” I said I believed I would study mosquitoes and flies. She was surprised and said “Just mosquitoes and flies? How much can you study?”

In the early 1960s after I graduated, many people in Taiwan were seeking opportunity in the United States. I was thinking of leaving, but later I felt I wanted to get married and settle down. One of my sisters found this out and was very upset and she criticized my lack of ambition. Because of her encouragement, I changed my mind and decided to study abroad. I applied and was accepted to the University of Hawaii. The people there opened their arms and took me in as one of their family. My principal professor, Dr. Minoa Tamasure, treated me like his son or his brother. I try to treat my students in the same way.

After I graduated, I worked at the Hawaii Department of Agriculture, studying biological control of pests. Hawaii is a world center in bio-control such as this, and I was lucky to be a member of that team. In 1991, the University of Hawaii hired me as an assistant dean. I worked for six years at that position before returning to Taiwan.

Huang: How did you start with the ITA program?

Lai: It had always been in my mind to teach in Taiwan. In 1997, NPUST established the ITA, and I was selected to be the director of the program. The institute started with only 15 local students, but had as one of its objectives the recruitment of foreign students. My responsibility was to initiate and build the international program, but at that time there was no indication of where the funding would come from. Luckily, the ICDF came forward with an offer to help. We had very friendly and fruitful discussions, and that set the tone for the scholarship program. We launched the program in 1998, with the first group of six foreign students. It has been a very good example of the ICDF’s willingness to support educational programs. Certainly without financial support from the ICDF, there wouldn’t be any ITA scholarship program today.

Huang: Describe the development of the program, the difficulties you have encountered and successes you have seen.

Lai: Unlike the U.S., the Taiwanese educational system is somewhat rigid. But the ITA was established with the concept of flexibility, with students accepted from any department in the college of agriculture. Conducting the program in English was also unique. In the beginning, of course, we made some mistakes,
and language and cultural differences were difficult. Student backgrounds were quite different, and even within the same subject, their knowledge varied considerably. They had different opinions, but they learned mutual respect. We have gained experience and made changes, redesigning and tailoring courses to student needs, and adding Chinese courses, which has bridged cultural and language differences. After four years, we have come a long way with this program and set a very good example for other schools and agencies. The students and faculty of the university understand that ICDF support has been critical to the success of the program.

Huang: Please share some memories about teaching and your students in the program.

Lai: I have learned about different cultures from foreign students with different backgrounds. They have rich experience in their countries, so they have lots to share. That’s also the reason why I try to put Taiwanese students together with them in class. I think it benefits both sides. I treasure these experiences. For me teaching is learning. I enjoy working with students. The students are my number one concern. I often say that without the students there is no Po-yung Lai.

I also want to mention the ICDF Technical Mission members’ contributions to the program. Every year since 1998 the ICDF has sent six agricultural specialists back to Taiwan to work toward their master’s degrees in the ITA. I enjoy working with them because of their working experience and their maturity. They have a good influence on other students. The leaders of the ICDF have the vision to upgrade their human resources, which I really appreciate.

Huang: What are your expectations for the ICDF program, and what are your own future plans?

Lai: This program is very promising. Many other universities are interested, and have modeled programs on this one. We have expanded the program by including students from countries that do not have diplomatic relations with Taiwan, and by introducing the new PhD program. In two years I will transfer my leadership position to other people, because of term limits imposed by the Taiwan Ministry of Education. But in fact I’ll be glad to step down. The baton has to be handed over to younger people.

As for me, during the past 20 years I think I have done enough administration work, and I want to devote more time to research in biological pest controls. Teaching will always be important to me too, and I want to see younger people take over in the research areas I have worked in. I am also thinking of translating textbooks. In my field most of the textbooks are in English, and only a small number of papers are in Chinese. That’s an area that I hope to explore.