Dr. Thein Kyu is a Distinguished Professor of Polymer Engineering. We recently had the pleasure of speaking with Dr. Kyu about his career at The University of Akron’s College of Polymer Science and Polymer Engineering. Read more about his life and career below.

Tell us something about yourself:
I was born in Prome, Burma, and began my undergraduate education in physics at Rangoon University. I was in my sophomore year when I was offered a Mombusho Scholarship from the Japanese Ministry of Education to study in Kyoto, Japan, so I was technically a physics drop out! Accepting the scholarship, I proceeded to graduate from the Kyoto Institute of Technology with a B.S. in Textile Engineering followed by a Ph.D. in Polymer Chemistry from the College of Engineering at Kyoto University. I enjoy working with soft matter physics, both experimentally and theoretically, especially thermodynamics and non-linear dynamics pertaining to phase transitions and critical phenomena in polymers and liquid crystals.

What were the driving factors in your decision to join the CPSPE faculty?
I was introduced by my advisor, Professor Hiromichi Kawai, Kyoto University, via a Christmas card in December 1982 to Professor James L. White, who had moved from the University of Tennessee to The University of Akron (UA) with a vision of creating a new Department of Polymer Engineering. I was very impressed with Professor White’s vision and enthusiasm in establishing a new polymer engineering discipline at UA, so I was attracted to join the faculty (or was I simply a Christmas gift to the University of Akron by mistake?) Initially I was hired in the Department of Civil Engineering in 1983, while Professor Avraam Isayev was hired by the Department of Mechanical Engineering. Subsequently, the Department of Polymer Engineering was founded by the three musketeers – Drs. White, Isayev, and myself – in the College of Engineering in 1984. At that time, the Department of Polymer Science was already world-renown, but administratively it was operated under the College of Arts and Sciences. Collectively, faculty from both departments decided to join forces together and form a College of Polymer Science and Polymer Engineering (CPSPE) in 1988 to gain greater visibility and national and international reputation by streamlining the graduate and undergraduate courses, joint research, industrial training, and other areas.

What’s your teaching philosophy or your outlook on higher education?
Serendipity or creativity should be the goal of graduate teaching. In graduate school, our teaching philosophy has evolved from learning what is right in the undergrad studies (e.g., hard-wiring of neuron dendrites in our brain) to what is not quite right in some basic principles and theories (or soft-wiring of neurons), since most of which are based on some assumptions, which if not all, are justifiable. If those assumptions were taken away, what will be the consequences (or modifications) of those theories? Hopefully, such a teaching approach will motivate students to become independent thinkers and ultimately innovators.

What are some of your favorite things to do when you’re not teaching?
Day dreaming and doing nothing on vacation!

What do you love most about your job at The University of Akron, and your work through your particular department?
Freedom to think and enjoy the endless job. It is rewarding to learn success stories of former students; some of whom have already retired with their own enviable careers in polymers. It is hard to imagine that some of my former students have already retired before me.

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What are your goals for CPSPE and your department?
All disciplines will eventually become mature and therefore should prepare for new visionary education and new research direction! Develop an on-line education program: Polymer Space for Innovation.

What is one thing that you hope each of your students learned from you?
Be creative and innovative.