Interest in political science brought Myanmar scholar to WMU

By: Ian Magnuson

Dramatic efforts to forge democratic reform in Myanmar inspired Zaw Thein to earn a master's degree in political science at Western Michigan University in hopes of more fully participating in the movement to democratize his homeland.

"There are few political scientists in Myanmar," said Thein, who earned his bachelor's degree in geology in 1974 from the University of Yangon. "My country has been under the official rule of a military junta since 1962 and one of the many things the military did upon seizing power was to outlaw the study of political science. The justification for that was that government officials believed Burmese Socialism was the only system to study, so why bother studying anything else?"
Political protests inform scholarly interests

His interest in politics was piqued by student demonstrations he witnessed in 1988 from his apartment window in Yangon during a pro-democracy uprising. Thein said the military junta suppressed everything that could have developed from the protests, so he settled into a career at a family-owned printing press.

In 2005, Thein heard about an opportunity to advance his English skills and to learn more about democracy and how other countries manage their affairs at the American Center in the Embassy of the United States in Yangon. In addition to ESL classes, Thein enrolled in courses in history, public speaking, American culture and creative writing. "I am a strong supporter of my country's National League for Democracy party and General Secretary Daw Aung San Suu Kye," he said. "This group will provide my country with its best chance to make a peaceful transition to democracy."

Through his involvement at the American Center, Thein learned about the United States' Fulbright program and a merit-based award they offer to support international education exchange for students, scholars, teachers, professionals, scientists and artists. Thein's Fulbright award covered tuition for his master's program at WMU and provided a stipend to cover living expenses and some travel within the United States.

"As a non-traditionally-aged graduate student, I didn't expect to receive an award," he said. "The Institute for International Education, which administers the Fulbright program, selected WMU as my host university. I am grateful to all the people who have helped make it possible for me to
study in the United States and for the strong support that WMU provides to Fulbrighters. I especially appreciate that Dr. Metro Roland [WMU Fulbright advisor] and Sonnie Farmer [support staff] host lunch meetings for us regularly and other social activities, like picnics and trips to Chicago."

Life in the U.S.

One of the biggest cultural changes Thein experienced settling into life in the U.S. for his two-year program was learning how to operate U.S. automated teller machines and adjusting to a climate that requires wearing shoes instead of sandals.

"It took me a while to get used to the cooler weather and wearing mainly shoes," he said. "In Myanmar, people wear sandals for everything, including official meetings. We have dressy sandals and casual sandals, much like the shoe culture in the United States."

At WMU, Thein lived in Spindler Hall, a dormitory adjacent to campus, which is also home to other international students. "I enjoy living at Spindler because you can access the Internet there 24 hours a day and it is a relatively quiet hall, so it is a good place to work," he said. "I also like that I feel part of a community there because everyone is friendly and helpful—we often have potluck meals together. However, I don't have that much free time because I spend a lot of time studying."

After completing his master's degree in political science, Thein had planned to return to Myanmar and translate political science books, write and publish articles, and teach basic political science courses. He predicted that graduation from WMU would not be the end of his
academic journey: "Seven credits in political science does not make one a political scientist—getting the degree is a baby step on a longer journey."

Thein graduated in April 2013.