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In October each year, Nobel Prizes are doled out.

My excitement this time came not only from the numbers—5 out of 13 names on the list of the 2009 Nobel Laureates are women, the largest number ever to receive these most prestigious awards in a single year in the history, but also from the broad scope of the awarded contributions, ranging from protecting and deciphering DNA to international diplomacy and to optical fibers.

My congratulation and celebration are not in the least due to a Chinese name, Charles Kuen Kao, who actually is a dual-citizen of UK and USA, but more significantly are for Charles being a renowned Life Honorary Professor of our Department of Electronic Engineering at the City University of Hong Kong soon after his departure from the Vice-Chancellorship of the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 1996. Charles has also been a dedicated Fellow of the IEEE since 1979.

On October 8, 2009, the Nobel Foundation announced that the new Nobel Prize in Physics was conferred to Charles for his “groundbreaking achievements concerning the transmission of light in fibers for optical communication,” shared by Willard S. Boyle and George E. Smith for their “invention of an imaging semiconductor circuit—the CCD sensor.” It all sounds like engineering rather than physics, doesn’t it?

My appreciation is being served with such a pleasant surprise that, as one of very few exceptions, an electrical engineer can actually win a Nobel Prize in Physics! It is now not the era of Newton, or of Maxwell, or of Einstein, but an era of interdisciplinary science and technology where the boundary between physics and engineering is fading away. For quite a long time, one could not precisely distinguish a practical engineer from an experimental physicist, or a theoretical engineer from an applied mathematician. Like it or not, that’s the way the world goes today. The good news is that for those

Nobel Prize dreamers and fans within our engineering communities such as the IEEE, the award to Charles has already shed light on a new dawn.

Speaking of Nobel Prize winning recipients, two extremes in the so-called SCI citations to our new Nobel Laureates have been notably observed by many. According to Thomson Reuters’ ISI Web of Knowledge, as of October 10, 2009, the winner in chemistry, Thomas A. Steitz, had published 265 papers with a total of 29,326 citations, and his h-index is 90; at the other end of the spectrum, Charles had a considerably smaller number of publications in which the prize-winning paper published in 1966 was cited for 197 times only, and his h-index is 20, yet he made optical fibers indispensable to everyone’s life today.

For those prize dreamers and lovers who may be pondering awards and honors as symbols of professional achievements and success, would you like to be Charles, or Thomas?

At this point, I may recall a popular Chinese bedtime story for children, *Little Kitten Goes Fishing*. Once upon a time on a sunny morning, little kitten MiaoMiao and his younger sister Mimi went fishing by the river with their mother. MiaoMiao was totally amazed by his mother’s success in catching fish very quickly, so he moved nearby her to try bettering his own chances. Shortly afterwards, he saw the slow and patient Mimi catching fish too, so he turned around and moved to close to Mimi. Then, his mother caught another one, and therefore MiaoMiao moved back closer to the mother. Thus back and forth, when they went home in the evening, Mimi and Mommy both had quite a lot of fish but MiaoMiao got nothing . . .

Well, I’m not sure what moral you’ll decipher from that tale, but it tells me: “The best way to be somebody is just to be yourself.”

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Guanrong Chen". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

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