Encouraging Interactions Between Asian Researchers
Towards holding NII-based international seminars

Yamamoto: I am informed that you regard researchers’ communities as important for the international development of software research. What are researchers’ communities like?

Hu: Communities where researchers interact are usually formed through academic societies and meetings. For example, some researchers from the West are already aware of the results of other researchers before the official announcement is made, in more than a few cases. Researchers from many countries often meet and gather, say, at international conferences held in Europe and America, and the information is conveyed upon these occasions. Researchers present their new findings when they gather in these locations, and are criticized, encouraged, or given the opportunity of working together. They gain a great deal through research and personal interactions. If this happens often, people feel attached to these places as their communities.

Needless to say, Asian researchers can also participate in these conferences. However, they meet less frequently, and it is not easy to become part of the communities.

Yamamoto: Although this is a borderless age, close proximity is important for forming communities...

Hu: It is easier to visit China and Korea from Tokyo than Europe, isn’t it? Unlike in the past, the level of research conducted in Asia has risen to a point where discussions are now possible on a global level. I therefore believe that an Asian community should be established and a mechanism formulated from which the ongoing work and research results are communicated to the world. In 2009, the Asian Workshop on Foundations of Software (AWFS) was held at GRACE Center, NII’s Center for Global Research in Advanced Software Science and Engineering. In addition, I was involved in the Seventh Asian Symposium on Programming Languages and Systems (APLAS 2009) held in Seoul, Korea, as the program committee chairman. A great number of researchers from the West also participated, and the Symposium was highly regarded worldwide.

Yamamoto: Please tell us about the new type of seminar you are planning.

Hu: It will be an Asian version of the famous Dagstuhl Seminar(+) in Germany. The most notable feature is that the Seminar aims to encourage interactions between researchers who are active worldwide through discussions on important issues in each area of informatics. It is not of a structure where programs are prepared beforehand and researchers make presentations. I have participated in the Seminar several times. One of the organizers is German, and around 30 of the world’s top researchers take part.

To encourage interactions, participants stay in a location slightly remote from the city center for a week. On the first day, each of the participants presents the issues in the areas he/she is involved with and provides a brief introduction to the research he/she is...
engaged in. Then all the participants vote to determine the program for the entire week of the Seminar. The participants dine together, and their seats are switched each time by lottery. Hiking and other events are planned. During the week of the seminar, the participating researchers become very close.

The Seminar is extremely popular, and one program is implemented for one week only, with another program commencing the following week. The weekly programs are arranged two and a half years in advance. Even if one expresses a wish to hold a seminar with a certain theme, only half the proposed topics are adopted. I definitely hope to hold an extremely popular seminar that is effective in both forming a community for researchers in Asia, and promoting research communication worldwide. Isn’t it an appropriate project for NII to pursue as it aims to become a center of research activities in Asia?

Yamamoto: Would there be any difference from the German version?

Hu: The organizers should not be limited to researchers from NII or other universities or research organizations from Japan. I hope that researchers from universities that have concluded tie-up agreements with NII will also function as organizers, including Beijing University and Tsinghua University of China, Seoul National University of Korea, the National University of Singapore, and Hanoi University of Technology of Vietnam, etc. NII will provide full support for the clerical aspects of the seminar so that the researchers can concentrate on discussions. We are extremely fortunate that most of the clerical workers from NII are fluent in English.

Yamamoto: Perhaps synergistic effects can be expected with the international exchange programs of NII.

Hu: There are many ways to enhance the effects, such as coordinating the schedule with personal interactions for joint research at NII, and having university students participate in the seminar.

Although NII is not a university, it has a system for educating students in doctoral programs. This is possible because we participate in the Graduate University for Advanced Studies, where diverse inter-university research institutes are utilized for education. Although many foreign students and working people study at NII, it is not well known because of its special systems. If NII gains more presence in Asia and understanding is fostered, I expect that we will attract a greater number of students from other Asian countries.

A Word from the interviewer

Professor Hu from China enrolled at the University of Tokyo in 1992 as a government-sponsored foreign student, and transferred to NII in 2008 after serving as Associate Professor of the University. Being familiar with the differences between Japan and China and also those between universities and inter-university research institutes is an asset when attempting community development involving the gathering of many researchers. Although Professor Hu has worked at NII for only two years, he has maintained a positive attitude of proposing a new type of seminar that NII should pursue on an organizational level, which is one of his characteristics. Professor Hu is an expert in programming language and software engineering, and the scientific analysis of programming capabilities by humans is one of the areas he is working in. The policy of NII, according to which social issues are dealt with by focusing not only on technologies but by merging humanities and sciences, certainly appears to have circulated.