Expectations Rise for NII Shonan Meeting as a Center of Asian Informatics Research

The NII Shonan Meeting, which began in February, 2011, was held for the 20th time in February of this year. Last November, the commemorative symposium “Creating Global Future Value in Asia” was also held. Professor Zhenjiang Hu, now the chair of the academic review committee, dedicated himself to creating the Shonan Meeting. We talked with him about its objectives, results, and his hopes for the future.

The NII Shonan Meeting (hereinafter referred to as the “Shonan Meeting”) is Asia’s first residential international seminar. It was established to provide a place for top researchers in the field of informatics from various countries to come together and exchange ideas and discuss the issues they are currently working on. It was modeled on the Dagstuhl seminars held in southwest Germany. The Dagstuhl seminars are an international workshop, supported by the German government, which has promoted the field of informatics in Germany and around the world for over 20 years. NII’s Professor Zhenjiang Hu has attended the seminar 6 times, and, keenly aware of its importance and significance, determined to create a similar center for informatics research in Japan.

“One of the things that sets Dagstuhl apart is that it is not a place for announcing research results, but for discussing promising future issues. Top level researchers gather in this pleasant small town, staying there and exchanging ideas with each other. It is extremely productive. However, there was no comparable top level international informatics workshop in Asia. NII believed that by creating a center for this kind of dynamic meeting of the best minds in informatics in Japan as well, it could contribute to the globalization of Asian informatics.”

This vision came to fruition in February, 2011, with the first Shonan Meeting. In the two years since then (effectively 2011, with the first Shonan Meeting, which started in February), 20 seminars have been held. Guided by Special Appointment Professor Yoshichi Tohkura, the Shonan Meeting’s steering committee chairman, members of the administrative committee and international members in charge of overall operations have succeeded in smoothly carrying out the seminar, led by the strong drive and dedication of all involved.

New topics emerge from the seminars, attended by over 400 people from over 30 countries.

Each seminar of the Shonan Meeting is attended by 20 to 35 people, and over 400 people have attended in total. Over 60% are non-Japanese, representing 34 nationalities.

“Fixed themes aren’t decided for the seminar in advance. Instead, they are set flexibly at the seminar itself, based on the interests of the participants. The themes themselves are decided upon discussion by all the seminar’s participants. The Shonan Meeting is certain to have a strong influence on informatics research in Japan and throughout Asia.”

As a general rule, the residential periods are from Monday to Thursday. This is to enable participants to meet with researchers who are not participating in the seminars. Past participants have been extremely satisfied. The main reason for their satisfaction is the community forming between researchers that the seminar makes possible, but that is not the only attraction of the Shonan Meeting.

“First, the fact that we have scrupulously maintained the Dagstuhl approach has been very well received. Another appealing thing about the Shonan Meeting is the allure of Japanese culture, such as the attention to detail in the services offered, the delicious food, the view of Mt. Fuji from the conference site, and the excursion to Kamakura.”

The fact that some people have already attended the seminar multiple times is a testament to the satisfaction of its participants. Each seminar creates new projects, and there have been moves to establish another organizer? to lead further, more focused discussions. This shows that the Shonan Meeting has succeeded in what it set out to do.

In addition to its main objective of creating a new center for global research, there is another major goal of the Shonan Meeting.

“Compared to westerners, Asians don’t tend to be as good at taking risks and exhibiting leadership. Holding the seminar in Japan by its very nature creates more opportunities for Japanese and other Asian researchers to act as organizers. The Shonan Meeting provides chances for researchers to be leaders at conferences in which cutting-edge issues are discussed, creating a stranger presence among the global research community.”

The Shonan Meeting is also considering new, uniquely Japanese approaches, such as coordination between industry and academia, and accepting open applications.

Last November, the highly successful commemorative symposium “For Making Future Value From Asia” was held at the Gakushi Kaikan in Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo, attended by almost 100 people. The keynote lectures were given by an impressive lineup of speakers: world-famous database theory researcher J.D. Ullman (professor at Stanford University), top virtual logic programming researcher R.A. Kowalski (professor at Imperial College London), and big data research pioneer M. Kutsuregawa (Professor, Institute of Industrial Science, The University of Tokyo). Special sessions in the latter half of the symposium included lectures by R. Wilhelm (scientific director of Schloss Dagstuhl) and professor at Saarland University) and professor Hu, and a session in which professors Wilhelm, Ullman, and Kowalski, as well as S. J. J when (the chairman of the supervisory board of the Dagstuhl Seminar and professor of Technische Universität Berlin), discussed their hopes for the future of the Shonan Meeting.

“I was the emcee, but the discussion was dynamically led by the interests of the participants. That’s the Shonan style.”

During the session, in addition to praise for the way the Shonan Meeting was carried out, some suggested not merely following in the footsteps of Dagstuhl, but adding new and unique elements.

“We would like to add new, uniquely Japanese and Asian elements to the Shonan Meeting. For example, there is little corporate involvement at Dagstuhl, but Japan has many leading information companies, so we would like to take advantage of this aspect of our region through collaboration between industry and academia. Also, right now the event is by invitation only, but we would like to open it partially to open application. This will increase the amount of thematic variety, as well as further improving the quality of the conference.”

The Shonan Meeting is becoming more and more well-known, and the range of corporate applicants and themes has expanded. However, Professor Hu states, “it will take a bit longer before we get everything completely on track, including funding and personnel.” The societal need for this kind of international conference is enormous, and it serves a very important role, both for Japan and the world. The new challenges being taken on by the Shonan Meeting, such as leveraging the regional characteristics of Asia, hold tremendous potential.

(Written by interviewer Yuka Sakurai)