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Outreach via Community Building

This beautiful autumn, I attended a wonderful International Conference on Image Processing (ICIP) meeting held in magical Disney World, which was organized by Eli Saber and his team. The first ICIP was held in 1994, so this year was the 19th event of the series. Earlier in March 2012, we also had a memorable International Conference on Acoustics, Speech, and Signal Processing (ICASSP) experience in Kyoto organized by Hideaki Sakai and Takao Nishitani and their team. The first ICASSP was held in 1976, so the Kyoto event was the 37th ICASSP!

Today, the average number of attendees at ICASSP is about 2,000, and ICIP has about 1,000. Both conferences have achieved a steady state as a large-scale event that attracts many returning attendees year after year. However, these annual events may only come to a continent once every few years. One may ask: Is that frequent enough to serve the IEEE Signal Processing Society (SPS) community?

First, there are some emerging regions with significant potential for growth in memberships. One such region is China, where there are about 2 million IEEE occupations with only about 5,400 IEEE Members. By comparison, the United States has about 2.5 million IEEE occupations with about 180,000 IEEE Members. Such a disparity in statistics answers the question why so many organizations are targeting China as a key region for membership development—a place crowded with many strategic competitors.

But why are there so few members from China now? Besides the historical aspects, China has been catching up fast. Many engineers/scientists in China are eager to join and embrace the IEEE. Nevertheless, even though both sides are eager to engage, there are issues to address and overcome. We need to understand and appreciate the challenges first.

So we paid a visit to Beijing and Xi'an in October 2011, where about 80 key leaders from various universities/organizations all over China were invited to have a frank dialogue in a town hall setting. We learned a lot from our conversations. The first surprising fact was that although everyone in attendance knew each other, they did not see each other altogether often. When they did meet, they were mostly meeting at an international conference. There has seldom been an opportunity for those who work in signal processing related fields to gather together to chat and have a dialogue!

With the rapid development of China's academic and research work and the unique Chinese environment, an infrastructure for community building and a direct link to SPS for a ladder of opportunities and professional development must be established.

Recognizing that need, the Board of Governors of the SPS has approved the 2013 launch of a premier annual event called the IEEE China Summit and International Conference on Signal and Information Processing (ChinaSIP) in response to the need and demand of our colleagues in China and the Asia-Pacific regions. ChinaSIP is envisioned as a high-quality conference that will provide a community building infrastructure, which can serve as a platform for local colleagues in China to collaborate with each other and with global experts.

The inaugural ChinaSIP will be held in Beijing on 6–10 July 2013. It will have plenty of exciting programs in addition to technical presentations and plenaries, including summer school/tutorials and networking opportunities with leaders in the global signal processing community. Also being planned are professional development panels to demystify issues of interests to many colleagues in China, such as the paths to become IEEE journal associate editors and IEEE Fellows, how to engage with the global signal processing community, and insights from high-impact signal processing research, programs, and products.

ChinaSIP will be a time and place for leaders, educators, practitioners, and researchers to gather to chat and laugh together—these are often the times when great ideas are stimulated and born.

To start such an ambitious task from scratch is not an easy job. Fortunately, we have many dedicated volunteers who have invested a tremendous amount of time to make this dream possible, and I thank them. Under the leadership of SPS Vice President-Finance Min Wu, a ChinaSIP Steering Committee has been established. The Steering Committee is in the process of developing the technical interest groups and inviting those who are willing and qualified to serve. Thomas Fang Zheng and Zhi Ding are leading the organizing team for the first ChinaSIP.

Besides ChinaSIP, perhaps the next region that we should pay close attention to is South/Central America. We are in the process of working with colleagues in this region to understand their unique needs, and hopefully we will soon develop an approach and platform that will help build a stronger scientific community to meet their demands. Of course, we shall do more for other regions as well.

Finally, I invite you to participate in ChinaSIP to be a part of its exciting launch, and I welcome your attendance. The leadership of SPS will be in Beijing in celebration of this inaugural ChinaSIP, and I look forward to meeting you there.

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