

CSH Asia

The “CSHL idea” takes root in China

It was a meeting that brimmed with significance for the future of science in Asia. Hundreds of people filled a sparkling new auditorium named for James D. Watson and plunged into what would be a five-day exchange of ideas about new concepts in cancer research.

The date was April 6th; the place was Suzhou, China; and any similarities the meeting bore to those in the Symposium series that Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory has made famous over the last 75 years were absolutely intentional.

The 1st James Watson Cancer Symposium, followed on April 12-17 by the equally well-attended 1st Francis Crick Neuroscience Symposium, were the historic inaugural events at the Suzhou Dushu Lake Conference Center. A fully equipped meeting place for scientists on China's rapidly modernizing southeast coast, the Center represents CSHL's most extensive effort to date to extend overseas its time-tested model of peer-organized meetings as the basis for open, critical discussion of cutting-edge ideas in biology and biomedicine.



Artist's view of Suzhou Dushu Lake Conference Center facility

The dazzling new Dushu Lake Center, whose design (see illustration, lower left) was inspired by a blending of ancient and modern in the style of I. M. Pei, a Suzhou native, is the fulfillment of an idea hatched in the back row of Grace Auditorium, half a world away from Suzhou, a few short years ago.

“I’d sit in the last row during the Cold Spring Harbor meetings, and try to take in the whole picture,” remembers Maoyen Chi, Ph.D., a native of Suzhou who worked as a computational scientist in the laboratory of CSHL Professor Mike Wigler for eight years before being named the CEO of the new meetings program in China in 2008. “I really fell in love with the academic culture of those meetings — relaxed, informal, and very free. And I began to ask myself: ‘What if we had this in China?’ What if we could build a small campus, where scientists of all levels could feel at home — maybe right near where I come from in Suzhou, where there are many beautiful mountains and lakes.”

The difference between a mere daydream and a moment of visionary insight, one might say in retrospect, is a matter of circumstance, a fortuitous alignment of forces. Little did Chi know that around the same time, David Stewart, Ph.D., the longtime executive director of the CSHL Meeting & Courses program, was having serious thoughts of his own, not specifically about China but about CSHL's role in Asia.

A Model of Openness

“For a number of years, people had been coming to us and asking us to get involved in Asia,” says Stewart. “There were complications of various kinds. What I knew, though, was this: we had a fantastic program at CSHL, admired the world over; and we have never been in the habit of standing still.” Since 2001, Stewart has been instrumental in establishing a joint program with England's Wellcome Trust, to create a meetings program in Cambridge modeled after CSHL's. Now the question was on what basis to bring the CSHL idea to Asia.

Stewart and President Bruce Stillman agreed about the major points. “Bruce felt strongly that total independence was the key. If we joined forces with a scientific society or state-organized scientific operation, it would likely have its own agenda; it would likely be intended as a spotlight for a single nation's scientists. That's not what we



Suzhou: bounding into the future while preserving an ancient past

The Dushu Lake Conference Center, like the high-tech “industrial park,” is something brand new at the edge of something very old and deeply venerated. The 10-square-mile Suzhou Industrial Park is just east of the old city of Suzhou, whose origins (and ancient city wall) have been traced to a time 2500 years ago, during the late Shang Dynasty. Despite the enormous growth in southeastern China in recent decades, Suzhou’s old town has been preserved, recognized the world over as a treasured cultural site. The city has long been among China’s most prosperous. Its location in the Yangtze River basin and along the path of China’s ancient Great Canal made it a center of commerce, including an important outpost of the silk trade. The city’s peerless gardens, framed by “moon-gates” (pictured above) that have been used as an important architectural motif in the Dushu Lake Conference Center, are among the World Heritage Sites listed by UNESCO. These classical gardens



were built by gentry during the Ming and Qing dynasties, and are a “must-see” for scientists attending meetings at the Center. The old city is equally famous for its canals and thousand stone bridges, which account for references to Suzhou as “the Venice of the East.” It is Suzhou’s ultramodern “satellite cities,” built on the periphery of the ancient town, that account for its present economic dynamism.

wanted at all. One of the things that makes Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory such an important force in science is its independence.”

Stewart was motivated by positive feedback he had received over many years from Asian scientists attending CSHL meetings. Like Maoyen Chi, many of them singled out the feeling of openness and camaraderie that they fostered. “The CSHL meetings offer scientists an opportunity to present their own work and get it critiqued, through immediate feedback from colleagues. This is incredibly valuable,” Stewart notes. “Our meetings are also famously democratic — people with decades of experience in their field can be challenged by grad students and postdocs. Our effort to involve young scientists in particular provides a powerful model, different from but complementary to the traditional, top-down model of scientific communication.”

A plan to take this idea to Asia came together with surprising speed in the summer and fall of 2006. In

August, Stewart and Chi met for a beer at the Blackford bar, some months after Stewart’s return from an exploratory trip. Chi shared his dream of locating a state-of-the-art meeting center near his native Suzhou, a 2500-year-old city of 6 million people located about 40 minutes inland by high-speed train from the coastal megacity (and traditional Chinese economic capital) of Shanghai, population 20 million. Chi had contacts in Suzhou whom he had reason to believe might welcome a CSHL-run meeting center.

Within the month, Chi and Chinese officials representing a sprawling development called the Suzhou Industrial Park, or SIP, were able to agree on the broad outlines of a plan. Bruce Stillman and Jim Watson thought well of it. In October 2006, Watson accompanied Chi to Suzhou to meet the SIP leadership. “Jim’s a huge figure in China, and I think the idea really captured his imagination,” says Stewart. “I liked the idea,” Watson says today, “because it is important that we know the best scientists in China and throughout Asia. We want to have exchanges with

them, including a role in training their postdocs. We can play a part in bringing young people in Asia to the frontiers of science."

By November 2006, an agreement of understanding had been signed. Stillman regards it as a good example of the Laboratory's "scientific entrepreneurialism," a means of propagating a democratic model of scientific exchange in a part of the world where science is growing faster than anywhere else. (see "An Asian hub," p.5)

SIP, which is no mere American-style "industrial park" but rather a burgeoning high-tech city of 300,000 built from the ground up over the last decade, agreed to finance construction of a conference center, stylish hotel accommodations and a grand ballroom, all accommodating 550 guests; an exhibition space for up to 300 posters; separate seminar rooms where breakout sessions as well as Banbury-style small meetings could be held; and a fabulous octagonal-shaped bar/restaurant — a social hub for the complex — projecting out into Dushu Lake. SIP, which is funded jointly by the Chinese and Singapore governments, provided CSHL with \$9 million in startup funds. In exchange for this sum, CSHL agreed



Lobby of Dushu Lake Convention Center

to create and manage a meetings and courses program for the new facility, a program CSHL wholly owns and has complete freedom in directing.

Both Stewart, who is president of CSH Asia, the CSHL subsidiary that owns the Suzhou meetings and courses program, and Chi, its CEO, are keen to stress, in Stewart's words, that "the program is not a U.S.-Chinese bilateral partnership." As Chi puts the case, "We call ourselves CSH Asia, and what that signals is our aim of making a home for scientists throughout Asia which happens to be situated in Suzhou."



The 550-seat James Watson Auditorium

The facility has space for 300 posters



It is “every bit as important to us,” says Chi, that scientists from Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Australia regularly attend meetings at the Dushu Lake Center “as scientists from the Chinese mainland.” He points out (see map, below) that Suzhou is a two- to three-hour plane ride from all of those places, save Australia and Singapore, which are, respectively, five and 10 hours distant by air. “The idea,” Chi says, “is to make a hub for biology, a pan-Asian hub, where the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory way of doing meetings — the scientific rigor plus the openness and informality, set against a backdrop of great natural beauty — makes Suzhou Dushu Lake a place scientists will want to come back to year after year, just as thousands of scientists make the annual pilgrimage to CSHL.” **Peter Tarr**



A swimming pool is one of many recreational features of the Center.



An Asian hub

From virtually a standing start, mainland China has rocketed over the last decade into the ranks of the world's leading producers of scientific and technical knowledge. In the life sciences, China's performance on a relative basis outstrips that of any other nation, based on a PubMed search: its scientists are publishing peer-reviewed papers in English at an average annual growth rate that has exceeded 10% since the year 2000, vs. less than 1.8% for the U.S. Interestingly, the five fastest “growers” for the period are all in the South Asia/Asia-Pacific region, the remaining four being South Korea (9.4%), India (7.5%), Taiwan (6.2%) and Australia. All of the cities shown in the map, right, are within three hours by air of Suzhou; Singapore and Sydney are five and 10 hours away, respectively.

