

Celebrating
JOHN H. HOLLAND'S
85TH BIRTHDAY

A Special Present to John from His Friends



Editors

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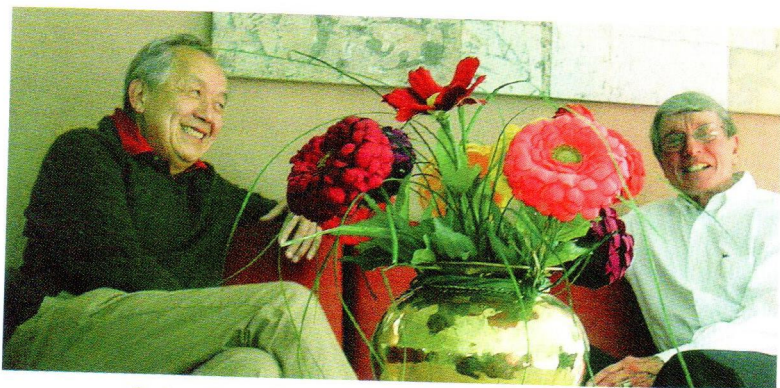
27 William S-Y. Wang

John and Me

John and I both did our Phd's in the 1950s at the University of Michigan. Our teachers, Arthur Burks and Gordon Peterson, were good friends. But we did not get to know each other well until an interdisciplinary Program in Communication Sciences was set up, and we were invited to jointly teach the first course in the new Program. For my half, I talked about natural languages to a group of bright-eyed students coming from very diverse backgrounds. I still have fond memories of sitting in on John's elegant lectures, largely on automata theory and other aspects of computation.

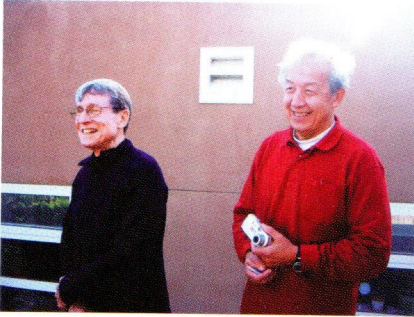
After I left Ann Arbor, we lost touch with each other. One day decades later, while I was browsing in Cody's bookstore in Berkeley, I was attracted by a little book called "Hidden Order: how Adaptation Builds Complexity". It seems a particularly cogent way of viewing how language emerged – from simple vocalizations and iconic gestures ~~step~~ of millennia ago building step by step into the remarkably complex systems we have today. I was overjoyed to see the author was John.

I couldn't be sure that John would remember me, but I emailed him anyway. This rekindled an old friendship, recounted in an interview reported in the Spring 2005 issue of the Santa Fe Institute Bulletin, from which the following photo is taken.



Scientists Reunite After Four Decades

“So,” the reporter wrote, “43 years after co-teaching the first course in a field that would one day become complexity science, Holland and Wang co-taught a course in language evolution at the SFI Summer School in Qingdao.” By that time I have retired from Berkeley and returned to China, situating myself in Hong Kong. John and I started to visit back and forth, sometimes at Santa Fe, and sometimes in Hong Kong, shown respectively in the two photos below:



I particularly like the one taken in Santa Fe because of the halo effect the sun's ray produced with my thinning hair. Both pictures show John with his broad infectious smile. As John said in that interview, “If we demonstrate that language can be learned with more primitive abilities, then that would change the way linguistic research is done.

It is an evolutionary perspective I strongly share. I could never understand how proposals of a ‘language organ’ can be taken seriously by anyone considering language emergence. In fact, I once joked about an “Organum ex machina” in a commentary for *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* (1984), since the proposals reminded me of the “Deus ex machine” used in Greek tragedies.

In recent years, we started a series in China, called Conference in Evolutionary Linguistics (CIEL), and John came to Beijing to give a keynote in 2012. We find our perspective shared by many, not only by colleagues at Peking University, who organized CIEL-4, and by colleagues in Hong Kong, who will organize CIEL-5, but by many friends in the West as well. As I write these reminiscences, I have been re-reading John's latest contribution here, “Signals and Boundaries: Building Blocks for Complex Adaptive Systems”.