“I was browsing through a bookstore in Berkeley and saw a book called *Emergence,*” says Bill Wang, research professor of language engineering at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. “I took it off the shelf and was surprised to see it was by John Holland.” This serendipitous instance initiated a reuniting of old friends and an important collaboration for scientific research.

Wang e-mailed Holland, who is an SFI External Faculty member and professor of psychology and computer science and engineering at the University of Michigan. “We started by comparing stories about our grandchildren and then the relationship became more and more substantive,” says Wang.

“Forty-three years ago,” relates Holland, “Bill and I were at the University of Michigan. We had the first appointments in what was then called the Communication Sciences Program.” At that time programs such as this existed only at Michigan and MIT. Together Holland and Wang designed and taught the first course in the program. What’s now called the Computer Sciences Program, has since become one of the leaders in the study of complex adaptive systems (CAS).

Not long after they taught together, Wang got an appointment at Berkeley. “He became well known in linguistics,” Holland says. Then time and distance took over, causing them to lose touch with each other for four decades.

After reuniting, they realized they shared many scientific interests. “Ever since that course with John at Michigan, I have been working at adapting ideas from evolution theory to linguistics,” says Wang. “Hence my joy at discovering John’s book.”

Holland went to Hong Kong, where a collaboration began, uniting his research in CAS with Wang’s work in language. “Many of the researchers in our program had heard of John and his work, so it was nice to have him in Hong Kong,” says Wang. At the time, Wang wasn’t new to the work of SFI. In fact he was already on an advisory committee for Murray Gell-Mann’s project on language evolution.

In the research, Holland and Wang are using CAS to redirect the focus of understanding language acquisition, removing emphasis from genetics and placing it on the process of learning. They’ve created a model in which the agents start with very primitive cognitive abilities. They learn, and adapt through doing so. “If we demonstrate that language can be learned with more primitive abilities, then that would change the way linguistic research is done,” says Holland.

This spring the work expanded with the help of a workshop at SFI convened to discuss “Language Evolution and Acquisition: Models, Networks, Robustness, and Diversity.” The workshop included Holland, Wang, and six other colleagues from around the world.

“The collaboration became even more interesting since some of SFI’s activities were beginning to blossom in Asia,” Wang adds. So, 43 years after co-teaching one of the first courses 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. They will teach together again at the 2005 school in Beijing.

“What I look for, in life and work, is fun,” says Holland. “And this has been really fun.”

—Lesley S. King