Good memories of Sigcomm 2013 in Hong Kong

DM Chiu, 2024/2/1

Recently, a colleague consulted me about some specific issues in organizing a conference. For this reason, I looked up old emails from organizing Sigcomm 2013 which was held in CUHK (our university) in 2013. Wow, that email folder has over 6000 emails! Plowing through these emails brings back good memories. In the following, let me go through some of the situations we faced and decisions we made. They may not be a big deal, especially for people who have organized conferences too, but it is refreshing for me to go over them and how things turned out.

First, the photos (https://conferences.sigcomm.org/sigcomm/2013/photo.php) from the conference are still online. I am very happy with the quality of these photos as they were taken by a professional photographer. There are a total of 498 photos, capturing not only speakers but also many attendees as they appeared in the audience, while chatting, at the banquet or other activities. If you attended the conference, I bet there is at least a 50% chance you find some nice picture of you in there. When we put the pictures online, we had a discussion regarding privacy; the decision was that we should post them, but if anyone requested taking their picture down, we will accommodate right away. We never had any such request in all these years.

One important goal we kept working on was to keep the registration fee as low as possible, while still striving for best experience for attendees'. To help achieve that, we decided to hold the conference on the CUHK campus. Although the campus is not centrally located, it is accessible by public transport (MTR) and have decent hotels near-by. Personally, I strongly advocated for the campus option, not only because it would give good exposure of my university to the Sigcomm community, but also because I believed campuses provide a much better ambiance for conferences based my personal experience. In hindsight, this decision brought a lot more work for us. We needed to book enough rooms, arrange lunch and coffee breaks; and find a room large enough to seat all attendees (we estimated at 500-600, but it turned out 777 registered and we needed overflow room), see photo of fully packed room. Besides

finding a large enough room, we also made special arrangements to ensure all people could access the Internet comfortably from all points in the room. It was a relief that we heard no complaints about network access. To achieve our registration fee goal, we also convinced our university to charge a minimal rate for the facilities, and negotiated with the banquet restaurant for a reasonable price. After all these efforts, we managed to set the registration fee at US$525, a relative low rate (I observe several editions of Sigcomm near that time charged US$650). The determination of the registration fee actually depended on our estimate of the number of attendees – we under-estimated by around 200!

resulting in a significant surplus for ACM Sigcomm.

The main social events of a conference are the banquet and the reception. For the banquet, we picked the Inter-Continental Hotel situated right next to the Victoria Harbor, one of the most central and nicest tourist spots. Although the price was around US$125 per person, it was a good deal for that venue. We also hired a band with a singer (see picture) to entertain during the banquet, which I think enhanced

the atmosphere a lot. The reception was held at the Hyatt Regency hotel near CUHK. They provided a spacious room for us, plenty of space for people to mingle. Another goodie we provided for attendees was an Octopus card with some stored money for each registered attendee (see the card I held in the picture). Public transport in Hong Kong is one of the best in the world, and this Octopus card make it easy to use public transport.

The biggest headache occurred after the conference started – a typhoon hit Hong Kong in the early morning of the second day of the main conference. Hong Kong gets hit by typhoons almost every year (mostly in summer time) so there is a standard system to rate their strength. When a typhoon is rated as "Signal Number 8" or higher (this does not happen every year), the insurance for various workplaces are no longer in effect so most workers are asked to stay home. This means the university had to pause the conference until the Signal turned below 8. To deal with this problem, we resorted to making the morning sessions (half day) run as parallel sessions later on. A bigger problem was the potential need to cancel the banqyet scheduled for that evening since it was a big expense item. I don't recall we bought any insurance, so we could take a big hit if the typhoon continued until the evening. This made me very uneasy. Fortunately, the typhoon signal was lowered around lunch time, so the afternoon sessions could resume normally, and the banquet was not affected. But due to the timing the lunch (on campus) had to be canceled. Since the cost was somehow absorbed by the cafeterias, we felt in all fairness we should return the money to the attendees (who needed to take care of their own lunch). Although it was a big hassle, we decided and did our best to refund some money (I recall US$25) to all registered attendees. At a recent dinner meeting with friends, someone who attended Sigcomm 2013 introduced me by bring this memory up.

While there are so many other interesting details that I can continue on and on, I think I better wrap up. In conclusion I must say that the emails reminded me foremost that so many people contributed so much to make the conference a success; and I am sure I did not thank them enough and wish to thank them again here (see some colleagues and students who helped are in this photo). Personally, it was a great pleasure that we hosted so many people at this conference; many were old friends (whom I may not have had enough time to greet and mingle with), and many attended the conference for the first time, and that is how they come to know me though I may not remember them. I have met several of them in subsequent years; when they brought up their good experience at Sigcomm 2013, it was most gratifying.