

World's leading astronomers meet in Taipei

By Sean Lin / Staff reporter

The directors of two of the world's top astronomy organizations — the European Southern Observatory (ESO) and the East Asian Observatory (EAO) — yesterday signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) vowing to enhance collaboration and exchanges in the field of astronomy.

At a meeting presided over by Academia Sinica in Taipei, EAO director-general and Academia Sinica research fellow Paul Ho (賀曾樸) signed the MOU with ESO director-general Tim de Zeeuw as a token of future collaborations.

Under the MOU, the two organizations are to pool and manage resources to bolster multinational collaborations, the scientists said.

The signature event also saw Academia Sinica Institute of Astronomy and Astrophysics director Chu You-hua (朱有花) sign an MOU with her EAO counterparts, including National Astronomical Observatory of Japan director-general Masahiko Hayashi, Korean Astronomy and Space Science Institute representative Young Chol Minh and Peking University Kavli Institute for Astronomy and Astrophysics director Luis Ho (何子山).

Chu said that the EAO, despite being a nascent organization, comprises four of Asia's top-caliber research institutes in astronomy.

Chu said that astronomy nowadays is no longer confined to "gazing at stars," but involves a high degree of technical support from other fields; for example, from mechanics and electricians, on ambitious astronomy projects.

Therefore, the EAO would seek to learn from the ESO — which celebrates its 51st anniversary this year — and seek to achieve the "lofty" goal of aspiring to its status as a global leader in astronomy, Chu said.

Zeeuw said that the ESO operates mainly in Paranal, Chile, where the organization's Very Large Telescope is located, but seeks to explore collaboration possibilities in the northern hemisphere, especially on Mauna Kea, a dormant volcano in Hawaii where the EAO's James Clerk Maxwell Submillimeter Telescope (JCMT) is situated.

He said that the ESO hopes to raise its current level of engagement in scientific projects related to JCMT and likewise hopes to work more closely with the EAO on projects regarding the Atacama Large Millimeter/submillimeter Array, a collaborative project between North America, East Asia and the EU.

The ESO last year embarked on a project to build the world's largest optical telescope, the European Extremely Large Telescope, which would span 39m and is scheduled to be completed in 2024, Zeeuw said.