

VISITING THE

A CELEBRATION OF CHILDREN AND CULTURE

Connecting science and culture makes each
fuller and more important in our lives.

By Anna H. Spitz

**Photos by Thomas
Veneklasen Photography**



MOON LADY:



The Mid-Autumn Moon Festival has been a special event in China for, some say, over 3000 years. This festival blends the celebration of the myths of ancient China about the Moon with the important harvest event in people's daily lives. It is a time when the Moon Lady of myth is said to grant wishes to those who send her their one-of-a-kind, unforgettable, never-heard-by-anyone requests.

The date of the Mid-Autumn Moon Festival is the fifteenth day of the eighth Chinese lunar month. The new Moon marks the first day of a Chinese lunar month. In 2006, the celebration will fall on October 7th, and people will celebrate the event throughout the world.

Since 1991, American families have adopted over 55,000 children from China. To many of these families it is important to foster a connection between their children and the culture of their birth country. *Southern Arizona Families with Children from China* (SAFCC)—a chapter of the national organization—holds festivals and other events throughout the year to bring Chinese heritage to life for our children.

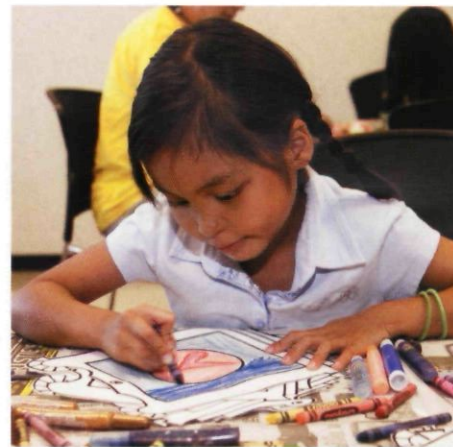
Chinese festivals are held on dates determined from the Chinese lunar calendar, but few of the parents or children know much about the scientific or observational basis of the dates. They know about the myths and stories but little about the physical world that these ancient myths seek to explain. Along with Moon cakes, the traditional lantern parade, and stories about the Moon Lady, SAFCC decided it would enrich our children's experience at the festival by letting them learn about the Moon as a physical object—we would view the Moon and provide materials that bring myth and observation together.

In 2005 SAFCC asked the Tucson Amateur Astronomy Association (TAAA) if their volunteers could attend the Mid-Autumn Moon Festival at the Tucson Chinese Cultural Center to provide close-up views of the Moon to the Festival attendees. TAAA is a well-established organization that provides a wonderful service to the community: with star parties for schools and nonprofit organizations, TAAA volunteers set up their telescopes and initiate kids and adults into the excitement of observational astronomy.

Although TAAA was skeptical that SAFCC really wanted a star party during a full Moon—when, according to most amateur astronomers, one cannot see any really interesting objects—we explained that the Moon was, in fact, the object we wished to observe. We described the connection of the Festival to the Moon and convinced TAAA members that we were not oblivious to the fundamental aspects of night-time observing—we really did want to observe that bright Moon!

Joining Myth and Science

Along with visits to the Moon Lady, families attending the Mid-Autumn Moon Festival in October 2005 observed the Moon through two telescopes. Paul Moss and Steve Marten



Before the festivities begin later in the evening, children enjoy making lanterns to carry in the lantern parade.



A beautiful part of the Mid-Autumn Moon Festival is the lantern display. Families bring lanterns to the festival and children make some of their own during a craft activity.



Parents and children join the lantern parade after dark.



Moon cakes are a traditional food for the Mid-Autumn Moon Festival. The cakes have fillings of sugar, sesame, walnuts, and other ingredients. They can be patterned with clouds, the Moon, or the rabbit.



The Moon Lady listens to special secret wishes of the children.

of TAAA showed many of the 300 attendees the wonders of Earth's natural satellite for over two hours. People returned for two or more viewings through Marten's Celestron Ultima 203mm Schmidt-Cassegrain and Moss's Vixen 102mm refractor. Indeed, the line for a look at the Moon was as long as the line to whisper special wishes to the Moon Lady. Both parents and children viewed the lunar craters, maria, and highlands—and none of the wonder or imagination of seeing a rabbit in the Moon was damaged by having craters pointed out and named or by learning about the physical reasons for phases of the Moon. Instead, the two ways of thinking, viewing, and interpreting—myth and science—complemented and strengthened each other.

To accompany the lunar observing, we provided a two-page handout about the Festival, *Mid-Autumn Moon Festival: What do you see when you look at the Moon?* This handout emphasized observations with a small activity for the children: they outlined various features on the Moon to form an object and, using photographs of the Moon, compared their object with tracings of the lunar rabbit and lunar toad mentioned in the myth. The handout also summarized the story of the Moon Lady that forms the basis of the Festival and provided some information about the lunar calendar and a little

about the Moon and its phases. This short introduction to myth, history, and astronomy started at least a few of the young observers on the path to connecting their heritage and their own “scientific” observations.

The Mid-Autumn Moon Festival is a great way to introduce children not only to Chinese culture and mythology but also to the long and important history of Chinese astronomy and to how much fun it is to observe the night-time sky. When science is tied to other interests in the children's lives, it broadens their experience and demonstrates the fundamental connection between them and the natural world. And given last year's successful Festival and subsequent calls for “more observing, please,” we are already planning more observing at this year's celebration of the Lady of the Moon. ■

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Telling of the “Lady in the Moon”

The Chinese legend of the Lady of the Moon is told in different ways and with name variations, but the basic story provided to SAFCC children is this...

Long, long ago an archer, Yi, saved the world by shooting down nine of the suns with his bow and arrows. As a reward the Queen Mother of the West gave this archer a magic potion that would let him live forever. The archer hid the potion until he felt himself worthy to drink it. One day while he was away, his wife, Chang E, drank the potion and flew through the

night to the Moon where she changed into a toad!

The Moon was a desolate place but a jade rabbit was there. The rabbit hummed and sang as he mixed magic ingredients into a potion of immortality—and he still does up to this day. As for Chang E's husband, he stayed in the Palace of the Sun most of the time but sorely missed his wife who lived in the Palace of the Moon. He visits the Moon on the fifteenth day of every lunar month when the Moon is fullest. And legend says that the Moon is so bright on that day because Chang E, the Lady of the Moon, and her husband, Yi, are happy to be reunited.

— A. H. S.



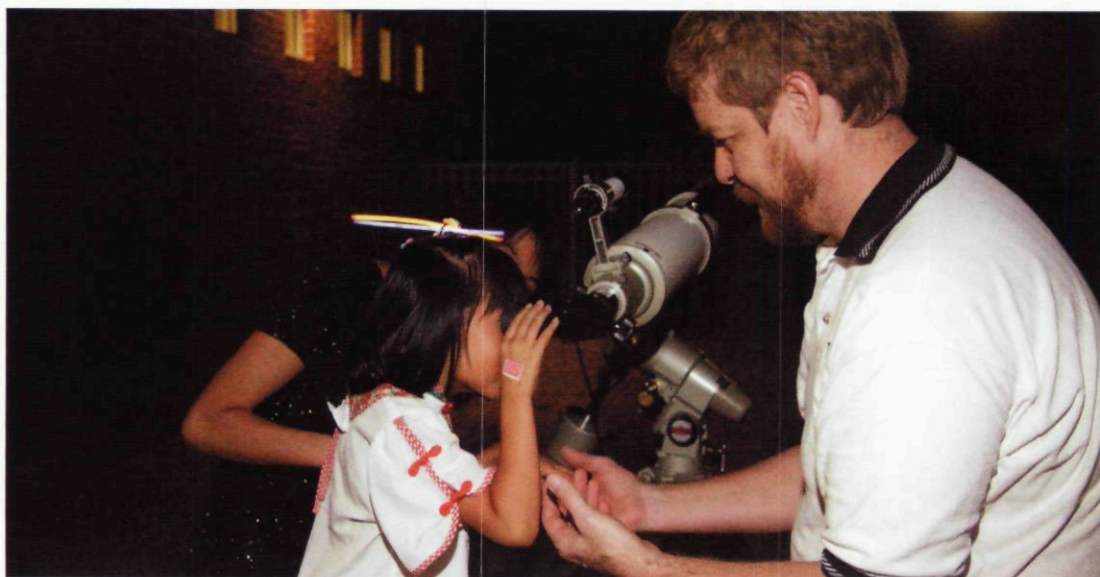


Left: The Moon Lady receives another special secret wish.

Above: A narrator reads the story of the Moon Lady to the children before the festivities begin.

Right: An astronomer from the Tucson Amateur Astronomy Association shows a child some of the Moon's features. The children (and adults!) returned often throughout the evening for additional viewing.

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