

Remembering Beijing

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Every General Assembly is remembered for something – in the past few years, Sydney for starting the International Year of Astronomy, Prague for Pluto, and Rio de Janeiro for the Strategic Plan. I thought that Beijing would be remembered for restructuring the Divisions and for the impressive progress we have made in implementing the Strategic Plan. But I was wrong! Above all, Beijing will be remembered for the unobtrusive but impeccable organization, the overwhelming generosity of our hosts, the smiling teams of volunteers, and the impressive CNCC.

Organising a GA starts more than six years in advance. First, the proposal has to be prepared, which involves a lot of background work. Then, once approved, the real work starts and it never stops, reaching a peak in the first few days of the actual GA. There is the National Organising Committee, the Local Organising Committee, the Professional Conference Organisers, the Convention Centre, which all have to blend together into a seamless team. This all has been done to perfection in Beijing.

In parallel, the IAU has to solicit proposals for the scientific programme, select the best, and plan the schedule, all the time maintaining very close relationships with the LOC and PCO, working together to make sure that everything is planned and all eventualities are covered. For Beijing we had a special problem: because of the high quality of the proposals we received, we decided that – quite exceptionally – we would have eight symposia while maintaining the normal programme of Special Sessions and Joint Discussions. This was not an easy decision to make, and was only possible because of the exceptional facilities of the CNCC, which offered us a wider range of rooms than most other conference centres could supply.

We also have to prepare, select and distribute the IAU grants. This year we assessed around 750 grant applications and gave out some 420 grants to a value of over 350,000 EUR. These grants are a vital part of IAU's programme: they enable people, especially young people or those from developing countries, to benefit from the "GA experience".

All this work has paid off. Everything that I have seen or



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heard says that the GA has been a great success, scientifically and organisationally. Our hosts astounded us all by securing the Vice-President of the People's Republic of China to make the opening speech at the Inaugural Ceremony, and we were delighted by the things he said, all highly relevant and encouraging to an astronomy General Assembly. The performances which followed at the Inaugural Ceremony were a breathtaking display of skill and artistry. Who cares if we overran the schedule by half an hour when something so memorable is on stage!

The science programme was outstanding. We were fortunate in having such excellent speakers for our four Invited Discourses, of course, but there were many other outstanding contributions, as the Proceedings which will appear next year will certainly show. We also managed the Young Astronomers Lunch, the Women in Astronomy day and many other special events.

All this made my task as General Secretary much easier, and I could concentrate on the business of the IAU and the plenary sessions of the GA. Much duller, but necessary!

I cannot thank everyone by name, much as I would like to do so, and so I thank everyone who had anything to do with the organisation and running of this wonderful GA. It has been a memorable experience. (This article was originally published in the 10th issue of *Inquiries of Heaven*.)