

Welcome address of IAU President Robert Williams  
21 August, 2012

Welcome to Beijing and IAU XXVIII General Assembly. Although the world economic situation continues to show stress, the science of astronomy is flourishing on many fronts. True, we are not immune to the negative effects of sharply reduced funding for projects and positions, yet our domain sees increased international collaboration, pioneering facilities and techniques in development, and significant discoveries that are changing the way humanity thinks about the universe and our place in it. Programs that the IAU has undertaken such as the United Nations International Year of Astronomy 2009 and the creation of the Office of Astronomy for Development in Cape Town have been hugely successful.

The IAU is going through a period of transition from an organization that historically has maintained a largely internal focus emphasizing meetings and events for its members to one that is becoming more involved in education and outreach to the general public. We are also making efforts to foster international collaboration on large facility projects. Several changes to the Statutes are being proposed that will allow broader input and oversight from members on issues such as membership and finances. And most importantly we are proposing for the future that scientific resolutions be presented and discussed at the GA and on the IAU website but that voting be open to all members and conducted electronically following the GA. In addition, the Executive Committee is recommending a change to the divisional structure of the IAU that should organize the divisions more in line with current major research themes in astronomy. As the first large astronomical meeting of this nature to be held in China the present General Assembly is a historic occasion for Chinese astronomy. It represents the tremendous growth in science in this country and increased funding that has enabled new projects and departments, and has attracted large numbers of students to undertake post-graduate studies in astrophysics. We will see evidence of this activity in the talks and posters, of which many will be authored by young investigators.

The astronomical community in China has joined together to create an excellent venue and program of activities that make the General Assembly an ideal place to exchange ideas. There is the old and the new. The ancient traditions and scientific advances of past dynasties have provided a solid foundation for China's innovative projects LAMOST, FAST, and AMiBA. You can experience excellent examples of both the old and the new in one place that you must visit while you are at the GA: the Beijing Planetarium. It combines the most modern facilities for astronomy education and outreach with a stunning collection of ancient instruments from the Han and Ming dynasties that long pre-date the instruments of Tycho Brahe on the island of Hven. Like many attractions in the Beijing area, it should not be missed. You should also take the opportunity to make the 10-minute walk over to the Chinese Academy of Sciences compound off Datun Road to visit the National Astronomical Observatories of China.

The "Inquiries of Heaven" daily newspaper will provide useful information for GA attendees. In addition to the daily schedule it will call attention to opportunities that you may find interesting, in addition to posting official information needed for official business meetings.

It is a pleasure to thank our Chinese colleagues who have worked to make the GA a success, and we look forward to a scientific program that will cause you to leave here full of ideas and enthusiasm.