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Annual event presents cultures of many lands

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— VALDOSTA — A whole new world and a new fantastic point of view are exactly what area middle school students experienced Friday during a field trip through the culture of Asia held at the James H. Rainwater Conference Center. Nearly 800 seventh-graders took tours of the facility, fully decorated with maps, flags, information booths and tables and various country exploration stations. Each conference room represented a different Asian country, and groups of students spent sessions inside the walls of China and Taiwan, Japan, Korea, India, Thailand and the Philippines, learning about the heritage and traditions relative to each specific region.

The third annual event was sponsored by the Valdosta Asian Cultural Association. Students from Valdosta State University's College of Education and of the Lowndes County High School Culture in Action Club assisted while instructing sessions ranging from Asian folk dance, to food preparation, to an Asian game village were held outside. Organizers were pleased with the turnout and look forward to continuing celebrations through the weekend.

"Several surveys were done, and the majority of school teachers wished to make this a social studies field trip for seventh grade; that's the time when students study Asia, along with Africa and South America. Each year the event gets bigger and better, and it really makes the children feel like they're out of South Georgia," said Deborah Davis, Asian Cultural Association secretary and vice president for community liaison.

As students walked under an arc to take "A Journey to China," tables lined the walls with informative project boards and display items. Some students took photos of the well animated porcelain dolls dressed in the little satin cloths traditional to Asia. Many stopped to touch ornaments, trinkets and toys that Asian children make by hand, while others read facts about Chinese dynasties, religions, ancient myths and the areas beautiful historical sites.

Lowndes High School Junior Felix Lin spoke with students as they took the educational journey, sharing interesting facts about his very own culture. "This is my first year with the CIA and I have really enjoyed this event. I think that Valdosta is a melting pot, and

it's a good idea to share different cultures with everyone so that people will learn to respect each other," Lin said.

Students were also able to gain a tasteful appreciation for the Asian culture as they created their own dishes, including Korean Kimbabs, Kimchi Salad and more. "My group made Vietnamese spring rolls, and it tasted really great. I think I could do it at home. It was pretty easy," said Echols County student Alex Segundo, 14. Outside, kids made and played a wide variety of games that are native to various Asian countries.

Rupa Gokal, 18, instructed a group of students in a festive Indian Stick Dance, of coordination, precision and speed. "The Raas Dandiya Dance is done during Navratri Celebrations in October. Today I'm teaching a six step routine, but it can be done with many more steps. As the dance continues, the music picks up pace and you have to keep switching partners. People began to step out as it gets faster and faster, until one remaining pair is left," Gokal said.

Students continued on their Asian Cultural Experience with an authentic lunch and later enjoyed The Bluestar Turkish Dance Troupe and Asian Academic Bowl before returning to their schools.

Organizers believe the event is fundamental to creating cultural awareness in the community for both youth and adults. The conference center tour and many other cultural event will continue through the weekend and the public is invited to attend. "We have a large Indian population here and there are so many people of Philippine descent. We see Korean churches, Chinese and Thai restaurants throughout the city. Still, sometimes it takes an event like this to make people aware of the strong presence and impact that these other cultures have right here in our community," said Julie Reffel, ACA vice president for education.

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