On Saturday October 13, 2012 UTSA’s East Asia Institute (EAI), in collaboration with the Institute of Texan Cultures, hosted “Family Day- Honor: Student Remembrances Through Altars.” The event lasted from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. and was comprised of several fifteen-minute lectures and numerous hands on art and craft activities. Over one hundred guests attended. The East Asia Institute would like to express our deepest thanks to the Japan Foundation Center for Global Partnership for a very generous grant to make the Japanese portion of the event possible.

Dr. Margit Nagy, Professor and Chair of the Department of History at Our Lady of the Lake University, delivered one of the several lectures, entitled “Gateway to Japanese Buddhism: Zen, the Goddess of Mercy and More.” This lecture served as an introduction into Japanese religion and related ceremonies. Nagy explained the breakdown of religions practiced in modern Japan, noting that the current population of Japan is 127 million people; of those 127 million, 83% identify as Shinto and 72% identify as Buddhist. “The numbers don’t match up, do
Tomoe Kumashiro, East Asia Institute’s Japan Outreach Coordinator gave a presentation outlining the tradition of Obon, an ancestral memorial service held from mid July to mid August. During the *bon* season the spirits of one’s ancestors are said to return home. A small fire called *mukae-bi* is lit outside of the house to guide the spirits home. People take time to visit and clean their family graves and place many offerings in front of their family altars. At the closing of the *bon* season a small fire called *okuri-bi* is lit to safely guide spirits back into the afterlife. It is common to see the *okuri-bi* placed inside of a paper lantern and released down a river. This is their way of saying goodbye to their ancestors. The biggest event of Obon is the *bon odori*, a traditional dance performed only during the *bon* season. Kumashiro showed several videos they?” she asked, before explaining that the truth behind this statistical anomaly is that Japanese pray to different gods depending on the situation. She continued to explain that Japanese homes often have both a Buddhist altar and a Shinto altar. Nagy covered numerous aspects of Buddhism in Japan, historically and in contemporary society, ranging from Buddhism’s arrival in early Japan, through the political impact of Buddhism in the Imperial court, to Buddhism’s modern day position in the Japanese psyche.

From left: calligraphy, paper lantern, Dr. Nagy gives a lecture on Japanese Buddhism, Bon-odori
showing the unique dances from various regions. She then explained the dance steps and had all the guests dance alongside her.

In the spirit of Obon, guests were able to construct their own chochin (traditional Japanese paper lantern). All materials were provided using a generous grant from CGP. Guests began with a wooden photo frame with holes pre-drilled into the corners. Using wood glue, four wooden rods were secured to the frame. As this was set aside to dry, the guests were given a chance to practice calligraphy and sumi-e, traditional Japanese ink painting. They learned how to use a brush pen to write their name in katakana, a form of the Japanese alphabet, as well as kanji characters possessing positive meanings such as, family (kazoku), love (ai), and dream (yume). Many guests produced beautiful landscapes symbolizing Japan using the sumi-e technique. Once they felt comfortable, they wrote and drew upon the rice paper that would become the walls of their chochin. After leaving them to dry, the paper was carefully secured to the wooden rods. As a finishing touch, a small battery-powered candle was placed into the center. This gave the lanterns an authentic feel.

With new understanding of Obon and how Japanese people honor their ancestors, the guests left with a beautifully crafted lantern and smiles on their faces. “Japan is such a country with old traditions,” says Crystal Escobales, one of the participants, “I really have a profound respect for their culture and customs. The lectures I attended were very informative and educational and the art and craft booths were interesting. What a great way for me to spend my Saturday!”

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