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Lt.-Gov. Phillip Lee, pictured Tuesday holding his Order of Manitoba medal, says he's proud to be a Manitoban and he's also proud of his Chinese heritage, a link that he will celebrate this weekend during the Moon Festival.

Chinese Manitobans prep for big festival

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By Carol Sanders

THOUSANDS of miles from their former home, Chinese Manitobans are gathering Saturday for the biggest party of the year.

The festival that began in China more than 3,000 years ago has withstood the test of time and globalization, said Zhibo Wang, an organizer.

"It's one of the most important, profound festivals for the Chinese," said Wang, who is helping to stage the Moon Festival at the University of Manitoba.

The mid-autumn celebration involves traditional performances and feasting on moon cakes — sweet, round buns with lotus root paste inside.

One thousand people are expected at the seventh annual event organized by the *Manitoba Chinese Tribune*.

When Manitoba's first Chinese-Canadian lieutenant governor arrived in Winnipeg nearly 47 years ago from Hong Kong, the community was tiny and people gathered in their homes. The festival here was smaller but the moon seemed so huge, recalled Lt.-Gov. Phillip Lee.

"Surprisingly, the moon (looks) bigger in Canada than Hong Kong," said

Lee, who marvelled at his first harvest moon sighting. "It's like 'when the moon hits your eye like a big pizza pie, that's amore,'" he smiled, citing the Dean Martin song.

But in Winnipeg, the round moon cakes turned into squares after being crammed into containers and shipped from Vancouver.

When he was a little boy in Hong Kong, children would parade around with paper lanterns in a variety of shapes during the Moon Festival.

"We'd sometimes compete," he said. "You have a big airplane? I have an elephant." Families who couldn't afford store-bought paper lanterns created their own.

"It was a lot of fun for kids."

Now that Manitoba's Chinese community has grown — to nearly 14,000 according to Statistics Canada but closer to 20,000, says Lee — the Moon Festival has grown, too.

"Now we're seeing some lanterns," said the multilingual lieutenant-governor, who also speaks Mandarin, Cantonese, German and Latin, and is learning French.

"I'm proud of my own heritage and my children are proud of it." But while Lee still gets into the spirit of the Chinese holidays, his grown Canadian kids

get more excited about Christmas.

"I call them bananas," he joked. "They're yellow on the outside and white on the inside... They'd rather talk about football and hockey than the Moon Festival."

Lee wouldn't miss the Moon Festival for the world, though.

And everyone is welcome, said organizer Wang. Usually, about 20 per cent of festival-goers are not Chinese, he said.

This year, they are marking the 60th anniversary of the People's Republic of China.

"It's a milestone," said Lee, who left Hong Kong long before the British returned it to communist China in 1997. Lee turned down an invitation to attend a "big do" for the anniversary hosted by Chinese government diplomats in Toronto.

"As a lieutenant-governor, it's not (appropriate) for me to participate in political functions," said Lee, who instead sent a congratulatory note.

Saturday's Moon Festival Social starts at 6:30 p.m. in Room 214-220 of University Centre at the U of M. Tickets are \$6 or free with a \$10 subscription to the *Manitoba Chinese Tribune*.

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