



CHINA LAUNCHES MANNED SPACECRAFT

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After 11 years of planning, China launched its first manned spacecraft into orbit on Wednesday, becoming the third nation after the former Soviet Union and the United States to send humans into space.

The Shenzhou 5, or "Divine Ship," departed from the launch center in the Gobi desert on its mission to orbit the Earth 14 times in 21 hours. China's first taikonaut, the Chinese word for astronaut, is Yang Liwei, a 38-year-old fighter pilot from an agricultural region of northeast China.

"The Chinese people have a long and distinguished history of exploration," NASA Administrator Sean O'Keefe said in a statement. "NASA wishes China a continued safe human space flight program."

The mission

After multiple satellite launch failures in the 1980s and 1990s, Chinese officials have chosen to keep the details of this latest mission secret.

However, in the days leading up to the launch, officials kicked off a publicity campaign for the event. As part of the campaign, an army song and dance troupe filmed a music video called "flying." In addition, the state television channel CCTV will begin a 20-part documentary of the space program in China.

Space programs have been a source of competition and national pride since the space race between the United States and Soviet Union took off during the Cold War.

Moscow led the space race in 1957 with the launch of Sputnik 1, the first manmade piece of equipment to orbit the earth. The following year, U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower sent a bill to Congress that created NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration).

In 1969, America seemed to have won the space race when Neil Armstrong became the first person to walk on the moon.

Building national pride

Wednesday's launch comes at a time of rapid political, social and economic change in China and builds on the momentum of Beijing's selection as the host country for the 2008 Olympics.

"China is hoping that its first spaceman will help focus the attention of citizens on China's greatness rather than on the downsides of the country's wrenching economic transformation," said James Miles, a British Broadcasting Corp. reporter who has covered China for many years.

In a country where 140 million people live off less than a \$1 a day, a successful mission could not only increase national pride but offer China a new seat on the world stage next to the most powerful countries.

"The goal is therefore highly political, and is aimed at projecting China above other regional powers, to an orbit where only the largest continental nations rotate," said Jean-Pierre Cabestan, a China specialist at the French National Center for Scientific Research.

Military implications

China's decision to keep the details of its space program quiet makes its neighbors nervous.

"China ... is displaying its confidence that it is Asia's No. 1 military power," said Testuo Maeda, a Japanese military analyst.

Maeda predicts that the Chinese launch could "hasten Japan's ballistic missile defense program," the Associated Press reported.

India is also concerned by China's advancement because of the hostility between the two nations over border disputes.

China has promised, however, that its space program's goals are peaceful.

"China has never and will never participate in an arms race of any form in outer space," said foreign ministry spokeswoman Zhang Qiyue.

International space programs

Despite the growing number of space programs across the world, the United States still controls 80 percent of the world space budget.

Japan has launched an unmanned spacecraft, while India is looking to send a probe to the moon, the BBC reported.

Because of the high cost of space travel, not all nations have adopted their own space programs. Fifteen European countries combined their resources to create the European Space Agency. Europe has its own launcher, the Ariane 5 rocket, and a fleet of planetary exploration crafts, but has not committed itself to manned missions.

If Wednesday's mission is successful, China plans to move forward with a mission to the moon, a space station and, eventually, a trip to Mars.

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