

Chinese Space History 1956 - 1978

While compiling the article in “Journal of Space Operations & Communicator” (Vol 17, issue 4, 2021) it occurred to me that in order to appreciate the recent fabulous achievements of the China National Space Administration (CNRA) a historical flashback would be appropriate.

I found a very interesting paper by Subodhana Wijeyeratne: “Yellow Star Rising: The History of the Chinese Space Program, 1956-1978” on academia.edu. The link for the complete paper is indicated below. The “Conclusions” chapter is presented here containing the major influences and developments in China’s space history.

Wan Hu is probably the most influential taikonaut who never existed. According to legend, the plucky Ming Dynasty official’s plan to make it to the heavens involved strapping 47 rockets to two kites, which were in turn attached to a wicker chair on which he sat. At a pre-arranged signal, forty-seven assistants lit these rockets. The outcome was, perhaps, all too predictable - Wan Hu ‘disappeared in flame and smoke, and was never seen again’. If he did survive he might take consolation in the fact that ‘a crater on the Moon is now named after Wan Hu’s story is almost certainly a fabrication, first appearing in print in Western media in 1909. Nevertheless, it is telling that the story occurs in China, for it was in China that the basic vehicle of all modern space exploration - the rocket - was born and developed, sometime between 850AD and the 13th century. Seven hundred years have passed since then, and China - now in the form of the People’s Republic - has regained its position in the upper echelons of the spacefaring nations. [1]



YELLOW STAR RISING

The History of the Chinese Space
Exploration, 1956-1978
Subodhana Wijeyeratne *)
published in 2016

*) Subodhana Wijeyeratne is an academic and science-fiction writer currently living and working in Tokyo. He completed his PhD on the history of the Japanese space program in May 2020, and is currently Assistant Professor at Tokyo Woman's Christian University, Tokyo. You can follow his latest work at subowijeyeratne.com

The History of the Chinese Space Program, 1956-1978

Subodhana Wijeyeratne

Conclusions

As described in the main text, despite the secrecy and obfuscation surrounding the early Peoples Republic of China (PRC) space program, it is possible to discern at least three areas of inquiry that seem to be ripe for rigorous analysis from a historical perspective.

>The influence of foreign know-how and materials, from both the Soviets and the Americans, both before and after the 1960 Sino-Soviet Split suggests that a serious reappraisal of the ‘done by us alone’ legend that has been vigorously forwarded by both Chinese agents, and certain Western historians, is long overdue.

>The utilization and compromising of the space program by Chinese Communist Party (CCP) figures as part of their struggles for power in the 1950s and 1960s also promises to provide fascinating and powerful insights into the practical consequences of those struggles in the realm of high technology, as well as bringing to light extraordinary stories of suffering, survival, and success against a background of near total social upheaval.

>Lastly, the use of the space program to articulate a vision of a war against nature, and a China rising

from a 'century of humiliation' to regain its position as a world leader in technology and political influence lies at confluence of art, discourse, and international competition that is at least as important as similar - more extensive - studies of the Soviet and American space programs. These are just three possible avenues into the exploration of the period from 1956 to 1978; and yet the brief overview provided in the main body of this paper alone is indicative of the richness of the stories lying therein, and the compelling human dramas associated with them. In short, the potential insight provided by studies of the early Chinese space program into the infant People's Republic of China are alone enough to make the exploration of these areas worthwhile.

Beyond this, however, there is a further consideration that recommends the study of the early Chinese space program. As mentioned earlier, space technology has revolutionized global communications in so profound a way that it can genuinely be called essential. Outside of the highly public successes of missions such as Rosetta, Hayabusa, and Mars Rover, our mobile phones, our internet connections, our MRI machines, and any number of modern technologies derive or rely entirely on the technologies developed and managed by space agencies. Indeed, it would be no exaggeration to state that the past two generations have witnessed a technological revolution on par with the development of reliable deep-sea navigation, the laying of telecommunications lines, or the expansion of railways.

Furthermore, the future only seems to bode further engagement with this technology, be it in the form of civilian applications such as zero-g medical laboratories, or the sort of militarization proposed by the US Air Force in their 2004 policy document 2-21.

To put this more simply, space technology is one of the most important fields of research in the modern world. Given that the People's Republic of China is now counted amongst one of its foremost practitioners - and may yet become the first nation to place a human being on another planet - it is surely of the essence that we understand how this came about, and what this may tell us about the future

Reference:

[1] Yellow star rising by Subodhana Wijeyeratne:

https://www.academia.edu/13168231/Yellow_Star_Rising_The_History_of_the_Chinese_Space_Program_1958_1976