

## CHAPTER 7

# THE *TAIKONAUT* AS ICON: THE CULTURAL AND POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF YANG LIWEI, CHINA'S FIRST SPACE TRAVELER

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In 2005 the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) sponsored the development of a new video game featuring heroes from Chinese history. The plan was to wean Chinese young people off their growing addiction to Western video games and replace it with something appropriate to Chinese values. Unlike American video games in which players slay dragons, fight aliens, beat up bad guys (or, more likely, be the bad guys themselves), in the new game "Chinese Heroes" players click on icons of select Chinese heroes to learn about their noble experiences and carry out healthy and constructive tasks like moving bricks and darning socks. An official with China's General Administration of Press and Publication, which sponsored the game's development by a Shanghai gaming company, hoped the game "will teach players about Chinese ethics."<sup>1</sup>

Five heroes are featured in the video game:

- Bao Zheng: an eleventh century statesman renowned for his battle against government corruption, strong sense of fair play, ability to tell truth from falsehood, and determination to mete out justice without fear or favor;
- Yue Fei, a twelfth century general who, with only 800 soldiers, defeated an invading army 500,000-strong. Before he left home to join the army at age 18, his mother allegedly tattooed four characters on his back which meant "Serve the country loyally," a constant reminder to protect China at all costs;
- Zheng He, the eunuch admiral of the Ming dynasty whose "treasure ships" sailed across the Indian Ocean to Africa in the early fifteenth century;

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1. Kou Xiaowei, an official with China's General Administration of Press and Publication, quoted in "Game On for Chinese Heroes," 29 August 2006, <http://english.aljazeera.net> (accessed 12 June 2006).

- Zheng Chenggong, a pirate who seized Taiwan from Dutch colonial rule in 1661; and
- Lei Feng, the People's Liberation Army soldier and faithful Party member credited by Chairman Mao for his cheerful selflessness and modesty.

How popular the game "Chinese Heroes" will become for the estimated 20 million Chinese now playing video games daily is questionable. It may not be serious competition for American video games such as "Grand Theft Auto," in which the starring role is played by an "unstoppable bad-ass" who wreaks havoc in a gritty Miami Vice-like environment and where the player can customize his character with every manner of tattoo, "jack" a cop's car, watch a pimp "beat down" a prostitute, and start an epic gun battle using a flamethrower, grenades, sniper rifle, Colt-45 pistol, AK-47, or sawed-off shotgun. The director of the Beijing Internet Addiction Treatment Centre, Tao Ran, has expressed doubt that Chinese Heroes will appeal very much to China's youth, saying, "Teenagers seek adventure and fulfillment in dramatic and skill-demanding games. If hero games do not focus on killing and domination, gamers will definitely not play them."<sup>2</sup>

One very powerful way that China has successfully combined graphic violence with its traditional appreciation for certain select types of heroes is in its martial arts movies. Notable within this extremely popular genre is the 2003 Oscar-nominated film, *Hero*, the most expensive Chinese film ever made. Set during the Warring States Period (shortly before the unification of China in the third century BC), the film tells the story of assassination attempts on the king of Chin by three legendary warriors who seek revenge for Chin's subjugation of their lands. The king justifies his actions as necessary for the peace of China, a justification that the sole surviving assassin (played by actor Jet Li) ultimately understands and accepts. Only a strong leader, the first "emperor," can unite all of China, and only through unification can the Chinese people ever escape civil war and find peace.

Western critics assailed the film's message as "totalitarian" and "pro-Chinese reunification" (vis-à-vis Taiwan), and for promoting a "sinister ethic that blatantly justifies the murder and repression of political opponents." That is why, critics said, the Beijing government so strongly endorsed the film—because the Chin emperor stood for today's rulers.<sup>3</sup> But other observers viewed the film differently, saying that it was a tale of sacrifice and love, one that embraced Confucian values and the ancient Chinese ethic that the very best people in society must care for the people first. As director Zhang Yimou said about his film, "The final assassin understands

2. Ibid. See also "A Clash of Cyber Cultures," *The Standard: China's Business Newspaper*, 24 September 2005, <http://www.thestandard.com.hk> (accessed 12 June 2006).

3. See, for example, Shelly Kraicir's review of the film, "Absence as Spectacle: Zhang Yimou's 'Hero,'" in *Cinema Scope Magazine* 5 (Spring 2003): p. 9.

that if he doesn't kill the Emperor, it's better for the people, because the civil war will end. The number one martial arts fighter decides not to kill the king, for the sake of peace."<sup>4</sup>

Ten months after the film opened in Hong Kong, the Chinese launched another "Hero," this time in the form of 38-year-old Yang Liwei. The rocket carrying the *yǎnhángyuán* (or Chinese word for astronaut) was a Long March 2F, one in a series of guided missiles named after the historic journey of 6,000 miles of 1934–1935 in which an army of 80,000 soldiers led by Mao Zedong, surrounded by the Nationalist army of Chiang Kai-shek, fled their bases in south China and escaped to the north, with only some 8,000 surviving the trek. The Long March became the central metaphor of Chinese revolutionary mythology and a source of inspiration for all subsequent Red Guards.<sup>5</sup>

After several years of speculation about the possibility of a piloted spaceflight by the Chinese, the launch finally came on 15 October 2003, 56 years to the month after the launch of the world's first satellite, the Soviet Union's Sputnik (4 October 1957), from Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center on the high Gobi Desert, some 1,600 kilometers northwest of Beijing—about as far off the beaten path as one can find even in a country as large as China. Yang Liwei's spacecraft, the *Shenzhou V* (Divine Vessel V), closely resembled the Russian *Soyuz*, which hardly surprised Western observers given that Chinese engineers had been working closely with the Russians since 1994 and had benefited from access to complete blueprints and the full-scale *Soyuz* spacecraft.<sup>6</sup>

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4. Zhang Yimou, quoted in Liza Bear, "Fighting for Peace (and Art Films), Zhang Yimou on 'Hero,'" 27 August 2004, *indieWIRE*, <http://www.indiewire.com> (accessed 12 June 2006).

5. On the Long March of 1934–1935, see Harrison E. Salisbury, *The Long March: The Untold Story* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980); Jean Fritz, *China's Long March* (New York: Putnam, 1988); and Benjamin Yang, *From Revolution to Politics: Chinese Communists on the Long March* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990). For a firsthand Chinese account of the Long March, see Changfeng Chen, *On the Long March with Chairman Mao* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1972.) On the Long March family of rockets, see Hormuz P. Mama, "China's Long March Family of Launch Vehicles," *Spaceflight* 37 (September 1995).

6. The best overview of the Chinese space program can be found in Brian Harvey, *China's Space Program: From Conception to Manned Spaceflight* (Chichester, U.K.: Springer, 2004). Harvey also provides a good bibliography. One of the most active publishing analysts of the Chinese missile and space programs is Great Britain's Philip S. Clark. In the U.S., James R. Oberg follows Chinese developments closely; several of his papers have appeared in *IEEE Spectrum*. See also "Testimony of James Oberg: Senate Science, Technology, and Space Hearing: International Space Exploration Program, 27 Apr. 2004," <http://www.spaceref.com>. See also Chen Lan, "Dragon in Space: A History of China's Shenzhou Manned Space Programme," *Spaceflight* 46 (April 2004): pp. 137–144.

Inside the *Shenzhou V* spacecraft, the *taikonaut*, as Western journalists had come to call a Chinese astronaut,<sup>7</sup> spent a little more than 21 hours in space, orbiting Earth 14 times before reentering the atmosphere and parachuting down onto the steppe of central inner Mongolia. The instant Yang Liwei made orbit over the Pacific at 9:10 a.m. Beijing time on October 15, the Chinese knew they had accomplished something remarkable: their countryman, Yang Liwei, had made the history books, joining the elite company of Russia's Yuri Gagarin and America's Alan Shepard as "first men" into space.<sup>8</sup>

Who was Yang Liwei? What was his background and training? Why was he selected for China's pioneering mission? How did Chinese society react to the news of his spaceflight? What sort of icon did Yang become; what sort of hero did he represent? Just as there is no way to fathom what the U.S. space program has meant to America without understanding what Americans wanted from their heroes—what they projected onto their heroes over the past 45 years—there is also no way to understand what the Chinese are after in space, or here on Earth, without understanding the iconography that has developed around their astronauts.

What is known about Yang Liwei in the West is what official Chinese sources have told us.<sup>9</sup> Yang was born on 21 June 1965, in northeast China's Liaoning Province, a major industrial region not far from the Yalu River that forms the Chinese border with North Korea. Yang's mother was a teacher and his father an economist, meaning that his family, by Chinese standards, was by no means humble or poor. According to official biographies, Yang had a "happy and tranquil childhood" and was "very intelligent and a good team leader of his playmates."<sup>10</sup> Excelling in mathematics and math competitions, Yang scored high on entrance exams and went to the best

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7. The Western term *taikonaut* blends the Chinese word for outer space (*taikong*) with the English word "astronaut." The term is not used by the Chinese themselves. Apparently the term was coined in May 1998 by a Malaysian journalist, Chiew Lee Yih, who first used it in newsgroups. The Chinese word term for space, *taikong*, literally means "great emptiness." In the Chinese language itself, the term *y'uhángyuán* ("universe navigator") has long been used for "astronaut." Official English texts issued by the Chinese government actually use the term "astronaut."

8. "China Puts Its First Man in Space," BBC News (15 October 2003), <http://www.news.bbc.co.uk>; "World Acclaims Launch," China Daily, 13 October 2003, <http://www.chinaembassy.org>; John Pomfret, "China Launches Its First Manned Space Mission," *The Washington Post*, 15 October 2003: p. A1; Brian Berger, "Shenzhou 5 Launch Introduces New Dynamic in Space," *SPACENEWS*, 20 October 2003: p. 6; Deborah Zabarenko, "United States Shrugs Off China Space Launch," *Reuters English News Service*, 22 January 1999; Philip S. Clark, "Shen Zhou 5—Flying the Red Flag," *Spaceflight* 46 (February 2004): pp. 54–60; Tim Furniss, "China Celebrates First Manned Orbital Mission," *Spaceflight* 45 (December 2003): pp. 488–489.

9. On what is known about the life of Yang Liwei prior to his *Shenzhou V* mission, see Brian Harvey, *China's Space Program*, pp. 2–14. See also "The Making of China's Astronaut," *Xinhuanet*, 17 October 2003, <http://www.chinaview.com>, and "First Chinese Astronaut Talks about Eight Years in Training," 24 July 2006, <http://www.spacedaily.com> (both accessed 12 June 2006).

10. "The Making of China's Astronaut," 17 October 2003, <http://news.xinhuanet.com> (accessed 12 June 2006).

middle school in his county. Joining the People's Liberation Army at age 18, Yang was recruited by one of the Chinese Air Force's top aviation colleges, where he earned the highest grade in every class he took. Upon graduation, he became a fighter pilot and was rated as an "elite" member of his Air Force division.

If there is a Chinese equivalent to "the Right Stuff," Yang Liwei had it. As an attack aircraft pilot, he demonstrated his crisis management during a very low-flying exercise over northwest China's barren Xinjiang region. Losing one of his jet engines, Yang, "with great calmness," radioed his situation, skillfully climbed to 4,921 feet (1,500 meters), managed to get his plane over snow-covered Mt. Tianshan, and landed "without hesitation"<sup>11</sup> even after his other engine had flamed out. Climbing out of the cockpit, dripping wet with sweat, amid cheers from his colleagues, Yang was greeted by his division commander who awarded him with an on-the-spot promotion.

In all, Lt. Col. Yang accumulated more than 1,350 hours of flying time in the Air Force. In 1996, from a pool of 1,500 candidate pilots, he was chosen for spaceflight training along with 12 others, and went to a special institute in Beijing where he passed a rigorous 30-course curriculum. "To establish myself as a qualified astronaut," Yang was later quoted as saying, "I studied harder than even in my college years and received tougher training than even that which made me a fighter pilot."<sup>12</sup> During the first two years of training, he reportedly never went to bed before midnight and rarely even left the training center. In a bid to improve his English, he often called his wife from his apartment in Space City, asking her to help him practice. So dedicated was he to training that his wife once found him moving rapidly in circles at home on a swivel chair. His training directors described him as "a sober-minded person with a superb capability for self-control." In a critical series of final simulations leading to his selection for *Shenzhou V*, Yang identified and remedied all the "faults" his instructors had set up for him. After each, when the instructor asked him whether he had made any errors, Yang confidently replied, "No errors at all!" A psychologist who asked him how he would feel if he were to fly a real spacecraft got the answer, "I'll be more relaxed than talking to you, so let me go for the flight!"<sup>13</sup>

The Chinese government tried to keep the identity of its first taikonaut a secret, but a few days before the launch Yang's identity was discovered and his picture published in the Hong Kong newspaper *Wen Wei Po*.<sup>14</sup> Originally, Beijing agreed to a live broadcast of the launch, but apparently lost its nerve at the last minute. Thirty minutes after *Shenzhou V* successfully reached orbit, the government's flagship

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11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. Harvey, *China's Space Program*, p. 2.

television station cut into regular programming to make the proud announcement. Televised replays of the launch quickly followed, beginning a day of saturation coverage in the Chinese media. Yang was shown walking out of his quarters in his flight suit and getting on a bus taking him to the launch pad. Waiting for him at the bus was the president of China, Hu Jintao, who made a few remarks about the great significance of the mission for China. In the U.S. space program, remarks made by astronauts at launch and during their missions—such as “Light this candle,” “The clock has started,” and “Godspeed, John Glenn”—became colloquial. The most widely reported remark made by Yang Liwei came when he met his president at the bus. “I will not disappoint our Motherland,” he said. “I will complete each movement with total concentration, and I will gain honor for the People’s Liberation Army and for the Chinese nation.”<sup>15</sup>

What the Chinese people seem to have appreciated most during the flight of *Shenzhou V* were Yang Liwei’s communications with his 8-year-old son, Ningkong.<sup>16</sup> In a Confucian society (which, of course, China has remained despite its communism), the father–son relationship is fundamental not only for the family but for all society and politics.<sup>17</sup> Whereas in the U.S. the most memorable in-flight comments from America’s astronauts have rarely had much to do with children or family, in China a great emphasis was placed on Yang talking lovingly while in space to his “dear wife” and “dear son.” What Americans seemingly most remember have been the vintage, off-color vernacular of our “space cowboys”—comments like Gus Grissom’s “No bucks, no Buck Rogers” or “The issue here is not pussy; the issue is monkey,” or Alan Shepard’s “Please, dear God, don’t let me f\*\*\* up.” These earthy types of American expressions, it seems clear, will never pass from the lips of any *taikonaut*.

15. Quoted in Pomfret, “China Launches Its First Manned Space Mission,” p. A17.

16. On the celebrity of Yang Liwei’s son Ningkong see Joe McDonald, “Chinese Astronaut an Instant Hero But Where Is He?” *Associated Press*, 22 October 2003, <http://www.space.com> (accessed 12 June 2006).

17. On Confucian values in modern China, see Thomas A. Wilson, ed., *On Sacred Grounds: Culture, Society, Politics, and the Formation of the Cult of Confucius* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2002); Honghe Liu, *Confucianism in the Eyes of a Confucian Liberal: Hsu Fu-kuan’s Critical Examination of the Confucian Political Tradition* (New York: P. Lang, 2001); Howard Giskin and Bettye S. Walsh, eds., *An Introduction to Chinese Culture through the Family* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001); and Theodore Hutters, R. Bin Wong, and Pauline Yu, eds., *Culture & State in Chinese History: Conventions, Accommodations, and Critiques* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997). On the persistence of Confucianism within Communist China, see Zongli Tang and Bing Zuo, *Maoism and Chinese Culture* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 1996); Edward Friedman, *National Identity and Democratic Prospects in Socialist China* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1995); and Deborah Davis-Friedmann, *Long Lives: Chinese Elderly and the Communist Revolution* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991).

In the Chinese press, a great deal was made about Yang as husband and family man. According to his wife, Zhang Yumei,<sup>18</sup> a middle-school teacher, Yang is a caring husband, and to his son, a hero. Following the launch, his wife said she would never forget the expression in her husband's eyes when she was about to be carried into the operating room for a kidney biopsy in 2001: "Just at the moment when I was to enter the operating theater, I saw the expression of extreme care, love, and regret like I've never seen. I felt as if a knife had pierced my heart."<sup>19</sup> During her recovery, Yang sat constantly at her bedside—that is, until time came to leave for more *taikonaut* training when, as a supremely dedicated member of the People's Liberation Army, he declined an offer from his commander to postpone it. Following his return from space, a picture showing Yang and his wife embracing appeared in virtually every Chinese newspaper. Its caption said that his wife asked her husband what wonderful things he saw in space. "I saw our planet," he told her. "It's so beautiful, like you."

From all across China came an outpouring of national pride over the spaceflight of Yang Liwei. *The People's Daily*, the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party, ran 100,000 extra copies that were quickly snapped up. In some towns, there were spontaneous parades and demonstrations. Schoolchildren exhibited their pictures of spaceships and astronauts. Hundreds of wall posters appeared, many of them combining themes of twenty-first century technology with more traditional styles of socialist realism. Postage stamps were printed in Yang's honor. *The People's Liberation Army Daily* trumpeted: "For China this is the beginning and there will be no end."<sup>20</sup>

A week after this flight, Yang, accompanied by his son Ningkong, opened an exhibition in Beijing of his *Shenzhou V* capsule, spacesuit, and parachute—an exhibit that subsequently made a road show across China. Yang's immediate political value lay in Hong Kong, where his visit, at the special invitation of the regional government, lasted a full six days.<sup>21</sup> For 155 years Hong Kong had been a British colony, until its sovereignty transferred in 1997 and it became a "special administrative region" of the PRC. Under the terms of the Sino-British Joint Declaration, China promised that Hong Kong with its 6.8 million people would enjoy a relatively high degree of autonomy until at least the year 2047. Under the "One Country, Two Systems"

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18. It is curious (though not in the least significant) that the name of Yang Liwei's wife, Zhang Yumei, is so close to the name of the director of the film "Hero" (and other celebrated Chinese films), Zhang Yimou.

19. Quoted in Pomfret, "China Launches Its First Manned Space Mission," p. A17.

20. Quoted in John Pomfret, "China's First Space Traveler Returns a Hero," *The Washington Post*, 16 October 2003: p. A22.

21. Andrew Brown, "China Astronaut on Charm Offensive," 1 November 2003, <http://www.cnn.com>; Joe McDonald, "China's First Man in Space Going Public," *Associated Press*, 24 October 2003, <http://www.space.com>; "HK Newspapers Hail Space Hero Yang Liwei," *XinhuaNet*, 1 November 2003, <http://news.xinhuanet.com> (all accessed 12 June 2006).



policy, Hong Kong would retain its own legal system, currency, customs policy, cultural delegation, international sport teams, and immigration laws. Late into 2003, however, the issue of unification remained deeply troubled. Morale in Hong Kong was low; its economy weak due to perceived government meddling; and officials of the new regime were so unpopular that the city had been hit by unprecedented antigovernment protests, not to mention an outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) that in one stretch had attacked 685 and killed 116 people.

Colonel Yang's visit was widely interpreted—more before it *began* than after it ended—as a cynical bid to promote Chinese nationalism by elevating Hong Kong's confidence and restoring the city's image. Several Hong Kong and Taiwan newspapers criticized the *taikonaut's* visit as a thinly veiled attempt to boost pro-Beijing political parties in the region's upcoming elections. Correspondents reported that many Hong Kong residents were indifferent to Yang's feat.<sup>22</sup> "It's nothing new—America did it years ago," a local businessman was quoted as saying. "I won't feel anything just because of his visit," admitted a downtown shopkeeper.<sup>23</sup> "It's just a gimmick," declared an accounting clerk. A 21-year-old female university student stated, "I always liked Britain better." As for Yang's spaceflight, she said it was being "blown totally out of proportion."<sup>24</sup>

But even before Yang arrived, there were signs that many people in Hong Kong were not so jaded. A survey by the Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups showed that 71 percent of Hong Kong young people felt excited and more proud of being Chinese by the news of the *Shenzhou V* flight. Support for his visit came from nearly 50 organizations in Hong Kong, not all of them so pro-Beijing, and his itinerary attracted people of all ages and from walks of life. For the first time in the history of Hong Kong's Science Museum, an exhibit was kept open around the clock, for four straight days, to meet the popular demand. When the *taikonaut* arrived, several thousand people waving Chinese and Hong Kong flags lined the streets. "It's worth the wait," said a 73-year-old man. "I never thought I would live to see the day that China could proudly stand alongside the United States and Russia as nations that sent a man into space!" "I think they should make a cartoon strip of Yang," said an 11-year-old boy.<sup>25</sup> "I just want to shake hands with Uncle Yang," said an elementary school student. A young female student picked by her schoolmates

22. "Hong Kong Ho-Hum over Chinese Astronaut's Visit," *Taipei Times*, 1 November 2003: p. 5; "Kids and Flags but Still No Genuine Cheer for Astronaut," *Taipei Times*, 2 November 2003: p. 5.

23. Quotes in "HK Welcomes China's Space Hero," BBC News, 31 October 2003, <http://news.bbc.co.uk> (accessed 12 June 2006).

24. Quotes in Min Lee, "First Chinese Taikonaut Visits Hong Kong," *Associated Press*, 31 October 2003, <http://www.space.com> (accessed 12 June 2006).

25. Quotes in Alan Low, "Spaceman Yang Gets Star Treatment," *The Age*, 2 November 2003, <http://www.theage.com.au> (accessed 12 June 2006).



to ask a question of Yang explained to a TV reporter, "I know it will be difficult, but I want to be the first woman astronaut of the nation."<sup>26</sup>

Chinese authorities hoped that the taikonaut would be an inspirational force for all Chinese—especially in Hong Kong, where the recent mood had been downbeat. "The moral encouragement that you have brought to the Hong Kong people is enormous," declared Hong Kong's chief executive, Tung Chee-hwa, at the Science Museum's ribbon-cutting. At Hong Kong Stadium, a capacity crowd of 40,000 gave Yang a standing ovation as he entered and was driven around the stadium in a golf cart. Inside was a party of local pop celebrities and movie stars, including Jackie Chan, with whom he sang a song. Jackie Chan asked the children of Hong Kong to take Yang as their model, stressing that success in life depended upon dedication and heartfelt effort.<sup>27</sup> Yang did not make a speech at the stadium, but the crowd was pleased just to see him in the flesh. "I'm just happy he is here," said one young man, "because he was brave enough to fly into space, and that courageous act has brought prestige for Chinese everywhere."<sup>28</sup>

In a country where the concept of celebrity was relatively new but quickly growing—including the likes of pop singer Gao Feng, NBA basketball player Yao Ming, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* film star Zhang Ziyi, fashion model Sun Na, Olympic diving star Guo Jinjing, and badminton superstar Lin Dan—it was clear inside the stadium that the people saw in the *taikonaut* not just celebrity but a man with a special aura or mystique. "Uncle Yang looks more handsome in person than on the TV screen," said a primary school student who came to the stadium with her father.<sup>29</sup> Following the event, the *Chinese Language Daily* commented, "Yang is not just a star. The welcome he received from Hong Kong residents exceeded that of any star. He is the superstar supported by Hong Kong residents of different age groups and different walks of life."<sup>30</sup>

Interestingly, the qualities of Yang's character that appealed most to the Chinese were not those connected to the glamour and glitz of the silver screen or pop music, but to characteristics more essentially Chinese. One Hong Kong schoolteacher said,

26. Quoted in "Hong Kong People Greet Hero Yang Liwei," *People's Daily*, 1 November 2003, <http://www.english.people.com.cn> (accessed 12 June 2006).

27. Immediately after Yang Liwei's visit to Hong Kong, Hong Kong's Moral and Civic Education Section of the Education and Manpower Bureau made available on its Web site a battery of teaching resources based on Yang's *Shenzhou V* flight. The title of the Web site material was "Perseverance and Commitment: Space Mission of Yang Liwei." See also "Yang Liwei's Space Mission Online for Moral Education," *The People's Daily*, 8 December 2003, <http://www.china.org.cn> (accessed 12 June 2006).

28. Quote in Low, "Spaceman Yang Gets Star Treatment."

29. Quoted in "Yang Liwei Meets HK Community," *Chinese Language Daily*, 2 November 2003, <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn> (accessed 12 June 2006).

30. See Low, "Spaceman Yang Gets Star Treatment."

“It is really an unforgettable experience to see Yang in Hong Kong, and I admire his modesty and calmness very much.” Newspaper article after article described Yang as “looking healthy and respectful and speaking in appropriate terms, with honest and cordial attitude.” In return, Yang spoke very gently and respectfully about his hosts. In brief remarks at the museum exhibition, the *taikonaut* said he was “deeply moved” by the warmth of his reception from the “big Chinese family.” At another event, he stated that “The Hong Kong compatriots make me feel at home. Their enthusiasm has made my heart beat faster than when I was in the spacecraft.”<sup>31</sup> Leaving the city after six days, he paid his final respects, “Hong Kong is much more beautiful than I had imagined. It is like a pearl.”

Before he left, Yang visited the Bank of China Tower, in the central city, where the bank president presented a check of a half-million Hong Kong dollars (about \$64,000 USD) to the China Space Foundation, in support of China’s research and development of space technology. Yang also went on a sightseeing visit to Tsing Ma Bridge, the world’s longest road-and-rail suspension bridge, which links the new Hong Kong International Airport to Kowloon and Hong Kong Island.<sup>32</sup> In both places, people saw the human embodiment of the Chinese space program juxtaposed with other vital symbols of China as a progressive force in the world.

Leaving Hong Kong, Yang Liwei next traveled to Macao, China’s second Special Administrative Unit, whose sovereignty had transferred from Portugal to Beijing in 1999. Some of Macao’s problems in 2003 were different from Hong Kong’s—notably involving labor unrest due to economic transformations that had transformed the oldest European colony in China from a tiny fishing village with gambling dens into a well-established tourist spot with huge, modern casinos. But, as with Hong Kong, national unification under Beijing’s leadership was the overarching concern. A visit from the new Chinese hero might help.

During a two-day visit, Yang visited several of Macao’s historic landmarks and then met for an entire afternoon with 1,000 students and teachers, answering questions. He visited the recently installed Macao Garrison of the People’s Liberation Army and attended a luncheon hosted by the garrison. As a result of those two days, an ad hoc consortium in Macao raised more than 14 million *patacas* (about \$1.75 million USD), for the China Space Foundation—an organization that promotes China’s space industries but which is not to be confused with the China National Space Administration, the counterpart to America’s NASA. Most of this money came from “political and business dignitaries” (Macao’s chief executive was reported to have made a personal contribution of 300,000 *patacas*), but some of it (how much was not reported) came from students and common folks. According

31. Quoted in “Yang Liwei Meets HK Community.”

32. “China’s First Spaceman Tours Hong Kong,” *Xinjuanet*, 2 November 2003, <http://www.pladaily.com.cn> (accessed 12 June 2006).

to Beijing, this sizeable donation from the 450,000 people residing in the Macao Special Administrative Region “embodied a strong sense of patriotism of the Macao compatriots.” On a per capita basis, the gift represented a donation of 31 patacas (or \$4 USD) for every resident. To put that into perspective, if every American today gifted \$4 to the U.S. space agency, NASA would cash a check for some \$1.2 billion.<sup>33</sup>

Leaving Macao, “Great Hero Yang” next stopped in the northern coastal metropolis of Tianjin, the largest open-water seaport in North China, which, along with Beijing, Shanghai, and Chongqing constitutes one of the PRC’s four administrative municipalities. Why Tianjin after Hong Kong and Macao? Perhaps it was because Tianjin had been one of the places slapped with a travel advisory by the World Health Organization for its SARS outbreak a few months earlier. Some of the most violent protests against locating SARS clinics in local communities had taken place in Tianjin, and it may have been that Beijing wanted a visit from the *taikonaut* to rejuvenate the city’s spirit. It may also have had something to do with the fact that Tianjin is the center for many of China’s pillar industries: machinery, electronics, chemicals, and metallurgy.

The impact of Yang Liwei’s historic spaceflight ranged far beyond the first three spots strategically selected for his immediate post-flight tour. It triggered nothing less than a nationwide frenzy—what one Western observer called a “flowering of patriotic kitsch.” In Shanghai, an estimated half-million people queued in freezing conditions to see China’s first astronaut. At a high profile rally in Beijing, Yang was conferred the title of “Space Hero.” A decree issued by the General Political Department of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army instituted Yang as a “model” for all Chinese soldiers. The decree ordered all members of the PLA and the Chinese People’s Armed Police to learn from Yang and his “heroic achievement.” “Military activities in various forms should be conducted to study the spirit of the astronauts,” the decree said.<sup>34</sup>

One of the most interesting things that happened after the *Shenzhou V* flight was the immediate commercialization of Yang’s name. Everything from rice to milk to action figures quickly bore the *taikonaut*’s image, name, or title.<sup>35</sup> The Chinese government tried to put a stop to this by trademarking and copyrighting Yang’s name and likeness, but with limited effect.<sup>36</sup> Even Yang’s home county in northeast China got into the act. Trying to cash in on his fame, Suizhong county leaders registered his name as a trademark for local produce, selling “Great Hero Yang” lettuce and cabbage and renaming a special white pear after him.

33. “China’s Space Hero Visits Hong Kong Garrison,” *PLA Daily*, 5 November 2003, <http://www.english.chinamil.com> (accessed 12 June 2006).

34. “China’s First Astronaut Crowned ‘Space Hero,’” *Xinhuatnet*, 7 November 2003, <http://www.chinaview.com> (accessed 12 June 2006).

35. Sangwon Suh, “Hong Kong: Selling Chinese Milk and Patriotism,” *International Herald Tribune*, 9 March 2004, <http://www.ihf.com> (accessed 12 June 2006).

36. Barry Gottlieb, “Don’t Touch That Name,” *Alternet*, 28 October 2003, <http://www.alternet.org> (accessed 12 June 2006).

At one point Beijing felt it had to put him on ice for a while, to temper the individual side of the achievement which it at first had been aggressively promoting. Commenting on Yang's public absence, a professor of public policy at Qinghua University in Beijing said, "It is normal that Yang Liwei has been regarded as a national hero and a good example for the young to learn from." However, "[T]he government should make sure there aren't excessive reports about one individual, because behind the success there was a whole project and system supporting the mission." "Yang Liwei's name will long be recalled," said a message posted on a Web site run by the Party newspaper, *People's Daily*, "while nobody will talk about the politicians!"<sup>37</sup>

But in the spring of 2004 the attention on "Great Hero Yang" again heightened when the *taikonaut* toured the U.S. In New York, he met with Secretary-General of the United Nations Kofi Annan and presented two U.N. flags he had carried with him on *Shenzhou V*. In Washington, Yang visited the office of Florida Senator Bill Nelson, the only serving member of Congress to have flown in space; while there, he also met Apollo 11 astronaut Buzz Aldrin. Yang toured the Kennedy Space Center, met Mickey Mouse at Disney World,<sup>38</sup> and got a VIP's view of the Johnson Space Center in Texas. Yang's American tour was widely reported in the Chinese press and was even shown on Chinese television.

What seems clear is that Yang's hero status signified some sort of sea-change in Chinese society and politics, because such publicity for a living person had been almost unknown in China's communist system prior to Yang. China had lauded "national martyrs" such as Wang Wei, the fighter pilot who died in a 2001 collision with a U.S. Navy plane, but when looking for people to serve as communist "models," the party usually picked plumbers and bus drivers for brief fame as "model workers." It has tried hard not to celebrate the cult of any individual other than leaders of the regime.

But there was Yang after his spaceflight, an instant hero, an icon, lionized in the state-run press not only as the country's first person in space but also as an elite pilot, a star student, Communist Party member, devoted family man, and national treasure. Yang's was an image crafted seemingly for a ruling party in need of a high-tech hero to bolster Chinese nationalism and pep up its own reputation—the same party whose very existence depended on the *group* being more important than any *individual*, and whose power often depended on its leaders hogging the spotlight.

Compared to China's bland, group-oriented leadership, Yang apparently had struck an extraordinarily responsive chord. Even his 8-year-old son became a celebrity, showing up over and over again in the Chinese media. On one occasion, party officials visited his school and honored his class with the honorary title "Space Squadron." Standing beside

37. Quoted in McDonald, "Chinese Astronaut an Instant Hero But Where Is He?" *Associated Press*, 22 October 2003.

38. "China's First 'Taikonaut' Rides Mission SPACE at Epcot, Walt Disney World in Florida," Disney Press Release, 28 May 2004, <http://www.hongkongdisneyland.com> (accessed 12 June 2006).

39. Quoted in McDonald, "Chinese Astronaut an Instant Hero," *Associated Press*, 22 October 2003.

a model rocket, young Ningkong gave a speech praising his father's accomplishment. "People asked me if I was afraid about Daddy going into space and I said 'not a bit,' because I knew that China's space technology was very advanced and Daddy was really awesome," he said. "I want to be like Daddy and travel to outer space some day."<sup>39</sup>

Whether or not Yang Liwei's son ever travels to space, it seems more and more clear that other Chinese youth of his generation will be doing exactly that—to orbit, to a Chinese space station, and perhaps to the Moon and to Mars. Though impossible for any Western analyst to predict with confidence what the Chinese will do next in space, or when they will do it, it seems clear from the public reaction to the October 2003 *Shenzhou V* flight that the Chinese people are excited by their prospects in space—excited in some ways that Beijing did not fully anticipate and could not fully control. Interestingly, when the two-man crew of *Shenzhou VI* flew into space in October 2005, the government essentially hid those *taikonauts* from view. There were a few celebratory events in Hong Kong and China, but nothing like Yang Liwei's road show, over which the government felt for a time that it had lost control.<sup>40</sup>

Whether Yang's visits to Hong Kong and Macao effectively served the nationalistic and political purposes Beijing had in mind is not so certain. Chinese officials commented at the time that they hoped his visits would instill pride for the larger "Motherland" among the residents of China's two Special Administrative Regions, but although the events with Yang sold out and were hugely popular, they do not seem to have had exactly the desired effect. Indeed, people living in those recently transferred sovereignties celebrated the *taikonaut* but without associating him all that much with the Beijing government or by warming to the mainland's way of life.

Evidence of this dissonance can be seen in the reaction to the subsequent announcement that the Chinese national anthem and a 45-second video featuring Yang and Olympic diving star Guo Jinjing were to be broadcast on Hong Kong's Chinese-language TV stations every night. Co-produced by Hong Kong's Committee on the Promotion of Civic Education and its Commission on Youth, the video (the soundtrack of which was *The March of the Volunteers*, the Chinese national anthem) aimed at "enhancing the sense of national unity." But critics in Hong Kong asked, "Does the government really believe that civil awareness can be raised by broadcasting the national anthem? Following this logic, will the government increase the number of times the video is shown if they believe people's civil awareness is not high enough?" One Hong Kong political commentator remarked, "People will only treat it as propaganda."<sup>41</sup>

40. On *Shenzhou VI*, see Edward Cody, "China Sends 2nd. Manned Spacecraft Into Orbit," *The Washington Post*, 12 October 2005: p. A2; Guy Gugliotta, "China Keeps Reaching for the Stars," *The Washington Post*, 15 October 2005: p. A12; and "Astronauts' Safe Return Sparks Big Celebrations," *China Daily*, 17 October 2005, <http://english.sina.com/china> (accessed 12 June 2006).

41. Quotes in Martin Wong, "Hong Kong: National Anthem to be Broadcast Before News," *South China Morning Post*, 1 October 2004, <http://www.asiamedia.ucla.edu> (accessed 12 June 2006); "Hong Kong: Chinese National Anthem Video Draws Fire," *South China Morning Post*, 7 October 2004: p. 1.

The effects of Yang's visits, then, were not exactly what Beijing was after; rather, the effects are best understood as a cascade of unintended consequences that may, if examined carefully, tell us something very important about how China has been changing, and will continue to change, as the twenty-first century heirs to the "Middle Kingdom" move out slowly but surely into exploring the universe.<sup>42</sup>

It would be prudent, especially for those whose heritage is not Chinese, to be extremely cautious in drawing conclusions about what the PRC might do in the future in terms of space exploration, based on what we think we know about China's past. One of the principal lessons of Chinese history that has been related over and over again in the West concerns the overseas voyages of Admiral Zheng He, one of the heroes of the PRC's new video games. As the lesson goes, a Confucian faction, after gaining control over the Ming court in the early fifteenth century, put an abrupt halt to the grand naval expeditions. The conservatives felt that "barbarian" nations offered little of value to add to the prosperity already present in the Middle Kingdom, and, anyway, it was improper for decent Chinese to go abroad while their parents were still alive. Western historians have speculated on how differently world history might have turned out had the Ming emperors sustained a vigorous colonial policy instead.

Advocates of a vigorous American human spaceflight program have made a similar object lesson of China's turning away from foreign ventures: by withdrawing from exploration, American society, too, will stagnate and open itself to exploitation by others. Space enthusiast Robert Zubrin, in his 1999 book *Entering Space*, declared:

By accepting the challenge of the outside world, Western civilization blossomed outward to dominate the globe. In contrast, the grand Chinese civilization grew demoralized in its stagnation and implicit acceptance of inferior global status and decayed, ultimately to be completely disrupted and remade by expansive Western influences.

Only twenty-five years ago, the United States, following in the footsteps of the Ming emperors, abandoned its own pioneering program of space exploration. At that time, American leaders could console themselves with the equivalent of the advice of the Ming court bureaucrats—exploration is too expensive, and nothing of value exists beyond what is familiar.

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42. Another bellwether of the underlying changes taking place in China today may be seen in the newest Chinese history textbooks being introduced into some schools in Shanghai. Instead of straight-jacketing students with texts based in communist ideology and the teachings of Mao, the emphasis of the new textbooks is on producing innovative thinking and preparing students for global discourse. Not that history and politics have been completely disentangled; far from it. But the new textbooks reflect a new emphasis, one that is indicative of what one of its authors, a Shanghai scholar, calls a sea-change in thinking about what students need to know. See Joseph Kahn, "Where's Mao? Chinese Revise History Books," *The New York Times*, 1 September 2006.

“Now we know better,” Zubrin has insisted. “The universe has presented us with its challenge. To remain who we are, we must accept. We must enter space.”<sup>43</sup>

But Zubrin's analysis and others like it, which suggest there is something *implicit* in the Confucian mindset and within the social order of China's “inner space” that ultimately works against exploration of “outer space,” may be fallacious. Rather than any inherent Chinese cultural inertia favoring the familiar and avoiding the unexpected, perhaps the underlying factor forcing China's Ming emperors to withdraw from their foreign ventures was something quite different, and very particular, historically speaking. For example, in his 2005 book, *Why Geography Matters*, Michigan State University geography professor Harm de Blij argued that, just as the Ming were poised to round the Cape of Good Hope and enter the Atlantic, “disaster struck at home.” A geological event, a “Little Ice Age” in north China, resulted in major famine and social disorder. The Ming rulers were forced to end their maritime expeditions, ordering the country's shipyards to build only barges that could navigate China's internal waterways with cargoes of rice. If the environmental crisis had not occurred, China might very well have become the world's dominant colonial power.<sup>44</sup>

It thus seems inappropriate, if not foolish, to believe that anything innate in the country's historical character will stop China from becoming one of the world's predominant space powers. If the iconography surrounding *taikonaut* Yang Liwei is any sort of reliable indicator, Chinese society is already well on its way toward successfully mixing its traditional Confucian values, communist ideology, and drive for economic and high-tech industrial competitiveness into an effective recipe for an expansive program of human spaceflight.

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43. Robert Zubrin, *Entering Space: Creating a Spacefaring Civilization* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 1999), p. xi. For more from Zubrin on the Mings' turning away from overseas exploration, see pp. 18–20.

44. Harm de Blij, *Why Geography Matters: Three Challenges Facing America: Climate Change, the Rise of China, and Global Terrorism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 78–79.



