Orgy of nationalist propaganda follows Chinese manned space flight

John Chan
24 October 2005

The Beijing leadership has exploited the return of China's second manned spacecraft Shenzhou VI to earth last Monday to saturate the media with hymns of praise to the glories of China's technical and economic achievements.

For over a week, the state-controlled media bombarded the public with extensive coverage of the five-day mission. Comments, greetings and photos from the orbiting astronauts were splashed throughout newspapers, television and the Internet to mark this "historic moment" in China's "national rejuvenation".

The landing in the northern grasslands of Inner Mongolia was broadcast live on television. As soon as the space vehicle touched down, the two astronauts—Fei Junlong and Nie Haisheng—were greeted with flowers and cheers. In carefully scripted comments, Nie declared: "We're grateful for the deep love and concern by all Chinese people, [including] the Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan compatriots."

The two astronauts will no doubt be transformed into political vehicles for nationalist propaganda. The first Chinese in space, Yang Liwei, was made a national hero after his flight in October 2003. He was dispatched to Hong Kong later that month in an effort to boost the discredited Beijing-backed administration headed by Tung Chee-hwa following a huge protest against planned anti-subversion laws.

Commenting on the latest space venture, official Xinhua news agency declared: "At this moment history is returning dignity and sanctity to the Chinese nation. In memories of the not-too-distant past, we were poor, in darkness and endured the bullying of imperialist powers. Sons of China, with their thousands of years of civilisation, were called the sick man of Asia.... Today an independent, self-sufficient, constantly strengthening China has, like a miracle, become one of a handful of countries able to make the dream of spaceflight a reality."

In its efforts to promote China's achievement, Beijing declared that the mission had been "made in China" from start to finish. In fact, the Shenzhou capsule is a modified version of Russian Soyuz space vehicle developed in the late 1960s as part of an agreement to purchase Russian space technologies. The Chinese astronauts received their initial training in Russia in the 1990s.

Similarly, the claim that China is "independent, self-sufficient" is an illusion. Like the Shenzhou, Chinese economic and technical development is largely derivative. China functions as a huge cheap labour platform for the global economy and is completely dependent on foreign capital and its associated imported technologies. Exports and imports now account for 75 percent of China's GDP and it is the third largest trading nation in the world.

For millions of Chinese workers, "made in China" means subsistence wages, atrocious conditions and political repression. On October 7, armed police attacked thousands of laid-off workers in Chongqing protesting against the corrupt sale of a state-owned plant. Two workers were killed.

The spacecraft was launched on October 12, a day after a major Communist Party conference in Beijing discussed its next five-year plan. The meeting was preoccupied with the deepening gap between rich and poor, rural poverty, mass unemployment, resentment of the lack of healthcare, investment bubbles, the inefficient use of energy and large-scale pollution.

The campaign surrounding the $US2.3 billion manned spaceflight is clearly aimed at boosting the Beijing bureaucracy and diverting attention from the country's deepening political and social tensions. The

© World Socialist Web Site

patriotic appeals are directly aimed at layers of the middle class, whose interests are bound up with the expansion of Chinese capitalism.

In a speech at the space control centre, Wu Bangguo, No 2 in the party hierarchy, stressed the political importance of the space mission, saying: “This will further improve the country’s international status and national strength, and will help to mobilise its people to rally around the Communist Party and work harder for the future of the country.”

The propaganda represents a shift. It is worth recalling that in 1970, amid boiling political and social tensions created by the so-called Cultural Revolution, Mao Zedong used China’s limited resources to launch its first satellite—Dongfanghong or “The East is Red”—atop a “Long March” rocket. The very names were designed to support Mao’s false claim to be building socialism in “Red China”.

Today, 35 years later, the Stalinist regime has dumped its socialist pretensions and openly embraced the capitalist market. The name of the latest spacecraft—Shenzhou or “Divine Vessel”—indicates the ideological shift. It is an appeal to the mystical and mediaeval philosophies that underpinned China’s past claim to be the Celestial Empire. China’s space programs are no longer hailed as a contribution by socialism to mankind’s progress, but the means for achieving national prestige, commercial interests and military power.

The manned spaceflights are an advertisement for the Chinese space industry, which is seeking to gain a significant slice of the lucrative international market for commercial satellite launches by offering cut rate prices. Beijing is also looking for other economic and technological benefits.

Hu Wenrui, a scholar from the Chinese Academy of Sciences, told Xinhua: “For example, China needs 2 billion tonnes of coal each year. If we could raise the fuel efficiency of coal by only 0.1 percent based on space experiments, we would make profits of 800 million yuan annually at the price of 400 yuan each tonne.”

Beijing has had proposals for manned space flight since the 1970s, but it only formulated its plans after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Faced with threats from the US, Beijing could not afford to be left out of the space race with all of its potential military applications. As the European Union and even India and Brazil embarked on ambitious programs, China followed suit. Following the latest flight, Beijing announced plans for a moon landing and the establishment of a Chinese space station within the next decade.

Beijing insists that its space endeavours are purely for peaceful purposes. But like every other country, China’s program is closely linked to military purposes. China established its own satellite-based system for precise navigation in 2003 to provide its military with the geo-positioning capabilities long available to the American armed forces.

It is quite possible that Shenzhou VI engaged in research related to military activities. Voicing Washington’s fears, Philip Saunders, from the Pentagon-linked Institute for National Strategic Studies, told CNSNews.com that China’s “improved space technology could significantly improve Chinese military capabilities. China may also seek to offset US military superiority by targeting US space assets.”

The Bush administration has made clear that it intends to maintain its clear advantage in every military arena, particularly in space. The US already uses satellites for reconnaissance and precision positioning. It is planning to develop an anti-ballistic missile system and is conducting extensive research into warfare from space and in space. Like other countries, China is responding.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site