

The Mystery of the Missing Godfather: Civil-Military Relations and the *Shenzhou-5* Manned Space Mission

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Introduction

On October 15, 2003, China launched *Shenzhou-5*, its first manned space mission. Yang Liwei, a 38-year-old lieutenant colonel in the People's Liberation Army (PLA), orbited the Earth 14 times over the course of 21 hours, safely landing in Inner Mongolia. While China had pursued manned space programs in the Mao era,¹ former president Jiang Zemin is credited with reviving the program in a speech on September 21, 1992, in which he called for "determined efforts" to develop manned spaceflight.² The program, code-named Project 921 after the date of Jiang's speech, was personally associated with Jiang during his tenure as the core of the third generation leadership collective, and he was prominently involved in the previous four *Shenzhou* launches.³ Even after the transfer of party and state leadership to Hu Jintao at the 16th Party Congress, Jiang's retention of the chairmanship of the Central Military Commission (CMC) ensured his central role in the program, which was administered by the PLA General Armaments Department (GAD) and the aerospace elements of the defense-industrial base.

In the saturated media coverage of the launch and recovery, however, Jiang was noticeably absent. He apparently did not join Hu Jintao and other senior leaders at the launch at the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center or even view the event with the remaining core of the leadership from the Beijing Aerospace Command and Control Center. Instead, Hu Jintao was the center of the action, issuing the "important speech" on the success of the mission, and Wen Jiabao played a significant role in welcoming Yang after his landing in Inner Mongolia. Official media did not publish any comments by Jiang until almost 22 hours after the launch, and neither the print nor video media have given any indication of Jiang's actual location during the mission.

This report examines the possible reasons why Jiang was not in attendance at the *Shenzhou-5* launch and assesses their implications for Chinese civil-military relations. At least three hypotheses come to mind: (1) Jiang suffered from an illness that prevented him from attending; (2) there was a collective desire to downplay the military features of Project 921 in order to avoid arousing international suspicions of China's intentions in space, thus precluding a prominent role for the chairman of the Central Military Commission; or (3) Jiang's absence stemmed from factional politics. In the last case, Hu's prominence could potentially be seen as an effort to display his own ascension to supreme leadership by symbolically one-upping Jiang and/or as a representation of the actual decline in Jiang's influence, even over the army. None of the hypotheses can be definitively falsified, and the truth may even involve elements of all three. The remainder of this report compares the critical events in the activity and media timelines,

looking for congruence and discontinuity. For the sake of comparison, Greenwich Mean Time is used exclusively.

Activity Timeline

Hu Jintao, Huang Ju, Wu Guanzheng, Cao Gangchuan, and Wang Gang leave Beijing for the launch in Jiuquan immediately after the Third Plenary Session of the 16th Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee has concluded on October 14.⁴ A little before **0100 GMT** on the morning of October 15, Hu presides over the ceremony marking the departure of three astronauts, which is held at the *Wentiang* (Sky Inquiring Pavilion) in the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center. At **0930 GMT**, Yang Liwei speaks with Cao Gangchuan via an unspecified communications link. After orbiting the Earth 14 times in 21 hours, the craft touches down in Inner Mongolia at **2223 GMT**. A few minutes later, at **2231 GMT**, Wen Jiabao speaks on the phone with Yang Liwei from the Beijing Aerospace Command and Control Center. At **2254 GMT**, General Li Jinai, director of the General Armaments Department and head of the launch mission, pronounces the *Shenzhou-5* mission a “complete success.” After a brief respite, Yang Liwei arrives in Beijing at **0152 GMT** on October 16 and is greeted by Cao Gangchuan, Li Jinai, and Chi Wanchun (political commissar of the GAD).⁵

Media Timeline

Hu Jintao in Command

At **0128 GMT** on October 15, 2003, slightly less than 30 minutes after the launch, Xinhua News Agency announces that Hu Jintao, two other Politburo Standing Committee members (Huang Ju and Wu Guanzheng), Central Military Commission Vice Chairman Cao Gangchuan, and CCP General Office Director Wang Gang witnessed the blastoff at the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center.⁶ No mention is made of Jiang Zemin.

At **0250 GMT**, Xinhua quotes Hu Jintao hailing the success of the mission: “The successful launch of *Shenzhou-5* is an honor for our great motherland, an indicator for the initial victory of the country’s first manned spaceflight and for a historic step taken by the Chinese people in their endeavor to surmount the peak of the world’s science and technology. The party and the people will never forget those who have set up this outstanding merit in the space industry for the motherland, the people, and the nation.”⁷ As a side note, the article informs readers that the remaining six Politburo Standing Committee members (Wu Bangguo, Wen Jiabao, Jia Qinglin, Zeng Qinghong, Li Changchun, and Luo Gan) viewed the launch from Beijing.⁸

At **0255 GMT**, *Zhongguo xinwen she* reports Hu Jintao’s comments at the prelaunch ceremony:

This will be the solemn moment you have been looking forward to for a long time. It will also be a solemn moment that the people of all

nationalities throughout the country have been looking forward to for a long time. As our country's valiant pioneer in space exploration, you shoulder the great expectations of the motherland and the people to realize a dream we have cherished for thousands of years. I believe that you will complete this glorious and sacred mission with a cool head and with determination and courage. We look forward to your triumphant return.⁹

Jiang's Name Is Finally Spoken

Finally, at **0854 GMT** and almost eight hours after the launch, Xinhua Domestic Service mentions Jiang Zemin by name, reporting that Hu thanked the program personnel “on behalf of the party Central Committee, the State Council, the Central Military Commission, and Chairman Jiang Zemin.”¹⁰ Hu also makes two explicit homages to Jiang, declaring that “the implementation of the manned spaceflight project is an important strategic decision made by the third generation central collective leadership with comrade Jiang Zemin at the core” and expressing his hope that comrades in the space industry would “conscientiously study and implement the important thinking of the ‘Three Represents.’” In addition to conducting an inspection of the launch site, Hu presents a basket of flowers at the Marshal Nie Rongzhen Monument. The article also provides a fuller list of senior leaders viewing the launch from the Beijing Aerospace Command and Control Center, identifying the remaining six Politburo Standing Committee members (Wu Bangguo, Wen Jiabao, Jia Qinglin, Zeng Qinghong, Li Changchun, and Luo Gan), nine out of the 15 remaining Politburo members (Wang Zhaoguo, Hui Liangyu, Liu Qi, Liu Yunshan, Wu Yi, Zhou Yongkang, He Guoqiang, Guo Boxiong, and Zeng Peiyan), a small group of Central Committee members (Xu Caihou, He Yong, Lu Yongxiang, Tang Jiaxuan, Hua Jianmin, Chen Zhili, and Zhu Guangya), and two important Central Military Commission members (General Staff Department Director Liang Guanglie and General Logistics Department Director Liao Xilong).¹¹

Hu's Supporting Cast

Nine hours into the launch, at **1006 GMT**, Xinhua reports that Defense Minister Cao Gangchuan has spoken with Yang Liwei.¹² At **1055 GMT**, Xinhua Domestic Service reports that Cao Gangchuan conveyed “sincere regards on behalf of the party Central Committee, the State Council, the Central Military Commission, and Chairman Jiang Zemin.”¹³

A long period of media silence ends at **2246 GMT**, when China Central Television's CCTV-1 shows Wen Jiabao talking to Yang Liwei on the phone after Yang's craft landed in Inner Mongolia. At **2308 GMT**, Xinhua reports Wen Jiabao's comment that the mission was a “complete success.”¹⁴ Somewhat belatedly, Xinhua Asia-Pacific Service at **2347 GMT** announces that Politburo Standing Committee members Wen Jiabao and Zeng Qinghong witnessed the landing of the craft from the Beijing Aerospace Command and Control Center. Wen reads the official congratulatory

message of the CCP Central Committee, the State Council, and the Central Military Commission.¹⁵

Jiang Is Heard but Not Seen

At **2331 GMT**, more than 22.5 hours after the launch, Jiang Zemin finally speaks for himself. Xinhua reports that Jiang Zemin called the Beijing Aerospace Command and Control Center to offer congratulations on the success of the manned spaceflight.¹⁶ At **0143 GMT** on the morning of October 16, Xinhua reports that Jiang called Li Jinai to congratulate him on the success of the mission, quoting him as saying:

First, I would like to offer my warm congratulations to those cadres involved in the research, building, and testing of the project! I would like to extend my warm solicitude to the astronaut who has made the space voyage! I would also like to offer my high consideration to all scientists, technicians, cadres, staff members, and officers and men who have worked hard for China's space cause over the past several decades! The success of China's first manned spaceflight marks another great achievement in China's reform, opening up, and socialist modernization construction, another milestone in China's high-tech development, and also another extraordinary feat of the Chinese people, who are making unremitting efforts to improve themselves. The success has shown again that the Chinese people have the will and capability to surmount the peak of world science and technology. The task and road ahead for China's space cause is long and arduous. I believe that as long as we give full play to the superiority of the socialist system, stress self-reliance, maintain initiative, are innovative, and coordinate and pool efforts to tackle scientific projects under the correct leadership of the CCP Central Committee with comrade Hu Jintao as the general secretary, we will surely make more brilliant achievements in developing aerospace undertakings and in developing China's scientific and technological undertakings as a whole. And the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation will surely be realized!¹⁷

Note Jiang's use of the standard *tifa*, which uses Hu's name but does not identify him as a "core" (*hexin*) of the leadership.

Here Come the Official Editorials and Congratulatory Messages

At **0210 GMT** on October 16, Xinhua announces that official congratulations have been issued on behalf of the CCP Central Committee, the State Council, and the Central Military Commission, quoting Wen Jiabao at the Beijing Aerospace Command and Control Center.¹⁸ At **0428 GMT**, the text of the congratulatory message is published by Xinhua with the balanced and politically correct exhortation to space program

personnel to continue successes “under the strong leadership of the CCP Central Committee with comrade Hu Jintao as the general secretary . . . [and to] be guided by Deng Xiaoping Theory and by the important thinking of the ‘Three Represents.’”¹⁹

At **1038 GMT**, Xinhua releases the text of the *People’s Daily* editorial. The article repeats Hu Jintao’s earlier homage to Jiang almost verbatim, declaring that “the initiation of the manned space program is an important strategic policy decision made by the party’s third generation leadership with comrade Jiang Zemin at the core.” More importantly, the editorial clearly identifies Hu Jintao as the alpha dog, highlighting Hu’s “important speech at the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center,” though it also gives a nod to Jiang by pointing out the necessity to seriously study and implement the important thinking of the three represents. The editorial closes with an unequivocal pro-Hu statement: “[T]he whole party and the people of all ethnic groups across the country closely unite around the CCP Central Committee with comrade Hu Jintao as the general secretary.”²⁰

At **1151 GMT**, Xinhua Domestic Service publishes the PLA General Political Department circular on the manned space mission.²¹ Revealing little daylight from its civilian counterpart, the circular praises “the wisdom and correctness of the strategic policy decision of the third generation collective leadership with comrade Jiang Zemin as the core to implement the manned space mission” and calls on “officers and men” to “conscientiously study General Secretary Hu Jintao’s important speech on the successful launch of the *Shenzhou-5* manned spaceship” and “the congratulatory messages of the CCP Central Committee, State Council, and Central Military Commission.” However, the circular also exhorts military personnel to “study the important spirit of Chairman Jiang’s congratulatory telephone call,” an exhortation which, given the lack of any meaningful content in the transcript of the telephone call, can only be assessed as pro forma payment of respect to the CMC chairman.

Conclusion

Along with the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) crisis and the Ming Number 361 submarine accident, explored in greater detail in my submission to *China Leadership Monitor* 8,²² the *Shenzhou-5* launch is the latest episode in a series of civil-military vignettes suggesting the growing consolidation of civil-military control by Hu Jintao at the expense of Jiang Zemin. In sharp contrast to reports in the immediate post-16th Party Congress period, when the military and civilian party media appeared to diverge in both tone and content,²³ the descriptions of the leadership arrangement are now unified around the concept of the “CCP Central Committee with comrade Hu Jintao as general secretary” and the centrality of Jiang’s concept of the three represents. Furthermore, regardless of whether Jiang’s absence at the *Shenzhou-5* launch was a subtle attempt to demilitarize the program, print and television audiences could not help but notice the downgrading of status afforded Jiang, despite valid institutional (and personal) reasons for him to attend the event. While Jiang did not retire at the Third Plenum in October, which would have been an even bigger surprise, the events of 2003 surely increase the anticipation of an early retirement by Jiang at the fall plenum in 2004.

Nevertheless, problems in the leadership succession still remain. Most troubling is the prospect of a crisis, particularly given the recent flare-up in cross-Strait tensions. Until Jiang retires and coherence has been restored to the civil-military arrangement, the specter of divided leadership and chain of command will remain.

Notes

¹ After *Sputnik* on October 4, 1957, Mao reportedly declared: “We, too, must make man-made satellites!” On February 19, 1960, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) fired its first rocket near Shanghai, but it soared only eight kilometers high. On April 24, 1970, China put its first man-made PRC satellite into orbit. The program to put a man in space foundered in the chaos of the Cultural Revolution. See “*Shenzhou-5* Launch: China’s Long-Cherished Dream Realized,” Xinhua News Agency, October 15, 2003.

² Ibid.

³ The dates of the four flights are *Shenzhou-1* (November 20, 1999), *Shenzhou-2* (January 10, 2001), *Shenzhou-3* (March 25, 2002), and *Shenzhou-4* (December 30, 2002).

⁴ “President Hails Successful Launch of China’s First Manned Spacecraft,” Xinhua News Agency, October 15, 2003.

⁵ Tian Zhaoyun, “Space Hero Yang Liwei Arrives in Beijing,” Xinhua Domestic Service, October 16, 2003.

⁶ “President Hu Jintao, Other Leaders Witness *Shenzhou-5* Blastoff in Jiuquan,” Xinhua News Agency, October 15, 2003.

⁷ See “President Hails Successful Launch.”

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ “Hu Jintao Stresses That Successful Launch of *Shenzhou-5* Manned Spaceship Marks an Important Historic Step of Chinese People in Scaling World Pinnacles of Science and Technology,” *Zhongguo xinwen she*, October 15, 2003.

¹⁰ At 0406 GMT on October 16, China Central Television’s CCTV-4 showed Cao Gangchuan shaking hands with Yang Liwei and praising Yang on behalf of Jiang Zemin for his work.

¹¹ “China Successfully Launches *Shenzhou-5* Manned Spaceship; Hu Jintao Watches the Launch at the Launch Site and Delivers Important Speech; Wu Bangguo, Wen Jiabao, and Others Watch the Launch in Beijing,” Xinhua Domestic Service, October 15, 2003.

¹² “Chinese Defense Minister Talks to Astronaut Yang,” Xinhua News Agency, October 15, 2003.

¹³ Huang Guozhu, Tian Zhaoyun, and Sun Yanxin, “Cao Gangchuan Smoothly Communicates with Astronaut Yang Liwei between Earth and Space,” Xinhua Domestic Service, October 15, 2003.

¹⁴ “Chinese Premier Says *Shenzhou-5* a Complete Success,” Xinhua News Agency, October 15, 2003. See also “China’s First Astronaut Lands Safely,” Xinhua News Agency, October 15, 2003.

¹⁵ Sun Chengbin, “China’s First Manned Spaceflight a Complete Success; Wen Jiabao Reads Congratulatory Message; Zeng Qinghong Views Recovery,” Xinhua Asia-Pacific Service, October 15, 2003.

¹⁶ “Jiang Zemin Congratulates Successful Manned Spaceflight,” Xinhua News Agency, October 15, 2003.

¹⁷ Huang Guozhu and Xi Qixing, “Jiang Zemin Congratulates Complete Success of China’s First Manned Spaceflight,” Xinhua Domestic Service, October 16, 2003.

¹⁸ “Top Authorities Hail Success of Manned Spaceflight,” Xinhua News Agency, October 16, 2003.

¹⁹ “Congratulatory Message of the CCP Central Committee, the State Council, and the Central Military Commission on China’s First Successful Manned Spaceflight,” Xinhua Domestic Service, October 16, 2003.

²⁰ “Great Glory to the Motherland—Congratulations on Complete Success of China’s First Manned Spaceflight,” Xinhua Domestic Service, October 16, 2003.

²¹ “General Political Department Issues Circular Urging All PLA and Armed Police Force Units to Extensively and Thoroughly Unfold Study and Education Activities on Success of China’s First Manned Space Mission,” Xinhua Domestic Service, October 16, 2003.

²² See <http://www.chinaleadershipmonitor.org/20034/jm.html>.

²³ See my submission to *China Leadership Monitor* 5 (winter 2003) at <http://www.chinaleadershipmonitor.org/20031/jm.html>.