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China Becomes Only Third Nation to Put Man in Space

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By *Brian Rhoads*

BEIJING (Reuters) - China put its first man in space on Wednesday, sending a single astronaut on a 21-hour odyssey around the Earth four decades after the Soviet Union and the United States pioneered manned space flight.


[Reuters Photo](#)

The Long March 2F rocket carrying "taikonaut" Yang Li Wei lifted off from a pad in the Gobi desert at 9 a.m. (9 p.m. EDT) and entered its predetermined orbit 10 minutes later in a launch the official Xinhua news agency quickly declared a success.

"I feel good and my conditions are normal," Xinhua quoted Yang as saying from space as the Shenzhou V, or "Divine Ship V," was making its first pass around the Earth.

Yang, 38, is part of an historic mission which, if completed, will make China just the third nation to successfully put a man into space -- and return him to Earth -- over 40 years behind the former Soviet Union and the United States.

Decked out in his space suit, Yang headed for the launch past rows of beaming and balloon-carrying children, "Young Pioneers" who had come to see him off. Once in the capsule he reviewed a flight manual and appeared "composed and at ease," Xinhua said.

"The Shenzhou mission, if successful, will make China the third nation to send a man into outer space, following the former Soviet Union and the United States," it said in a brief dispatch.

State media have hailed the spacecraft as China's most sophisticated, with breakthrough technology including fault-detection and escape systems.

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"The rocket that will launch the Shenzhou V spaceship is the best of all. It is of superior quality and has stood our most stringent testing," the official China Daily quoted Huang Chunping, commander-in-chief of rocket systems, as saying.

President Hu Jintao was at the Jiuquan Space Center to watch China's bid to realize a dream that arguably dates back centuries to the Ming dynasty. He hailed the launch as an initial success for "the glory of our great motherland."

It was a "mark for the initial victory of the country's first manned space flight and for the significant, historic step by the Chinese people in scaling the peak of the world's science and technology," Xinhua quoted Hu as saying.

Yang, who follows a trail blazed by Russian cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin and American Alan Shepard in 1961, was due to orbit the Earth 14 times and touch down in Inner Mongolia at 7 a.m. on Thursday (7 p.m. EDT on Wednesday).

A lieutenant colonel in the People's Liberation Army selected from a pool of 14, Yang is the son of a teacher and an official at an agricultural firm. He was raised in Suizhong county in the northeast "rustbelt" province of Liaoning.

"We are proud of him," his brother-in-law told Reuters just minutes before the launch. "We don't worry about his safety because we trust the

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nation's advanced technology."

Yang would dine on specially designed packets of shredded pork with garlic and "eight treasure" rice, washed down with Chinese tea, state media said.

A successful mission would mark the crowning moment for a space program launched by Mao Zedong in 1958 but quickly left far behind in the Cold War "space race" rivalry that saw the United States put a man on the moon in 1969.

A year later, China launched its first satellite aboard a Long March rocket, which orbited the Earth blaring out the Cultural Revolution anthem "The East is Red."

A tight veil of secrecy has blanketed the space program and the 58.3-meter-high (191-foot-high), 479.8-toncraft.

Success would spur China's scientific programs and emergence on the world stage marked by more active diplomacy, a winning bid to host the 2008 Olympics and a robust economy.

Failure would lead to a national bout of handwringing and cast a sharp spotlight on China's many problems, from unemployment to disgruntled peasants to a growing gap between rich and poor.

China invented gunpowder and legend holds that a Ming dynasty (1368-1644) official named Wan Hu attempted the world's first space launch. He strapped himself to a chair with kites in each hand as 47 servants lit 47 gunpowder-packed bamboo tubes tied to the seat.

When the smoke had cleared, Wan was apparently found to have been obliterated. But the dream was not.

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