

# Commercial Time For Shenzhou

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The balance of power in human spaceflight is shifting. China is gradually emerging as a credible third force in putting humans in orbit, as the USA struggles to define its near-term future as a spaceflight power.

But another power shift has occurred internally within the Chinese human spaceflight program itself. Commercialism is appearing as a major factor for financing and justifying the existence of the Shenzhou program.

When Yang Liwei became China's first astronaut in 2003, national pride was the principal motivation and justification for his historic voyage. China had carried out one of its most outstanding achievements in recent history. The mission helped to establish China's status as an emerging economic and technological power.

However, there can never be another first mission. The propaganda impact of subsequent Shenzhou missions will not be as strong, even if China goes on to achieve feats such as space walking and docking. But there's a clear desire to continue the Shenzhou program. How can Shenzhou be sustained in a complex political and fiscal environment?

One answer, it seems, is straight-out economics. In recent weeks, China's state-run media have been unusually vocal about the economic benefits of Shenzhou. Such heavy emphasis on monetary issues was absent when Shenzhou 5 was launched.

The new emphasis on money suggests that other factors, such as political

and military support for Shenzhou, could be waning. Or perhaps promises of wealth from the stars were quietly made to kick-start the program, and the authorities have now decided to reap their harvest.

Media reports have emphasized areas such as job creation, economic stimulus and technological development that have appeared simply by building the spacecraft. These claims seem fairly sound, and echo similar claims made in the USA for its own spaceflight projects. But China is going further.

Having decided that the launch of Shenzhou 6 will be broadcast live on national television, advertising slots on China Central Television are now being sold for fairly high sums.

A potential audience of hundreds of millions of people is a tempting target for any advertiser. But how is the money being circulated? Will CCTV pocket all the spoils, or will some of the money find its way into the Shenzhou program itself?

No exact answer has been forthcoming, and given the nature of China's command economy, such a question could be somewhat moot. As long as the Shenzhou program is generating revenue for the government coffers in general, the exact money trail doesn't matter.

It's tempting to think that the live broadcast and advertising deals could all have been formulated together as part of a Shenzhou grand fiscal plan, especially when China's first launch was only shown as a delayed broadcast. But the picture is probably more convoluted.

Having avoided a loss of face from a launch failure on Shenzhou 5, and experienced the triumph of a successful mission, Chinese authorities have probably decided that there is no harm in allowing a live telecast of the mission, regardless of the financial arrangements.

The decision to tie the telecast into an aggressive advertising program could well be inspired by China's recent experiences with "Super Girls", a home-grown answer to the internationally syndicated "Idol" singing contests. "Super Girls" has attracted as much popularity and notoriety as its international equivalents, but the audience in China is substantially higher.

Chinese television programmers have now had a taste of colossal commercial programming, and could be looking for the next big event. If 500 million people watch the launch, as some pundits expect, the revenue potential is enormous.

But capitalism has infiltrated Shenzhou more directly. Mention has also appeared of a project to fly small items on the mission for payment, making Shenzhou 6 into a commercial cargo mission. This money, presumably, could flow more directly into China's aerospace coffers. The advent of this project is unsurprising.

Earlier this year, SpaceDaily reported on a plan to fly souvenirs on Shenzhou. As SpaceDaily noted, the reportage in China's media was limited and somewhat vague; mention of the project disappeared after one obscure news item. The new pay-to-fly program could be a revised version of this original project.

Does this mean that Shenzhou will become even more commercialized in the future? We can only speculate at the moment. Chinese astronauts could find their suits and spacecraft festooned with advertisements in the future, like Formula 1 cars.

It's not unreasonable to speculate that commercial space tourism on board Shenzhou could also be earmarked for the future. But exactly how far China is prepared to go with its commercial endeavours will depend on many factors. The value of the space program will need to be

measured in more than just straight financial returns. Until China has flown several more missions, the balance will not be known.

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