

China's Space Program

Brian Harvey

When China became only the third nation in history to fly a man into orbit aboard their own spacecraft a year ago, the rest of the world took notice. But China had been carrying out impressive space feats for more than three decades - perhaps far fewer flights than the US and Russia, but in many respects, with impressive but generally unappreciated levels of technology and reliability.

Irish space author Brian Harvey thoroughly updates an earlier book he wrote about Chinese space activities, not only by adding the latest events, but by going back and filling in gaps and unknowns in past events based on the flood of new historical material now becoming available. Although China is a secretive society in principle, they are releasing far more information now than the USSR did at the beginning of the Space Age, and there are also numerous reliable unofficial information sources.

As a result, this book provides a thorough overview of China in space, set in a perspective of how its activities compare with those of other nations. Harvey has succeeded in an even greater challenge: collect the mass of disorganized and unrelated information and formulate it into coherent chapters that address themes, activities, and intentions in a lucid, logical sequence. This book doesn't merely catalog, it describes and elucidates.

Harvey's description of the early years of the Chinese program, when it was bedeviled by shortages and by political interference, is as dramatic as any other space story in the world. He expertly exploits new biographical material about the father of the Chinese program, Tsien Hsue Shen, but for some reason uses that old-style spelling, not the new Chinese orthography that spells the name "Qian Xuesen". No spy novel from fiction has a more convoluted plot than his real life.

The book combines engineering descriptions with human-interest stories, describes how information comes to light while other material remains secret, and uses candid Chinese reports and speeches to map out future options for a nation that has become a major player in outer space, one which may in coming years come to dominate some phases of human space exploration. This book explains how it will probably happen.