

Sky Dragons Behind the Media Curtain: UFOs in China

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Whenever scientists studying a phenomenon suspect that the data have become contaminated by preconceptions or otherwise compromised, they seek new samples from farther afield. It's often their only hope to make any further progress.

At first glance, UFO reports from China offer a similar advantage to the modern study of ufology.

Since the mass-media perception of UFOs as alien vehicles or top-secret government hardware in the West has arguably so overwhelmed the raw phenomenon as to make it unrecognizable, researchers hope that China, isolated in so many ways from the rest of the world, can provide eyewitness descriptions unaffected by Western popular culture.

The culture-bound encounter

In the United States, for example, reports tend to be biased by such long-standing misconceptions as the original "flying saucer" term itself, which derives from a sloppy newsman's story.

Kenneth Arnold didn't really describe his sighting in any such terms, but the flying saucer quickly became the norm for everyone else who read the newspapers and wanted to describe an unidentifiable aerial sighting.

Then there are the Hollywood images of "space aliens" that appeared on American television and [movie screens](#) just in time for Betty and Barney Hill to recall seeing similar entities.

Further examples of this media contagion frustrate and infuriate serious ufologists, but they are legion.

Beyond the media curtain

On the other hand, reports from China seem immune from such distortions. They may be closer to the "raw" phenomenon, allowing investigators to gain insights no longer possible in the West.

Recent press reports from China describe a surge in public interest in the phenomenon, there called *fei-die*, or flying dishes.

Dozens of sightings in the last several months have excited China's UFO

enthusiasts. According to press reports, most episodes in the Beijing area involved glowing orange-yellow objects that lingered in the early evening or night sky for more than 15 minutes before instantaneously disappearing.

This "boom time" for Chinese UFOs has led to great public interest and wide media attention, tolerated by the government. In a country where the internet is strictly controlled, the Jiangsu U.F.O. Research Society's web site boasted that "frequent UFO visits have enveloped all of China."

Are Western researchers jealous?

The most famous Chinese UFO expert appears to be Sun Shi-li, a retired foreign ministry official who is now president of the Beijing UFO. Research Society.

"The level of interest and acceptance is definitely rising," he has told Western journalists.

Sun also judiciously applauded what he called the Chinese government's "enlightened and practical attitude."

"In the U.S., scholars investigating this are under pressure and have been derided," he said. "But in China the academic discussion is quite free, so in this area American academics are quite jealous of us."

He described a UFO he saw while planting rice in 1971, when he was sent to the countryside as a young Communist Party worker during the Cultural Revolution. It was a bright object in the sky that rose and fell repeatedly.

"I assumed it must be some sort of monitoring device, since relations between China and the Soviet Union were very tense at the time," he said recently. "It was only years later, when I got more access to foreign materials, that I realized what I'd experienced."

Sun added that he has a gut feeling that "aliens are living among us disguised as humans."

What was the sky dragon?

Despite such enthusiasm, certain Chinese UFO reports contain detectable warning signs to Western ufologists.

On July 26, 1977, a single event blazed across the skies of several provinces.

This was the famous and widely-documented "sky spiral" or "dragon," which (like a nearly identical apparition on July 24, 1981) took the form of a spinning white spiral gliding through the sky soon after sunset.

In the West, similar apparitions are quickly "solved" by correlating them with space and rocket events, particularly those involving fuel spewing out of tumbling stages. But this has proven impossible in China where such

potentially prosaic stimuli remain highly classified.

Many of the leading causes of mistaken UFO perceptions in the West -- such as missiles, aircraft, balloons and other aerial activities with human origins -- cannot be documented in China because of state secrecy policies. Consequently, Chinese cases that would find quick solution in the West remain unidentified.

What would a "raw encounter" look like?

And perhaps the promise of pristine UFO reports from China will be as elusive as the UFO phenomenon itself, as another famous Chinese case suggests.

On the evening of August 27, 1987, observers across wide areas of central China reported a UFO in terms no different than those used by witnesses elsewhere.

That particular "UFO" turned out to be surplus fuel venting from a tumbling Japanese rocket about 300 kilometers out in space. As the rocket spun, a spiral-shaped cloud larger than the moon formed in the dusk skies, moved rapidly from west to east.

Only the geography is new...

But back on Earth, witnesses were sure they were seeing an alien visitor, and elements in the Chinese reports reflected classic trends in the UFO literature.

In Zhejiang province, a power generator reportedly failed. People reported that their wristwatches stopped. Eyewitnesses at an airport spoke of the "dazzling brilliance" of the object, which was "hovering about 900 meters from the end of the runway." Two people in Shanghai reported seeing portholes on the central body.

A military pilot on air patrol spotted the object and pursued it for several minutes.

"It was descending," he recalled. Then it reversed course and ascended "much faster." Finally, he said, "after 45 seconds, I was unable to keep up with it."

Because contrary evidence -- the Japanese rocket -- was unavailable, Chinese researchers have accepted these coincidences, exaggerations, and misperceptions. The event was -- and remains -- a "true UFO."

Meanwhile, if China can offer special insights to the UFO puzzle, time seems to be running out. As Sun Shi-li and others describe their work, western UFO theories have already flooded into the country, where the local news media has disseminated them.

It may turn out that Chinese UFOs are just as frustrating -- and often, just as prosaic -- as those elsewhere in the world.

