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THE DOMESTIC POLITICAL IMPACT OF CHINA'S SPACE PROGRAM

Abstract

This paper seeks to clarify the political purposes for which China's government uses its space program by identifying the key themes and the primary target audience of the political messaging being projected through the space programme. The Chinese program serves key propaganda purposes, but a key aspect of propaganda, that is critical to this paper, is that to be effective, propaganda claims must be relevant to the target audience. The message needs to be crafted in such a way that it resonates with the particular concerns, historical memory and cultural cues of the target population. Identifying such cues allow us to identify who the target population for the propaganda is. While the Chinese government has clearly used the space program to project a general message of technological achievement to the wider world, the targeted dimension of the messaging appears to be far more directed at China's own people than it is at the international community. The paper analyses a number of specific Chinese space missions, focussing on the language used to describe them by the government, the symbolism of the mission names, the post-mission messaging to the Chinese population and the effectiveness of these messages in influencing popular perceptions of the program and the government. Missions analysed include the Chang'e -3 lunar robot explorer, Shenzhou space vehicle and Tiangong orbiting laboratory. The Shenzhou 6, 9 and 10 missions are used as case-studies of the propaganda messaging surrounding human spaceflight missions, particularly in relation to national minorities and the populations of Hong Kong and Macau. For the government messaging on the Chinese space program to be effective, it is necessary that China's population understand it in the terms in which it is being projected. While assessing Chinese public opinion is not as straightforward as it is in many other states, there is nevertheless considerable evidence to suggest that the CCP objective is being achieved. Recent Chinese public opinion surveys such as the 2012 Global Times survey are used to relate the responses by citizens to the messaging being projected by China's government. These studies suggest that, at least in the major cities, the Chinese population has a good understanding of the benefits of the program. Significantly, the responses indicate that the public is adopting the terminology that is a central feature of government messaging on the space program and this appears to have been internalised by the population.