

# ORBIT

## Astro Space Stamp Society



In this issue

Space mail from Chinese Shenzhou 1

Shenzhou 12 Recovery Covers

Shenzhou 13 Commemorated by

Special Envelopes

Collecting China's Space

Programme:

Challenge and Fun



See Page 22 for  
more details





# Collecting China's Space Programme: Challenge and Fun

by Umberto Cavallaro

The covers featured in the article are from the Author's exhibit "China - a long march to the Moon", one of the only two exhibits officially presented in the Western FEPA and FIP exhibitions.

I don't think that exists an astrophilatelist who doesn't have in his collection at least a few Chinese space covers.

Normally if you are a Western collector who doesn't read Chinese, you don't understand much of them. Often it is not even clear which mission they refer to; nethertheless they fascinate an attract: the colours of the Chinese covers, their sizes, the materials they are made of... all is unusual.

When you look at a China's collection, you see a symphony of colours, ranging from white to black. Handling some envelopes made of unusual materials arouses particular emotions, like the colourful silk covers, or the light items made out of rice paper.



Fig. 1 - Shenzhou 7 "Non-flown Cover" made of silk, issued by the Beijing Institute of Tracking and Telecommunications Technology (BITTT).



Fig. 2 - Very light Shenzhou 9 "Non-flown Cover" made with rice paper by Jiuquan Military Post Office.



Fig. 3 - Golden commemorative cover with military stamp, cancelled at the Ali post office where Chang'e-5 re-entered into the China's national border. As Ali is a very remote location in northern Tibet, difficult to reach especially in winter, a total of less than 100 covers were cancelled there.



Fig. 4 - Commemorative launch cover issued for by China Philately for Shenzhou 12, launched on June 17, 2021.

If you try to deepen, you soon realize that little is known on the China space programme, especially about its beginning, when – like during the first Cold War at the early Soviet Union's era – everything was a state secret: indeed "a secret shrouded in mystery".

China is the third country to independently send humans into space, but its march to space has been a long one, and the origin of the Chinese Human Space Programme is in great part still little known, especially during the chaotic period of Mao's Cultural Revolution and the struggles for leadership following Mao's death, when even the Chinese rocket industry was swamped, despite Chou Enlai's attempts to protect it.

A major contribution to China's missile and space programme, was made in 1956 by Qian Xuesen, a brilliant Chinese-American aerospace engineer and physicist who emigrated with his family to the USA in the 1930s, and entered the academic and military world, where soon



became one of the leading American experts in jet aircraft. A former research scientist at MIT, he joined the group led by von Kármán with whom he founded the JPL (NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory).

He was one of the U.S. Army colonels who at the end of the war traveled to Germany with Von Kármán to debrief captured German Nazi rocket scientists, including Wernher von Braun.

Accused of Communism during the McCarthy era, Qian was expelled from the USA in 1955 and returned to China where he was welcomed as a hero and became the "Father of Chinese Rocketry". Under his direction the Space Flight Medical Research Centre for taikonauts was developed beginning in 1968.



Fig 5 - Chinese stamp featuring Qian Xuesen.

The Chinese program proceeded however very slowly. Only in 1970 the first Chinese artificial satellite was launched, while the Americans were already scurrying on the Moon.

No confirmed information is available on the top-secret Project 714 aimed to put two people into space by 1973 with the Shuguang-1 spacecraft ('Dawn' in Mandarin) to launch a Chinese man into space. Nineteen PLAAF pilots were selected for this goal in March 1971. But the project was cancelled for political reasons in 1972.

Nor is better known the short-lived second China's crewed space programme that was announced in 1978 with the open publishing of details and impressive photos showing Chinese taikonauts in space suits being trained in altitude chambers, but was abruptly cancelled in December 1980, with some observers arguing that this second crewed program was created solely for propaganda purposes, and was never intended to produce results.

Particularly important was the Fanhui Shi Weixing programme (FSW), (know in the West as Recoverable Test Satellites programme) developed since 1966, with some contradictory stop-and-go. Recoverable Test Satellites were first launched in November 26, 1975 for military and civilian observation tasks, and helped test new technologies useful for future manned space missions, and especially for returning to Earth.

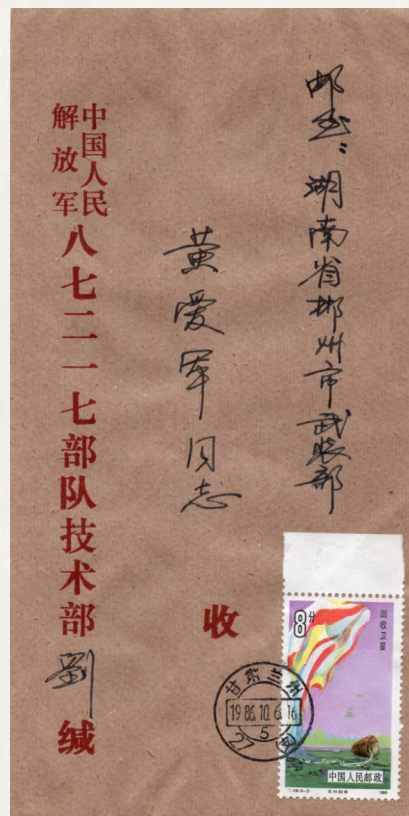


Fig 6 - Early cover commemorating the launch of the 8th Recoverable Satellite (FSW-0 8) on October 6, 1986.

(One of the only five items of this kind known worldwide serviced by soldiers of the 87217 Unit of the Technology Department of the People's Liberation Army, using an ordinary army's cover)

Three models of recoverable satellites were developed: FSW-0, FSW-1 and FSW-2.

Nine FSW-0 satellites were successfully launched and recovered. But they are hardly documented in astrophilately, since early China's space missions were top secret. It was not until after the mid-1980s that space launches started to be recorded in secretive conditions with covers serviced by military personnel (see fig. 6).

After a late and slow start, in the years since, the Chinese Space Programme has moved rapidly toward parity with space powers like Russia and the United States.



Fig. 7 - Early commemorative cover issued on August 10, 1987 by the JSLC Military Post Office, for the 9th Recoverable Test Satellite (FSW-0 9). On the red rubber stamp, for the first time the name of the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center ("Jiuquan"=酒泉) was made public on a cover.



In 2016, for the first time China launched more rockets than Russia, equaling the 22 rockets launched by the United States. Included among those missions was Shenzhou 11, which carried a crew of two to dock with China's Tiangong-2 spacecraft, the orbiting space laboratory serving as a stepping stone for the larger Tianhe space station.

But even today, those who want to deal with the Chinese space program must be ready to face secrets and mysteries.

The third-generation group of Taikonauts were selected in October 2020, but their names (17 men and 1 woman) were not revealed and still are a State secret.

Also the taikonauts' assignments for each mission are disclosed only before the launch, sometimes few hours before.

China's space ambitions is now focused on boosting Chinese prestige at home and abroad. Space industry is regarded as a part of China's vision for economic transition and is challenging Chinese firms to develop new materials, sensors and other technologies, "China has been relying on the knowledge discovered by others" proclaimed Wu Ji, the president of Chinese Society of Space Research and chief scientist and project leader of Strategic Priority Program on Space Science of Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS), himself a Chinese Researcher who studied and researched in the West(see note 1).

So, a promising Space Programme with great National ambitions.



Fig. 8 – Cover commemorating the launch of Chang'e-5 lunar probe, featuring the attractive Chinese Moon goddess, Chang'e.

The attention of the collectors is often attracted by fancy pictures and colours. What is important for them is that you may be quite sure that there are no bad surprises with the important pieces.

The flown items (mainly covers and cards, but also stamps) are usually accompanied by notary attests that certify their genuinity with the dry seal of the Official Notary Office of Beijing.

Fig. 11 (right) - "Unflown" cover prepared by BITTT for flying in the cabin of Shenzhou-4. The rhomboid red rubber stamp alerts that this is an "unflown cover".



Fig. 9 – One of the 601 flown covers issued by CISME (China Institute of Space Medico-Engineering), The cover was cancelled with the special postmark "China Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center, MPO, Lanzhou 27th Branch post office, 2003.10.6.9, loaded in the cabin of spacecraft" and embarked on the cabin of Shenzhou 5. On the cover – signed by all the 14 taikonauts at the time – the Beijing Fang-Yuan Public Notary Office embossed its dry seal to certify the authenticity of this flown cover.

What few collectors know is that the expensive flown items with notary certification are far from rare. Thousands of items are loaded into the cabin of the spacecraft in each space mission since the 16th recoverable satellite in 1994. On the Shenzhou-1 alone, in 1999, were embarked more than 33.000 covers and stamps. Just under 15.000 items flew on Tiangong-1 in 2011.

While many thousands of very attractive ordinary commemorative covers are issued for every mission, collectors interested in unusual hard-to-find material may search, for example, for "unflown" items (like the ones featured in Fig 1, 2, 10, 11, 12, and 13). These are items that were produced in very limited quantity (usually few hundreds or even less) and prepared for flying in space, but not embarked on the spacecraft due to weight limits or other payload constraints.



Fig. 10 - "Unflown" cover issued by China Space Foundation for flying on Shenzhou-2 in October 2000. Cancelled at Beijing Xibeiwang 1 p.o. with the ordinary postmark and the flown-proof cancel, but not embarked because of weight limits. A blue rubber stamp was added with 留地封, 中国航天基金会 (Not flown cover, China Space Foundation)





It's not easy to catch all the details. I was lucky enough to enjoy the help of many Chinese friends who helped me to understand postmarks and peculiarities.

First of all I had the chance to get in contact with the Colleague of the FIP Astrophilately Commission Lin DaAn, the Delegate representing China in the Commission, who assisted me in finding the right items and – more important – in discovering useful details.

A big support also came from Ling Fugen, one of the main authors of Chinese Astrophilately who wrote many specialized books on China's Astrophilately Activities and with whom we started a “cultural” astrophilately exchange.

An invaluable help, especially in finding and understanding “unflown covers”, came from Guo YanMing – himself a cover designer who successfully flew several covers in space – and from the ASITAF member Zhou ZhiYu, whom I thank.

Usually, “unflown covers” follow the same process of the flown covers and are prepared in advance for loading in the cabin. They are postmarked with the “flown-proof” postmark.



Fig. 14 (Left) – “Flown-Proof” postmark of the Lanzhou 27th Branch Military Post Office at the China Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center with the inscription “loaded in the cabin of spacecraft”.

Fig. 15 (Right) – “Flown-Proof” postmark of the Hainan Space Post Office, near the Wenchang Satellite Launch Center with the wording “Exclusive use for space mail loaded in capsule”.

Not all of the covers presented for flying are actually embarked. The other are returned to the owner. In the early times a “non-flown” stamp was added in the front side of the unflown covers (See Fig. 10, 11). Today they are similar to the flown items, from which mainly differ because they don't bear Notary's dry seal (See fig 1, 2, 12 and 10).

For Western collectors, this is a “new” astrophilately area that repays the efforts made to discover it.

(Note 1) From 1985-1986, he was with European Space Research and Technology Centre (ESTEC), Noordwijk, Netherland where he worked on contoured beam satellite antenna design. In 1993 Wu Ji obtained a Ph.D. degree from Technical University of Denmark in Copenhagen, and then visited, as a visiting professor, several universities in the US, including the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, the University of Texas at Arlington and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).



Fig. 12 - “Unflown” cover issued by JSLC Military Post Office, prepared for loading on the first space station TianGong-1



Fig. 13 (Left) - “Unflown” cover issued by Guo YanMing for the maiden flight of Long March 7 to be loaded in the return cabin of the rocket.

## International Space Station – Russia Departs

Russia has now formally announced that they will pull out of their partnership with the International Space Station, (ISS), by 2024 in order to concentrate on its own space station, the Russian Orbital Service Station, ‘ROSS’, (Российская орбитальная служебная станция). This was announced by Yuri Borisov, the head of Roscosmos, on July 26, 2022, at a meeting with Russia's President Vladimir Putin. He said that Russia would fulfil their obligations to the ISS partners until then.



The Russian Orbital Service Station, ROSS, (Российская орбитальная служебная станция).