

Let's hear it for China

The fact that the Chinese have successfully put a man in space should be greeted with congratulations, not condescension and silence, yet most of the world seems to be ignoring the psychological and cultural significance of the event. Among the missing are warm words of praise from the United States and Russia, until China's success the only two nations to have put humans in space.

One condescending voice came from Roger Launius, former chief historian for NASA, who was quoted in *The New York Times* as saying China's success was not a "technologically mesmerizing event" and that "a lot of people are saying, 'Been there, done that.'" In the United States and Russia, that's true, but in China the event shoots off the charts and has the Chinese feel very good about themselves. What's wrong with that?

As any historian knows, China suffered the humiliation of foreign occupation in some form or another for approximately 200 years. The return of Hong Kong in 1997 was an event tracked by a digital clock in Tiananmen Square, where thousands, if not millions, could watch and cheer. National pride got a boost. The same thing happened when the Beijing won the right to host the 2008 Olympics.

China seldom gets the credit it deserves for inventing or developing technology that we take for granted today. The Chinese invented paper, dynamite¹, the compass and, something dear to me, the printing press. Ask most Americans who invented the printing press and the response is usually Gutenberg. But the Chinese have a history of invention centuries longer than the United States and Russia; they just haven't been as good at getting the word out.

Yes, China's space venture has a potential dark side and hints of that have appeared in the press. Reportedly, the Pentagon sees the venture as a possible military threat, although not for another 20 or so years. It is difficult to understand what China would have to gain in a war with the United States, given that both countries are so economically intertwined that problems in one affect the other. In July, China (and Russia) continued their advocacy for keeping weapons out of space, clearly an attempt to avoid a war, not start one.

Unfortunately, the relationship between the current administration and China got off to a rocky start when even before he became president, George W. Bush, in an attempt to differentiate himself from President Clinton, referred to China as a "strategic competitor." Clinton, who had a bellicose China policy at the outset of his administration, in the end called China a "strategic partner." Neither description was correct, but at least with Clinton the policy toward China seemed headed in a positive direction. Bush not only went in another direction, but in a negative one. Eventually, the relationship warmed up, but it was only after the Chinese

¹ Mistake: I meant gunpowder, the precursor to dynamite.

stepped to the plate as a mediator with North Korea that the White House appreciated China's role in the world and its usefulness to the United States.

That good feeling should not only continue, it should be emphasized. Publicly praising China for its latest accomplishment is one way of doing that. National pride is an important commodity in China and any positive event that advances national pride should be duly noted.

Expressing our admiration for the Chinese costs us nothing, but gains us a lot of goodwill in China. And if a successful space mission means that 50 years from now China is an equal power in the world, what of it? England is no longer the power it once was, but it is still a power. Why should only certain nations control the world's destiny? A friendly Asian power takes the pressure off the United States and sends a positive message to the entire world.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, 20 million Chinese died in a program called "The Great Leap Forward." Nearly 45 years later, the Chinese have taken a genuine great leap forward. The world would do well to acknowledge this positive step.

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