Launch raises questions

Questions and answers about China's pending space launch.

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The Orange County Register

China's pending attempt to send people into Earth orbit intrigues Paul Ronney, a University of Southern California mechanical engineering and aerospace professor who trained as a backup payload specialist for the space shuttle Columbia in the late 1990s. Ronney, who has visited China many times, discussed the launch with The Orange County Register.

Q: What is the significance of China's attempt to send a man into orbit?

A: It is not obvious why they are doing this. But it would be quite a feat if they pull it off because China would become only the third country to launch a person into space. The two nations that have done it - the Soviet Union and the United States - first did so in the early 1960s. It would be significant to have a third player in manned space flight after all of this time.

Q: Caltech physicist Steven Koonin, who advises the U.S. on space issues, said China should try to send a probe to the moon or Mars if it wants to prove its prowess.

A: Sending a person into space isn't a breakthrough. But I think it's more impressive than sending a probe to the moon, which has been done a fair number of times. If a moon probe crashes you can say, "Oh, darn. Let's try it again." It's not the same with humans on board. And if you get a third entry in manned space flight, that could open up more possibilities for things like space tourism.

Q: Do you see this launch as a steppingstone to something bigger?

A: I can't read their minds. But I've visited China many times. The Chinese are a very proud group of people. I would not be surprised if they looked to build a space station.

Q: Zhang Quiye, a spokesperson for the Chinese Foreign Ministry, said China's space program is devoted to peaceful purposes. Does that seem likely considering that China has already developed intercontinental ballistic missiles?

A: The Chinese have a serious space-science program. I compare what they're doing to what's happening in the United States and Russia. Yes, there are military applications to space. But the U.S. has certainly had civilian programs that were not tied to any military objective. China could be doing the same.

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