

Hovering UFO Closes Chinese Airport

Sightings of alleged UFOs occur pretty often, but it's rare indeed for one to affect scheduled air traffic. We should not be surprised, then, to find that such an event has made the news. What was the mysterious object that allegedly hovered over Hangzhou's Xiaoshan Airport, China's ninth-busiest, on the evening of July 7, 2010? At about 8:40 PM local time, a UFO was reported by a flight crew that was preparing to land. As a precaution, flight controllers delayed or redirected eighteen flights.

As is often the case, conflicting and confusing accounts of the UFO incident make it difficult to determine exactly what happened. Reporters want an exciting story, and UFOlogists want to win converts. They will typically grab onto any photo or video that is supposed to represent the object and report as fact practically any claim that is made regardless of its source or veracity. Many images of the alleged airport UFO—images that were supposed to show the UFO over Hangzhou but obviously showed a different object—soon began circulating in news stories and on the Internet. Most frequently seen is an impressive-looking rectangular object, from which a beam of light shines out underneath (see the accompanying news report at <http://tinyurl.com/273h68h>). At first I thought the image was the reflection of an interior fluorescent light fixture, as may be seen when looking out a window. After studying the other photos in this series and reading some of the online discussions, I agree that it's probably an exposure of a few seconds showing a helicopter with flashing



Photo: Metro Express

One of several published images purportedly showing a UFO over Xiaoshan Airport. This image appears to be a long-exposure photograph of a police helicopter with a searchlight beam shining down. It was posted to the Internet long before the incident at Xiaoshan.

lights, shining a searchlight on the ground. In any case, because these photos were posted to the Internet a year before the sighting, they obviously have nothing to do with the July 7 incident. Other photos accompanying news accounts of this incident show a rocket launch, probably that of the Russian Progress M-06M supply ship launched to the International Space Station on June 30.

However, it is significant that the brilliant Venus in the evening sky at that time, was nearing its maximum brightness before setting about two-and-a-half hours after the sun. One would think it impossible for a group of educated and seemingly rational people to mistake the brilliant planet Venus for a UFO, but experience shows otherwise. "No single object has been misinterpreted as a 'fly-

ing saucer' more often than the planet Venus. The study of these mistakes proves quite instructive, for it shows beyond all possible dispute the limitations of sensory perception and the weakness of accounts relating shapes and motions of point sources or objects with small apparent diameters," wrote the well-known pro-UFOlogist Jacques Vallee in his 1966 book *Challenge to Science*.

A brief video snippet of the "UFO" about twenty seconds into a Chinese-language news report on the incident shows a tiny, bright dot against a dark sky (see <http://tinyurl.com/2c9ft7o>). It might be a camcorder image of Venus, although the slight fuzziness on the left side may possibly result from an off-axis image. Alternatively, it might instead show the plumes of a distant rocket launch. Without more informa-

tion, we cannot say for sure. Officials said that the object did not turn up on radar. Ruan Zhouchang, spokesperson for the Xiaoshan Airport in Hangzhou, said through an interpreter, “There was an unknown object seen in the skies over the airport. So according to our regulations we had to close the airspace. Aircraft movements were suspended from 8:45 PM to 9:41 PM.” However, the photo accompanying that news report, supposedly showing the object, appeared to be that of a high-altitude con-

crew reported seeing just one bright object, not two, Maillot concluded that the “UFO” reported by the crew *was* Venus and not some separate object (www.ufologie.net/htm/afp270100.htm).

An official investigation by Chinese aviation experts was launched into the incident at Xiaoshan Airport. They concluded that the object probably was “an airplane on descent reflecting light” (see <http://tinyurl.com/2bw272q>), one which apparently kept descending for an hour or more. They said it might also have

a mostly-cloudy and not-yet-dark sky (see www.whatsonxiamen.com/news13305.html), but it’s not clear if the illustration is supposed to be an actual photo of the incident or a reconstruction using photo editing software (even if claimed otherwise, it’s probably the latter).

Several explanations for this sighting come to mind. Witnesses may have seen a display involving searchlights or lasers from a distance. I witnessed once—and only once, in my many years of sky-gazing—a rare phenomenon of a mock-Jupiter, essentially the same thing as a mock-Sun or “sun dog,” which looks like a vertical ribbon hanging in the sky. I glimpsed it only briefly before an approaching front of cirrus clouds covered it. Possibly the witnesses may have seen a very rare phenomenon of that sort, although I suspect that the clouds containing the ice crystals that were creating the phenomenon would have obliterated the sky before the object count got to fifty. Or, since this account contains very few details and does not contain the full name of any witness, the whole story may be made up. Such are the circumstances one often encounters when one starts to critically investigate UFO claims.

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trail (see <http://tinyurl.com/2vd2zuz>).

A 2001 incident occurring at the Barnaul Airport in southern Siberia sounds very much like the incident at the Xiaoshan Airport. The Agence-France Presse reported from Moscow on January 27, 2001:

An airport in southern Siberia was shut down for an hour and a half on Friday when an unidentified flying object (UFO) was detected hovering above its runway, the Interfax news agency reported. The crew of an Il-76 cargo aircraft of the company “Altai” refused to take off, claiming they saw a luminescent object hovering above the runway of the [*sic*] Siberia’s Barnaul airport, local aviation company director Ivan Komarov was quoted as saying.

As in Hangzhou, nothing appeared on the radar. UFO investigator Eric Maillot—from the Cercle Zetétique, a French rationalist organization—looked into this case. He discovered that the time and direction of the UFO matched the position of Venus. And because the

been an “unexpected flying vehicle,” whatever that is. Imagine how embarrassing it would be to have to conclude, “Air Traffic Controllers at one of our major Chinese airports mistook Venus for an unknown hovering aircraft.”

Whatever may or may not have hovered above Hangzhou, a feverish UFO excitement seemed to grip the region. On July 14, from about 8–9 PM, a UFO was reported in Shaping Park in Chongqing. This sighting also sounds very much like Venus. But according to the Chinese newspaper *Southeast Express*, at about 11:30 PM on July 9, two men in Xiamen reported seeing “dozens of vertical luminous beams” in the sky. According to one witness, identified only as Mr. Wang, “At first, there were only five of them, hanging very low in the sky, but after a short while, the number increased to about fifty, and they were higher and higher, just like a stave hanging in the sky.” The story was accompanied by an impressive-looking photo showing hovering yellow lights in

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In the July/August issue of the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER, I reported on the stinging comments made by James Carrion when he resigned as head of MUFON, the largest UFO group in the United States. He described the UFO phenomenon as being based in “humans deceiving humans,” which is no less than rank heresy to the mostly hardcore UFOlogists in MUFON, to whom UFOs must be extraterrestrial spacecraft. Now Carrion has announced the formation of the *Center for UFO Truth* (CUT), which according to him is “not a UFO organization nor is it affiliated in any way with Ufology. Instead CUT is a historical research organization focused on examining the question long ignored by historians: was the UFO subject purposely created by the United States and its allies as part of a cold war operation and perpetuated to this day for national security reasons?” (see <http://tinyurl.com/UFOtruth>).

Almost as soon as this announce-

ment hit the Internet, some of UFOlogy's wolves started howling at Carrion, as he described in his next blog posting, "Blasphemy Will Get You Stoned." He also relates what happened when he presented his theory of psi-war UFO deception at the UFO Crash Retrieval Conference in Las Vegas in 2009. "I realized that presenting a human theory for the origin of UFOs at a UFO conference is tantamount to blasphemy."

I don't think that Carrion is going down the right path here. I don't see how the CIA could have manipulated Kenneth Arnold, Ray Palmer, and the other founding fathers of UFOlogy, or why they would want to. I think that the UFO subject owes its existence not to spy wars but primarily to processes that Charles Mackay described in his book *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*. However, it is entirely possible that some governments (including our own) may have exploited the public's existing belief in UFOs for their own ends. I commend Carrion for having the courage to go his own way, and I wish him well. Even if his journey doesn't lead to "UFO truth," I'm sure he'll turn up some interesting stuff along the way.

By a very interesting coincidence—if it *is* a coincidence (cue sardonic laughter)—a book just published in the United Kingdom makes the same kind of argument as Carrion: that the U.S. government has been secretly *promoting* belief in UFOs. This goes against the conventional UFOlogy belief that the government is trying to cover up the ex-

istence of UFOs. Mark Pilkington, a writer and filmmaker living in London, is author of *Mirage Men: A Journey into Disinformation, Paranoia, and UFOs*. According to the publisher's blurb, "*Mirage Men* explores the strange and symbiotic relationship between the U.S. military and intelligence agencies and the community who believes strongly that UFOs have visited earth." The review in the U.K.'s *Daily Mail* says, "According to Pilkington, the campaign to promote the idea of UFOs was masterminded in the Fifties by the head of the CIA, Allen Welsh Dulles. More recently, many of the leaked fake documents and bogus stories seem to have come from the U.S. Air Force's Office of Special Investigations (AFOSI)" (see <http://tinyurl.com/28oknqb>). Of course, by the 1950s, flying saucers had already promoted themselves quite effectively to the public without any help from the government, and Pilkington's claim that the famous UFO contactee George Adamski was a victim of CIA deception—complete with alien impersonators in fake saucers—is implausible in the extreme.

Still, it is undeniable that one of the early directors of the National Investigations Committee on Aerial Phenomena (NICAP), the most influential UFO group of the 1950s and '60s, was Roscoe H. Hillenkoetter, who was also the first director of the CIA. Another early NICAP director was former CIA "psychological warfare" chief Colonel Joseph Bryan III, and there were at least two other NICAP directors in the CIA (see <http://tinyurl.com/NICAP-CIA>). Were

UFOs just a personal interest of theirs, or were UFOs related to their CIA work? Enough persons with a CIA or other intelligence background have turned up in UFO circles over the years to make the question an interesting one. Even the well-known skeptical believer, the late Karl Pflock, was a former CIA man.

These men should not be confused with what seems like a small army of deceivers and impostors who claim to have intelligence and/or a military background that turns out to be simply made up. For example, a man originally known only as "Source A," who claimed to be a high-ranking Navy officer, gave "confirmation" of tales of U.S. military officials meeting with extraterrestrials. He was recently identified as Richard Theilmann, an impostor who apparently never served in the Navy; he wore a chest full of medals that he never earned (see <http://tinyurl.com/SourceA>).

More puzzling is the confession of UFOlogist William Moore, co-author of *The Roswell Incident* and *The Philadelphia Experiment*, who famously told the audience at a MUFON conference in 1989 that he had been recruited by intelligence agencies to spy on the somewhat unhinged UFOlogist, the late Paul Bennewitz. If Moore is telling the truth, this supposed spy mission makes no sense. If he's not, why would he make up a story that has caused everyone in UFOlogy to revile him? Of course, that assumes that Moore was acting rationally, and in UFOlogy rationality is often in short supply. ■

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