

China's Hu praises astronauts for space advance

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Chinese President Hu Jintao on Tuesday told the three astronauts aboard a space capsule they had pushed forward China's space programme, after they carried out the country's first manual docking.

Hu spoke to the crew -- including China's first woman in space Liu Yang -- by telephone two days after they carried out the highly technical manoeuvre, a milestone in an ambitious programme to build a space station by the end of the decade.

"The smooth completion of the manual docking shows China fully grasps [space docking](#) technology," Hu said in a conversation with the astronauts that was broadcast live on state television.

"You have made outstanding contributions to the development of China's manned space programme."

Beijing sees its space programme as a symbol of its global stature, growing technical expertise, and the Communist Party's success in turning around the fortunes of the once poverty-stricken nation.

Jing Haipeng, who is leading the astronaut team, told the Chinese president that the three were in good condition after 10 days in space. State media said the spacecraft could return to earth on Friday.

"[Chinese astronauts](#) have our own home in the space. We feel proud of our great country," Jing said, as the three astronauts dressed in blue

jumpsuits stood to receive the call from Hu.

The third member of the team is Liu Wang, who carried out the manual docking between the Shenzhou-9 vessel and the orbiting Tiangong-1 module following the spacecraft's [launch](#) on June 16.

The complicated manoeuvre was the main goal of the 13-day Shenzhou mission, testing the docking technique needed to be able to construct a space station -- which China aims to do by 2020.

The two spacecraft first came together in an automatic docking on June 18, and several hours later the three astronauts on board Shenzhou-9 entered the Tiangong-1 -- another first for China.

Jing told Hu that the group was now carrying out experiments in [space](#), but he gave no details.

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