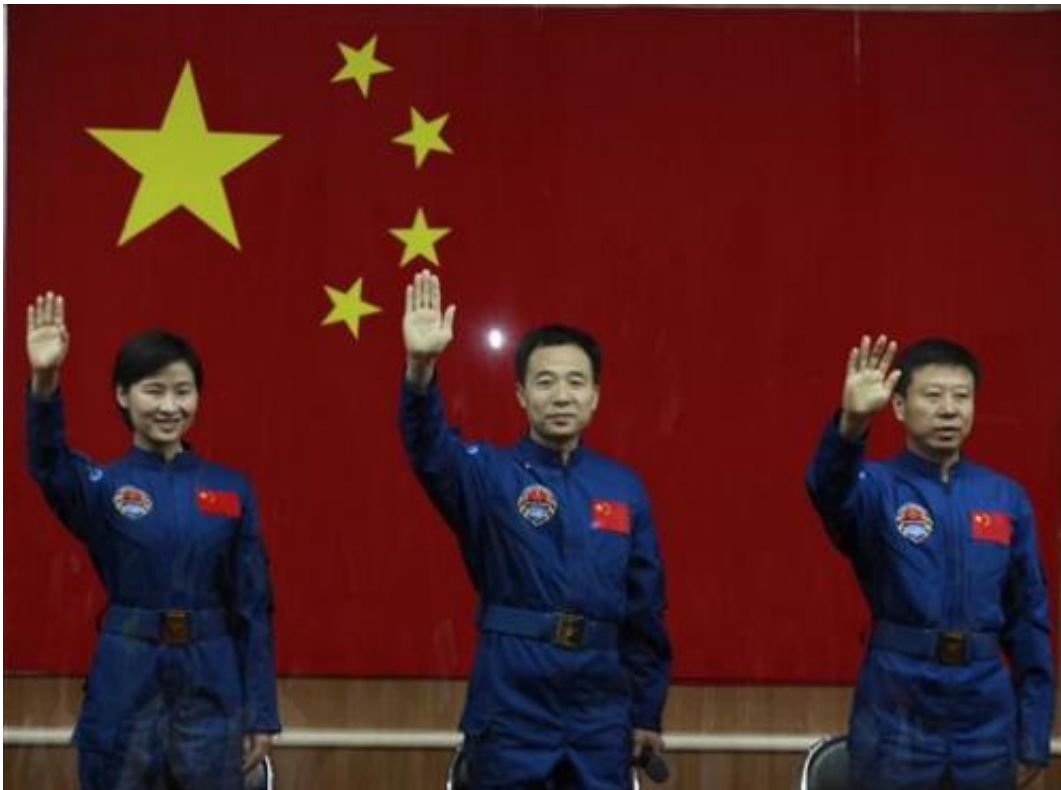


China sending first woman in space to test module (Update 2)

June 15 2012, by NG HAN GUAN



Chinese astronauts from left., Liu Yang, Jing Haipeng and Liu Wang wave from behind a glass enclosure as they meet the press at the Jiuquan satellite launch center near Jiuquan in western China's Gansu province, Friday, June 15, 2012. China will send its first woman into space Saturday along with two other astronauts to work on a temporary space station for about a week, in a key step toward becoming the only third nation to set up a permanent base in orbit. (AP Photo/Ng Han Guan)

(AP) — China will send its first woman and two other astronauts into space Saturday to work on a temporary space station for about a week, in a key step toward becoming only the third nation to set up a permanent base in orbit.

Liu Yang, a 34-year-old air force pilot, and two male colleagues will be launched Saturday aboard the Shenzhou 9 spacecraft, which will dock with the bus-sized Tiangong 1 space module now orbiting at 343 kilometers (213 miles) above the Earth.

"Arranging for women astronauts to fly is not only a must for the development of human spaceflight, but also the expectation of the public," space program spokeswoman Wu Ping said. "This is a landmark event."

Two of the astronauts will live and work inside the module to test its life-support systems while the third will remain in the capsule to deal with any unexpected emergencies. Wu said the mission will last more than 10 days before the astronauts return to Earth in the capsule, landing on Western Chinese grasslands with the help of parachutes.

The rocket began fueling Friday at the Jiuguan Satellite Launch Center on the edge of the Gobi desert in northern China, Wu told reporters at the center. The launch is scheduled for 6:37 p.m. (1237 GMT) Saturday, she said.

Joining Liu, a major, is veteran astronaut and mission commander Jing Haipeng and newcomer Liu Wang, both air force senior colonels.

"You could say this mission is a combination of the old and the new and coordination between the male and female," Wu said.

Success in docking — and in living and working aboard the Tiangong 1

— would smooth the way for more ambitious projects, including the creation of a permanent space station and missions to the moon, and add to China's prestige in line with its growing economic prowess.



Chinese officials present a scale model of the Shenzhou 9 module docking with China's Tiangong 1 space module and 3 astronauts during a press conference at the Jiuquan satellite launch center near Jiuquan in western China's Gansu province, Friday, June 15, 2012. China will launch three astronauts, including a mother of one who flies transport planes, to live and work on a space station for about a week, a major step in its goal of becoming only the third nation with a permanent base orbiting Earth. (AP Photo/Ng Han Guan)

China is hoping to join the United States and Russia as the only countries to have sent independently maintained space stations into orbit. It already is in the exclusive three-nation club to have launched a spacecraft with astronauts on its own.

The mission demonstrates China's commitment to "long-term human spaceflight" and marks a test of "the technological capabilities requisite for a future permanent space station," said Joan Johnson-Freese, an expert on the Chinese space program at the U.S. Naval War College in Rhode Island.

Still, that is some years away. The Tiangong 1 is only a prototype, and the plan is to replace it with a permanent — and bigger — space station due for completion around 2020.

The permanent station will weigh about 60 tons, slightly smaller than NASA's Skylab of the 1970s and about one-sixth the size of the 16-nation International Space Station.

Analysts say China's exclusion from the ISS, largely on objections from the United States, was one of the key spurs for it to pursue an independent program 20 years ago, which reaches a high point with Saturday's launch.



Wu ping, spokesperson for China's manned flight program, reacts as a solar panel drop from a scale model of the Shenzhou 9 module docking with China's Tiangong 1 space module and 3 astronauts during a press conference at the Jiuquan satellite launch center near Jiuquan in western China's Gansu province,

Friday, June 15, 2012. China will launch three astronauts, including a mother of one who flies transport planes, to live and work on a space station for about a week, a major step in its goal of becoming only the third nation with a permanent base orbiting Earth. (AP Photo/Ng Han Guan)

The three astronauts will perform medical tests on the effect of weightlessness on the human body, as well as other scientific and engineering tasks on Tiangong, or Heavenly Palace, which was put into orbit in September.

Wu said the capsule would first dock by remote control, then later separate and dock again manually, to prepare the technology for a permanent space station.

"After we have realized both the auto and manual docking technology, we can completely master this technology," she said.

China first launched a man into space in 2003, followed by a two-man mission in 2005 and a three-man trip in 2008 that featured China's first space walk.

In November 2011, the unmanned Shenzhou 8 successfully docked with the Tiangong 1 by remote control — twice to show the durability of the system.



A Chinese official arranges astronaut figures with a scale model of the Shenzhou 9 module docking with China's Tiangong 1 space module to present them at a press conference at the Jiuquan satellite launch center near Jiuquan in western China's Gansu province, Friday, June 15, 2012. China will launch three astronauts, including a mother of one who flies transport planes, to live and work on a space station for about a week, a major step in its goal of becoming only the third nation with a permanent base orbiting Earth. (AP Photo/Ng Han Guan)

While operating with limited resources, China's space program is a source of huge pride and enjoys top-level political and military backing. This has left it largely immune from the budgetary pressures affecting NASA, although China doesn't say what it spends on the program.

The selection of the first female astronaut is giving the program a publicity boost. State media have gushed about Liu, reporting she once successfully landed her plane after a bird strike disabled one of its engines.

Shortly after Wu's news conference, reporters were driven to a second building for a question and answer session with the astronauts, who were dressed in blue jump suits and seated behind a glass partition.

"We won't let you down. We will work together and successfully complete this mission," said Liu Yang, who like China's other female astronaut candidates is married and has a child, a requirement because of fears that exposure to space radiation could affect fertility.

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