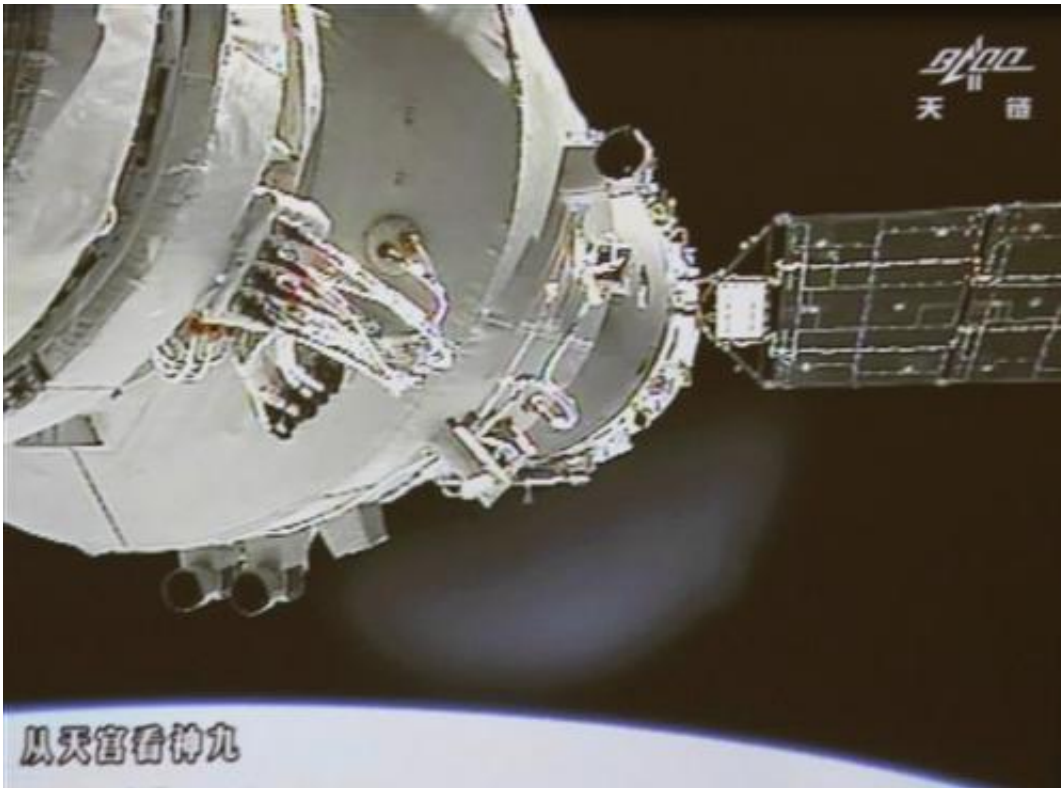


Chinese spacecraft docks with orbiting module

June 24 2012



In this image made off the screen at the Beijing Aerospace Control Center in Beijing and released by China's Xinhua News Agency, Shenzhou-9 spacecraft and Tiangong-1 lab module, partly seen on left, are conjoined again Sunday, June 24, 2012. Three Chinese astronauts Sunday successfully completed a manual docking between of the spacecraft and the orbiting module, the first such attempt in China's history of space exploration. (AP Photo/Beijing Aerospace Control Center via Xinhua) NO SALES

(AP) — A Chinese spacecraft carrying three astronauts carried out a manual docking with an orbiting module on Sunday, a first for the country as it strives to match American and Russian exploits in space.

The Shenzhou 9 capsule completed the maneuver with the Tiangong 1 module shortly before 1 p.m. (0500 GMT). The docking was shown live on national television. It follows a docking last week that was carried out by remote control from a ground base in China.

The Chinese astronauts have been living and working in the module for the past week as part of preparations for manning a permanent space station. They returned to the Shenzhou 9 capsule early Sunday and disconnected in preparation for the manual re-connection.



In this image made off the screen at the Beijing Aerospace Control Center in Beijing and released by China's Xinhua News Agency, Shenzhou-9 manned

spacecraft parts from the orbiting Tiangong-1 space lab, partly seen on left, to prepare for the country's first manual space docking Sunday, June 24, 2012. The Chinese spacecraft and the space lab were joined together by an automated docking on June 18. (AP Photo/Beijing Aerospace Control Center via Xinhua)
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The crew includes 33-year-old Liu Yang, an air force pilot and China's first female space traveler.

Liu is joined by mission commander and veteran astronaut Jing Haipeng, 45, and crew mate Liu Wang, 43.

Their mission, which is expected to last at least 10 days, is China's fourth manned mission. Shenzhou 9 launched June 16 from the Jiuquan center on the edge of the Gobi desert in northern China.

China is hoping to join the United States and Russia as the only countries to send independently maintained space stations into orbit. It is already one of just three nations to have launched manned spacecraft on their own.

Another manned mission to the module is planned later this year. Possible future missions could include sending a man to the moon.

The Tiangong 1, which was launched last year, is due to be replaced by a permanent space station around 2020. That station is to 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](#).

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