

China's Shenzhou-10 spacecraft returns to Earth (Update)

June 26 2013, by Kelly Olsen



In this photo released by China's Xinhua News Agency, the re-entry capsule of China's Shenzhou 10 spacecraft lands in Siziwang Banner, north China's Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region on Wednesday, June 26, 2013. The space capsule with three astronauts has safely landed on grasslands in northern China after a 15-day trip to the country's prototype space station. (AP Photo/Xinhua, Ren Junchuan)

China completed its longest manned space mission Wednesday as its Shenzhou-10 spacecraft and three crew members safely returned to Earth, in a major step towards Beijing's goal of building a permanent space station by 2020.

The return capsule touched down at 8:07 am (0007 GMT), live state TV footage showed, kicking up a cloud of dust on the grasslands of north China's Inner Mongolia region.

Technicians quickly gathered to open the craft's hatch and crawled inside to check the crew's safety. Applause erupted at mission control when word came through that they were in good condition.

A smiling commander Nie Haisheng was the first to emerge from the capsule at 9:31 am.

He was followed by female astronaut Wang Yaping, who also smiled and waved, and Zhang Xiaoguang.

"At this moment what I most want to say is that space is our dream and our motherland is forever our home," Nie said.

"I wish our motherland to thrive even more and our people to become happier and happier. I thank the entire nation for their concern and support for us."

The 15-day Shenzhou-10 ("Divine Vessel") mission is seen as another step in Beijing's ambitious objective of building a space station.

Highlights of the mission included docking with China's orbiting space module Tiangong-1 in tests intended to prepare for the building of the space station.

Wang delivered a video class to children across the country from space last week, showing how a variety of objects—from a bubble of water to a spinning toy—behave in zero gravity. The crew also conducted medical experiments during the mission.

China first sent a human into space only in 2003 and its capabilities still lag behind the United States and Russia. But its programme is highly ambitious and includes plans to land a man on the moon.

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

Vice Premier Zhang Gaoli, in a congratulatory message delivered at the Beijing Aerospace Control Center and shown on state TV, cited "the staunch leadership of the party central committee with comrade Xi Jinping as general secretary" as a factor in the mission's success.

"Our motherland and people will forever engrave in our memory your distinguished success," he added, referring to all involved in the mission.

Users of Weibo, China's Twitter-like microblogs, also offered congratulations.

"Heroes have returned victoriously," read one posted under the username Christina from Kaifeng Radio, a station in Kaifeng in the central province of Henan.

The space programme has been heavily promoted on Chinese media.

On Monday, Xi, who besides heading the party is also China's president, spoke to the crew via video call.

"The space dream is part of the dream to make China stronger," Xi told them, the state Xinhua news agency reported, referencing his signature "Chinese dream" concept.

"With the development of space programmes, the Chinese people will take bigger strides to explore further into space," he said from the control centre.

Xi had travelled to the Jiuquan space centre in the Gobi desert to witness the blast-off on June 11.

China plans to launch the Tiangong-2 space lab around 2015, the official Xinhua news agency reported Wednesday, citing Wang Zhaoyao, director of China's manned space programme office.

Wang also discussed plans to put in orbit an experimental core module of a space station around 2018, with the manned space station itself being built around 2020.

Morris Jones, an independent space analyst based in Sydney, Australia, called the latest mission a success and said it bodes well for China's space ambitions.

"China has truly mastered the art of space flight and is now ready to begin work on a space station," he told AFP.

China is only the third nation after the now-defunct Soviet Union—now Russia—and the US to carry out manned space missions.

Other space programmes such as in Japan and Europe have chosen not to go the manned route on their own and instead cooperate with others such as the US and Russia to put their astronauts in space, Jones said.

"China is forging a more independent path where they are not dependent on other nations for their basic space capabilities," he added.

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