# Onward and upward as China marks 10 years of manned spaceflight

October 14 2013, by Felicia Sonmez

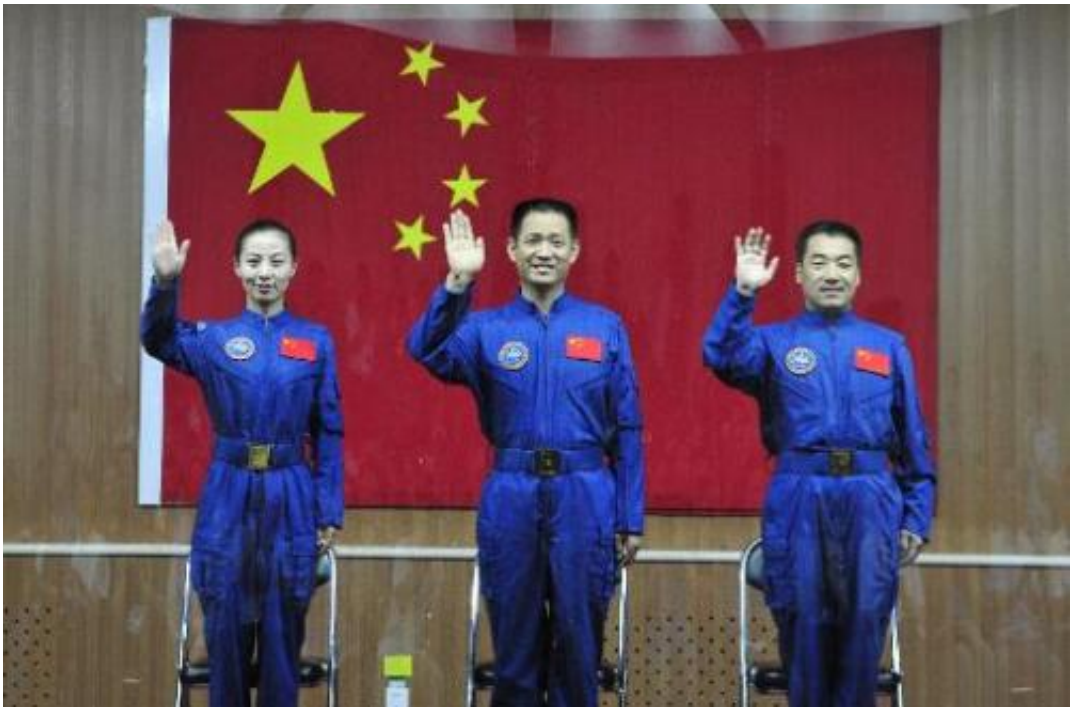

Image taken on June 10, 2013 shows crew members of Shenzhou-10 (L-R) Wang Yaping, Nie Haisheng and Zhang Xiaoguang at a press conference in Jiuquan, China

China marks 10 years since it first sent a human into space Tuesday, with its ambitious programme rocketing ahead while rival NASA is largely closed due to the US government shutdown.

Yang Liwei orbited the Earth 14 times during his 21-hour flight aboard

the Shenzhou 5 in 2003, blazing a trail into the cosmos for China.

More than 40 years after Yuri Gagarin's groundbreaking journey, the mission made China only the third country after the former Soviet Union and the US to carry out an independent manned spaceflight.

At the time, Beijing was so concerned about the viability of the mission that at the last minute it cancelled a nationwide live television broadcast of the launch.

But since then, China has sent a total of 10 astronauts—eight men and two women—into space on five separate missions, and launched an orbiting space module, Tiangong-1.

Its latest manned trip, the Shenzhou 10 in June, was not only greeted with wall-to-wall TV coverage, but also attended by Chinese President Xi Jinping, who told the crew their 15-day mission represented a step towards making the country stronger and a "space dream" for the Chinese people.

Chinese firms have seized on the anniversary to promote goods from watches to engine oil, including a 9,800 yuan ($1,600) set of teapots said to be signed by all its space voyagers.

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

Its ambitious plans for the future ultimately include landing a Chinese citizen on the moon, with an unmanned moon rover to be launched by the end of this year, a fourth launch centre opening in two years' time, and a permanent orbiting space station to be completed by 2023.

Around the same time, the International Space Station operated by the US, Russia, Japan, Canada and Europe will be retired.

Image taken on June 11, 2013 shows the Shenzhou-10 rocket blasting off from the Jiuquan space centre in China

It is a symbolic coincidence and a reflection of shifting power balances back on the Earth, analysts say.

The rapid, purposeful development of China's space programme is in sharp contrast with the US, which launched its final space shuttle flight in 2011 and whose next step remains uncertain amid waning domestic

support for spending federal dollars on space exploration.

Last week space conference organisers said NASA personnel were not legally allowed to read their emails due to the US government shutdown, and visitors to NASA's website were met with a notice reading: "Due to the lapse in federal government funding, this website is not available. We sincerely regret this inconvenience."

## More than military benefits

Yang's flight into space 10 years ago "was a highly visible sign of China's rapid technological and industrial progress", said Morris Jones, an independent space analyst based in Sydney. "The implications go beyond spaceflight."

Much of the technology used in space exploration can have military benefits, such as in tracking missiles, experts say.

But they also note that China has reaped other, less-tangible advantages from the programme.

Image taken on November 3, 2002 shows visitors next to a Long March 3-B rocket at the Zhuhai Air Show

"The regional benefits that China has gotten from being seen as the regional space leader have really translated into military and economic prestige," said Joan Johnson-Freese, a professor of national security affairs at the US Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, and an expert on Chinese space activities.

"It's got economic advantages in that the rest of the world doesn't see China as just capable of producing knock-off designer clothes," she added. "It has benefits in terms of education; students get interested in technology."

Yang Liwei, China's first astronaut, delivers a speech on April 11, 2011 in Moscow

China is still behind the achievements of the US and Soviet Union—both of which it has learned from—and years away from launching its space station.

But Yang himself, now deputy director of China's manned space agency, said it has already received proposals from developing countries interested in riding its coattails into orbit.

"We would like to train astronauts from other countries and organisations that have such a demand, and we would be glad to provide

trips to foreign astronauts," he said at a United Nations/China Workshop on Human Space Technology in Beijing last month, according to the official Xinhua news service.

Pakistan has said it hopes to be among the first to take the opportunity.

Image taken on June 29, 2012 shows China's first female astronaut Liu Yang being carried out of the Shenzhou-9 spacecraft in a remote area of northern China

The timing of China's space station launch and the absence of US activities "will de facto make them a space leader", said Johnson-Freese.

China's 30-year space plan was "a long-term approach that has long-term advantages", she added.

"Technologically, it's not that China is leaping forward," she said. "It's that they have the political will because they don't have to respond to the will of the electorate to keep this going, which of course is very hard in democracies."

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