Rocket blasts off carrying first Chinese crew to new space station
17 June 2021, by Ludovic Ehret

Nie Haisheng (C), Liu Boming (R) and Tang Hongbo will be the first crew on China's new space station.

The first astronauts for China's new space station blasted off Thursday for the country's longest crewed mission to date, a landmark step in establishing Beijing as a major space power.

The trio launched on a Long March-2F rocket for the Tiangong station, where they will spend three months, in a much-anticipated blast-off broadcast live on state TV.

Lift-off happened at 9:22 am (0122 GMT) from the Jiuquan launch centre in northwest China's Gobi desert, with the rocket rising in clouds of smoke against a blue sky.

After about 10 minutes it reached orbit and the solar panels unfolded successfully and now we declare the Shenzhou-12 launch a complete success.

At a ceremony before blastoff, the three astronauts, already wearing their space suits, greeted a crowd of supporters and space workers, who sang the patriotic song "Without the Chinese Communist Party, there would be no new China".

The mission's commander is Nie Haisheng, a decorated air force pilot in the People's Liberation
Army who has already participated in two space missions.

The two other members are also members of the military.

**Space life**

Their Shenzhou-12 spacecraft will dock with the Tianhe main section of the space station, which was placed in orbit on April 29, possibly as soon as six hours after liftoff.

The module has separate living spaces for each of them, a "space treadmill" and bike for exercise, and a communication centre for emails and video calls with ground control.

Huang Weifen of the China Manned Space Program said the astronauts will perform two spacewalks during the mission, both lasting around six or seven hours.

She also said the trio will wear newly-developed spacewalk spacesuits.

The launch represents a matter of huge prestige in China, as Beijing prepares to mark the 100th anniversary of the ruling Communist Party on July 1 with a massive propaganda campaign.

To prepare for the mission, the crew has undergone more than 6,000 hours of training, including hundreds of underwater somersaults in full space gear.

The Chinese space agency is planning a total of 11 launches through to the end of next year, including three more manned missions which will deliver two lab modules to expand the 70-tonne station, and supplies and crew members.

China's space ambitions have been fuelled in part by a US ban on its astronauts on the International Space Station, a collaboration between the United States, Russia, Canada, Europe and Japan.

**China’s plan to build a space station**

- 11 launches are scheduled to deliver all the planned modules
- First astronauts to board care module in orbit will visit in June 2021
- Space station expected to be operational by 2022

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Factfile on China's planned space station, scheduled to be operational by 2022.

It is China's first crewed mission in nearly five years.
China's astronauts have undergone over 6,000 hours of training for the first crewed mission to the Tiangong space station.

It is due for retirement after 2024, even though NASA said it could potentially remain functional beyond 2028.

Tiangong will be much smaller than the ISS, and is expected to have a lifespan of at least 10 years.

China has said it would be open to international collaboration on its space station although it has yet to give specific details.

Zhou Jianping, chief designer at the space programme, said "foreign astronauts are certainly going to enter the Chinese space station one day."