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## Industry hails HK's first astronaut

Business leaders say space mission marks a boost for city's innovation

By CHAI HUA in Hong Kong  
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Business leaders have applauded the selection of Lai Ka-ying — Hong Kong's first astronaut — for the Shenzhou XXIII manned spaceflight, calling it a historic breakthrough for the city, particularly in the aerospace sector.

Wingco Lo Kam-wing, president of the Chinese Manufacturers' Association of Hong Kong, said the fact that a local astronaut has been chosen to join the national space mission underscores the central government's strong commitment to supporting the city's innovation and technology sector, as well as talent development.

Payload specialist Lai — an alumna of the University of

Hong Kong — together with mission commander and spaceflight engineer Colonel Zhu Yangzhu and spacecraft pilot Colonel Zhang Zhiyuan, successfully docked with the Tiangong Space Station and met with the outgoing Shenzhou XXI crew on Monday morning.

Lo said payload specialists are responsible for critical tasks, such as conducting space station scientific research and aerospace experiments that require profound academic expertise and professional capabilities.

The inclusion of a Hong Kong expert in the nation's space mission demonstrates the strength and maturity of the special administrative region's scientific research-and-talent cultivation system, which continues to nurture high-caliber

professionals, he said.

Lo said aerospace technology is among the key industries that will drive economic upgrading and high-quality economic growth during the 15th Five-Year Plan period (2026-30) and added that it is a clear strategic direction for the SAR.

The participation of a Hong Kong specialist in space exploration will stimulate the development of the city's aerospace-related industries, promote deeper integration between Hong Kong's innovation and technology sector and the national aerospace industry system, and enhance Hong Kong's position as an international innovation and technology center, Lo said.

Yeung Hoi-shan, president of the Hong Kong Commerce and Industry Associations, congratulated the nation for the successful launch, describing it as a "breakthrough" in Hong Kong's history.

He said members of the association watched the live broadcast of the Shenzhou XXIII lift-off ceremony on Sunday night, witnessing the historic moment for Hong Kong's first female astronaut, and expressed immense pride in her achievement.

"The association is actively responding to the national strategic deployment for science and technology development by building robust bridges for technological innovation and economic-trade exchanges between Hong Kong, Macao and the Chinese mainland," Yeung said.

He believes these efforts will accelerate collaborative growth of the science-technology industry in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area, while inspiring industry peers to uphold the aerospace spirit, pursue innovation-driven development, and proactively shoulder the responsibilities of the new era.

# Mission head plans to grow petunias in space

## Shenzhou XXIII commander's passion for the sky blossoms aboard Tiangong

By ZHAO LEI  
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Colonel Zhu Yangzhu, commander of the Shenzhou XXIII mission, said he plans to grow petunias in space during his stay aboard the Tiangong space station.

"I will bring some petunia seeds with me. I plan to plant them once I get aboard the space station and see if they can bloom. I hope they will grow into lovely blossoms."

"I picked petunias because they are fairly easy to grow, and their flowers are quite beautiful. What's more, the blooms give off a vibrant and uplifting vibe, which can cheer people up. Just as we feel delighted seeing flowers and plants growing on home balconies, the same pleasure is even stronger in space. The view of green vegetation, along with blossoms and fruits if they grow, can tremendously brighten our spirits," he said in an earlier interview with reporters at the Astronaut Center of China in Beijing before setting out for the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center in northwestern China for the launch on Sunday night.

Zhu, 39, said Chinese astronauts have a "space garden" inside the Tiangong space station. Recalling his participation in the Shenzhou XVI mission, he said he and his crewmates grew plants, mostly lettuce and green onions.

"We ate them after they matured," he added.

According to Zhu, new planting equipment was sent to Tiangong after his flight, enabling astronauts to harvest more vegetables and fruits.

The astronaut noted that the Shenzhou XXI crew has harvested cherry tomatoes three times in orbit. They also planted wheat, which has begun to form ears. In addition, they have grown three generations of mint.

"We will continue to take care of those plants, and will cultivate carrots during our stay," Zhu said.

### Earth visits

Recalling his first and only spacewalk during the Shenzhou XVI mission, Zhu described the eight-hour activity on July 20, 2023, as "an experience that will stay with me for life."

"The awesome vistas of Earth seen outside the space station are very different from those viewed from inside. Floating out into space, anyone would be instantly overwhelmed by the breathtaking scenery. The blue sky and oceans lie

directly beneath me. As we orbited above the atmosphere, blue skies spread out both ahead and underfoot, with clusters of white clouds drifting far below.

"I also gazed upon deep blue oceans and lush green lands. When passing over deserts, sharply defined stretches of brown and tan terrain came into my sight. Countless rivers were clearly visible as well," the astronaut said.

What struck Zhu the most was a gigantic typhoon eye he observed when the space station flew across the Atlantic Ocean.

"Suspended amid the endless expanse of space, our home planet appears small, yet breathtakingly beautiful in its blue hue. All these magnificent sights have filled me with even greater reverence for life, nature and the universe," he said.

During the spacewalk, the astronauts also soared over the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. The landscape unfolded clearly before Zhu's eyes, with towering snowcapped mountains and the estuary of the Yellow River visible from orbit.

"The land of our motherland lay right in front of me. At that moment, I couldn't help wondering what made our space journey possible. It is our great motherland that sent us into space. Countless space industry workers toil behind every space mission, lifting us high toward the stars," he said.

### Flight path

As one of the first two members of China's third group of astronauts to take part in a space mission, Zhu said he was destined for flight.

When he was a middle school student, Zhu often used pilot training equipment at his school, which cooperates with the People's Liberation Army Air Force in selecting students for flight school.

In his fifth year in middle school, Zhu planned to apply for an Air Force flight training program. However, his head teacher believed he had great potential for scientific research and persuaded him to reconsider. Still, his passion for the sky never faded.

"I said to myself: 'If I can't fly into the sky myself, I'll dedicate myself to researching flight technologies instead,'" Zhu said.

Before taking the national college entrance examination in 2005, he applied for a major in spacecraft systems and engineering at the National University of Defense Technology.

His second choice was aircraft design and engineering at Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics.

Thanks to his high scores, Zhu was admitted to the College of Aerospace Science and Engineering at the National University of Defense Technology in Changsha in the summer of 2005.

After obtaining a bachelor's degree, he went on to pursue master's and doctoral degrees in fluid mechanics at the same university.

After a decade of study, Zhu graduated in 2015 with the highest academic score in his major.

He was then assigned to an infrastructure construction unit of the PLA, where he assumed his first engineering post. In the position, he led a group of soldiers working at construction sites in remote mountainous areas. He also took part in a postdoctoral program run by the Army Engineering University of PLA in Nanjing, Jiangsu province.

In 2017, Zhu was transferred to the Space Engineering University under the former PLA Strategic Support Force to help establish a mechanics laboratory.

In the summer of 2018, he learned about the selection of China's third-generation astronauts and decided to apply.

"I didn't make it into the Air Force to fly fighter jets in blue skies, but then came this opportunity for me to fly spacecraft outside Earth's atmosphere, so I was determined to try my best to chase it," he said.

After many rigorous tests, Zhu stood out among thousands of applicants and was recruited by the PLA Astronaut Division in October 2020. Due to his lack of flight experience, Zhu found it difficult at first to learn spacecraft control operations at the Astronaut Center of China.

To master the skills as quickly as possible, he made full use of a desktop simulator for manual rendezvous and docking installed in his apartment, conducting extra training after daily sessions. After thousands of hours of practice, he developed solid muscle memory and eventually achieved precise manual rendezvous and docking operations.

On May 30, 2023, Zhu was launched into space, beginning a five-month orbital mission as the spacecraft engineer for the Shenzhou XVI mission.

"I think the experience of my first mission is very important because it let me know exactly what and how I work in space," Zhu said before setting out on the Shenzhou XXIII mission.

## High spirits



**Above:** The crew members of the Shenzhou XXI. Zhang Lu (front left), Zhang Hongchang (left) and Wu Fei (second from left) and those of the Shenzhou XXIII. Zhu Yangzhu (front right), Lai Ka-ying (right) and Zhang Zhiyuan (second from right) meet and pose for a photo aboard the Tiangong space station on Monday.

JIN LIWANG / XINHUA  
Left: The crew members of the Shenzhou XXI engage in a training session on March 4. XINHUA

## Spaceflight fulfills childhood dream

By ZHAO LEI  
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Colonel Zhang Zhiyuan, an astronaut of the Shenzhou XXIII mission, grew up fascinated by the wonders of navigating the skies.

"When I was a little boy, my friends and I usually played in the farm fields. Back then, we would often hear military aircraft roaring past overhead. We would run after the planes and shout excitedly. At that time, I held pilots in great admiration and thought this profession was an exceptionally noble calling," said the Gansu province native, who will celebrate his 40th birthday aboard the Tiangong space station next month.

Memories of the astronaut's passion for flying remain vivid in the mind of his father, Zhang Jukun, a retired schoolteacher.

"One day, his mother and I were working in the fields while he played beside the ridge. A plane flew across the sky, and he spotted it and kept chasing after it, running about 400 meters," Zhang Jukun told Gansu Daily. "I pulled him back and told him he could never catch up with an aircraft. Right away he asked me, 'When can I get to fly a plane myself?' And I answered him, 'If you keep working hard, you will make it someday.'"

In the years that followed, Zhang Zhiyuan grew into a caring and sensible young man. He often helped with farm work on the family's land after school.

He studied diligently throughout his primary and middle school years, consistently achieving above-average grades, while never

letting go of his dream of flying.

When Zhang Zhiyuan turned 19, a long-awaited opportunity arrived: recruitment officers from the People's Liberation Army Air Force came to his school, Baityn No 1 High School.

He decided to try and soon stood out among the more than 200 candidates. After passing a series of rigorous tests, he became the only student from his school admitted to the Aviation University of Air Force in Changchun, Jilin province.

Throughout his university years, he trained to high standards, noting that "the path from a flight student to a qualified pilot is filled with tough elimination rounds. To attain outstanding physical fitness, I stuck to extra training every single day."

After graduating, he was assigned to a fighter jet unit and rose through the ranks. He took part in numerous combat exercises, accumulating more than 1,200 hours of flight operations.

In the summer of 2018, Zhang was playing basketball with his comrades when a fellow officer rushed over with news that China was recruiting its third generation of astronauts.

He and his teammates immediately stopped the game. After reviewing the recruitment criteria, he signed up without hesitation.

"I have paid close attention to China's manned space program ever since the Shenzhou V mission. I was deeply impressed by how perfectly every mission concluded. Still, I never dared to dream that I could get the chance to become an astronaut myself before that day," he said.

Zhang advanced through successive selection rounds, undergoing strict medical examinations, psychological evaluations, and an unforgettable first experience in centrifuge training.

"Inside the centrifuge cabin over me, and my body resisted instinctively. My head swayed back and forth and side to side, yet I had to stay conscious and answer questions at any time," he said.

"Long after that, I grasped the skills for centrifuge training and realized how futile it was to rely on physical strength alone."

Apart from physical conditioning, mastering complex spaceflight theory felt like a long-distance endurance run. He pushed himself to understand and memorize every formula, principle and data set.

As a result of his dedication and perseverance, he was selected for the Shenzhou XXIII mission, finally realizing his dream of flying beyond the atmosphere.

"The dream of flying into space is built upon endless learning, rigorous training and steady accumulation of know-how. There are no shortcuts on this journey."

Over the past years, I have encountered training bottlenecks and felt disappointed after failing to be selected for previous crews. It is exactly these experiences that have taught me the essence of perseverance. True devotion lies in giving it your all even when you fully understand how tough pursuing a dream can be," he said at the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center on Saturday, a day before embarking on his maiden space journey.