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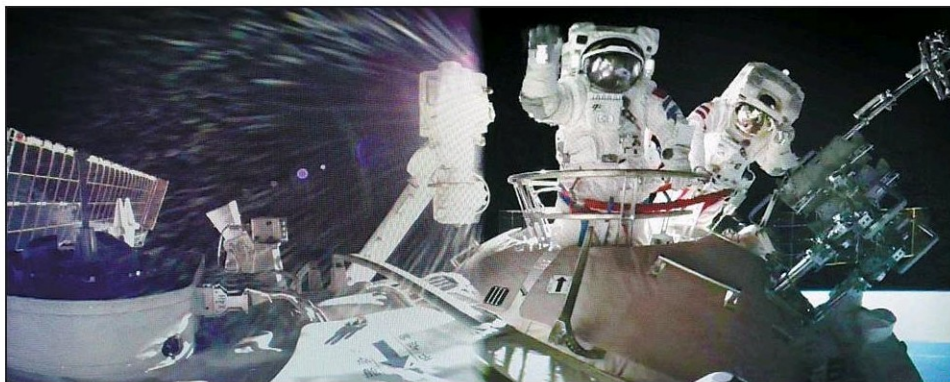
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Major General Nie Haisheng, the Shenzhou XII mission's commander, and Major General Liu Boming are seen waving to the camera during the crew's second extravehicular activity, commonly known as a spacewalk, on Friday. XU BU / FOR CHINA DAILY

Shenzhou XII astronauts conduct second spacewalk

By ZHAO LEI

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The Shenzhou XII mission crew carried out their second extravehicular activity, commonly known as a spacewalk, on Friday outside the core module of China's permanent space station, according to the China Manned Space Agency.

The agency said that Major General Nie Haisheng, the mission commander, and Major General Liu Boming closed the hatch of the airlock cabin at 2:33 pm after flying back into the core module. They worked outside the craft for about six hours, completing their tasks nearly one hour ahead of the original schedule.

Nie and Liu opened the hatch at

8:38 am and later floated out. The pair installed and adjusted equipment, demonstrated their extravehicular suits, and tested the large robotic arm and other spacewalk-related devices, the agency said in a statement.

They also used cameras on their spacesuits and the spacecraft to take pictures for each other, including some striking scenes of Nie standing on the robotic arm against the backdrop of the Earth's oceans and clouds.

Another crew member — Senior Colonel Tang Hongbo, who is taking part in his first spaceflight — remained inside the station to monitor and support the extravehicular operations.

Both of the Shenzhou XII's two

planned spacewalks have been successfully completed. The mission crew will continue performing scientific experiments and technological tests until mid-September, when they will return to Earth, according to the agency.

Pang Zhiliao, a space industry observer and retired researcher at the China Academy of Space Technology, said that Chinese astronauts have become skilled in extravehicular maneuvers despite having done only three spacewalks so far.

"You can see through the video clips published by the agency that Nie and Liu carried out their tasks expertly and they seemed to be quite relaxed. I think that is why they could finish the operation earlier than planned," he said.

Pang added that the impressive photos they took during the spacewalk will inspire more young people to know about or even take part in China's space endeavors.

The Shenzhou XII mission crew carried out its first spacewalk on July 4, with Liu and Tang flying outside the spacecraft for seven hours to test the robotic arm, install equipment and adjust an external panoramic camera. That was the second spacewalk Chinese astronauts had ever made.

Their spacecraft was launched on a Long March 2F carrier rocket that blasted off on June 17 from the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center in northwestern China. The astronauts entered the Tiangong space station later that day after the two spacecraft

docked with each other, becoming the first inhabitants of the station.

The three-month Shenzhou XII mission, the nation's seventh manned spaceflight, is part of the Tiangong program, which aims to complete a three-component station in a low-Earth orbit before the end of 2022.

Upon its completion, Tiangong will be manned regularly by groups of three astronauts in periods lasting several months. During handovers to the new three-member crew, the station will accommodate up to six astronauts.

During the three-day Shenzhou VII mission in September 2008, astronaut Liu and Zhai Zhigang carried out China's first spacewalk that lasted about 15 minutes.