

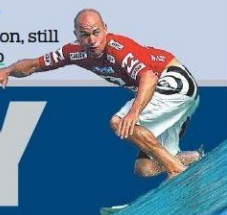


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# CHINA DAILY

WEDNESDAY, May 31, 2023

中國日報

www.chinadailyhk.com HK \$10



The Shenzhou XV and Shenzhou XVI crews pose in the Tianhe core module of the Tiangong space station on Tuesday, marking the start of the in-orbit crew handover, in this screen grab from the Beijing Aerospace Control Center. LI JIE / XINHUA

## Astronauts meet in Tiangong space station core module

By ZHAO LEI  
at Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center  
[zhaolei@chinadaily.com.cn](mailto:zhaolei@chinadaily.com.cn)

The Shenzhou XVI mission crew, which includes the first Chinese civilian astronaut, reached orbit on Tuesday and started work in the Tiangong space station.

**Inside** Aboard the Shenzhou XVI spacecraft, mission commander Major General Jing Haipeng, spacelift engineer Colonel Zhu Yanzhu and Professor Gui Haichao, the mission's science payload specialist and the first Chinese civilian in space, were launched by a 20-story-tall Long March 2F carrier rocket, which blasted off at 9:31 am from the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center in northwestern China's Gobi Desert.

After a short flight, the 8-metric-ton spaceship was placed into a low-Earth orbit about 400 kilometers above the planet and then activated the rapid rendezvous-docking mode to approach the Tiangong station.

On Tuesday afternoon, the spacecraft connected with the radial port on Tiangong's Tianhe core module.

After about two hours of preparatory work following the docking, Jing opened a hatch on the Shenzhou XVI spaceship and floated into Tianhe's connection cabin at 6:19 pm.

He was welcomed by Major General Fei Junlong, leader of the Shenzhou XV crew, who had been waiting inside the cabin.

"Let's hug! I am so happy!" Fei said as he embraced Jing.

Following Jing, Zhu and Gui moved into the connection cabin one by one, and they were also greeted and hugged by Fei.

The Shenzhou XVI trio then moved into the Tianhe module and hugged the other Shenzhou XV crew members — Senior Colonel



Jing Haipeng and Fei Junlong, commanders of the Shenzhou XVI and XV missions, respectively, hug after meeting in the Tianhe core module. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Deng Qingming and Senior Colonel Zhang Lu — who were waiting there and recording the emotional moment on a smartphone.

The two crews chatted for a while before taking a group selfie to applaud from the ground control staff.

The entire procedure was broadcast live on China Central Television. The two teams are scheduled to stay together for about five days, and the Shenzhou XVI crew will then take over the massive orbital outpost from Fei's team, who have been in orbit for six months and will return to Earth as scheduled.

Jing and his crew members will stay in Tiangong for around five months and are scheduled to return to Earth in November. They will carry out several spacewalks during the mission to mount equipment outside the station and also conduct maintenance work. Lin Xiaojang, deputy director of the China Manned Space Agency, said at a news conference on Monday.

Other major tasks will include assisting with the docking and departure of visiting spacecraft such as cargo ships and a space-based telescope, conducting scientific experiments and demonstrations of technology, and hosting science lectures, Lin said.

The official said he expects that new scientific data in a wide range of research fields such as general relativity and the origins of life will be obtained during the Shenzhou XVI mission.

The Journey is the debut flight of China's third generation of astronauts, and the first time a Chinese civilian has traveled into space.

Jing and Zhu are members of the People's Liberation Army's Astronaut Division, while Gui is a doctoral supervisor at the Department of Spacecraft and Launch Vehicle Technology of Beihang University's School of Astronautics in Beijing.

Lin said that after stringent training, all of the third-generation astronauts have passed qualification



The Shenzhou XVI spacecraft is launched at 9:31 am on Tuesday from the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center. GU JIANWEN / FOR CHINA DAILY

tests and have been cleared for space missions.

Moreover, the Shenzhou XVI mission is Jing's fourth spacelift, making him China's most experienced astronaut.

According to Lin, China now has all prerequisites for sending foreign astronauts into space — a well-constructed space station, a reliable astronaut transportation system, and mature methods for astronauts' training and support.

"We are actively working on this matter. I very much welcome and look forward to foreign astronauts flying on board our space station," he said.

One of the world's largest and most advanced spacecraft, Tiangong currently consists of three major components, the Tianhe core module and the Wentian and Mengtian science lab modules, and it is connected to three visiting vessels, the Shenzhou XV crew craft and the Shenzhou XVI crew craft and the Tianzhou 6 cargo ship.

## Launch signals wider-opening space sector

**T**raditionally, China's astronauts are selected from among fighter plane pilots with ample flying experience, as they can control the machinery and have the training to stay calm should an emergency arise in space.

Yet among the three astronauts aboard Shenzhou XVI, which is taking them to Tiangong, China's space station, is Gui Haichao, a professor from Beihang University. He is the first civilian China has sent into space, and will conduct space science experiments, collect and analyze data and maintain the lab devices on the space station.

That's good news for the nation's space science, as he will be more professional in carrying out research experiments on the space station.

It is also good news for China's astronautics sector, as it shows that the nation is confident enough to send persons other than military pilots into space. It means that the threshold for traveling into space is being lowered, offering hope to many that one day ordinary people will be able to buy a ticket for a trip into space.

Besides Gui, there is also Zhu Yangzhu, a space flight engineer from China's astronaut team, who will serve as a professional rather than a pilot. Zhu's teaching experience in college, similar to that

of Gui, is also evidence of Chinese astronauts' educational background being raised.

Twenty years after Shenzhou V took China's first astronaut Yang Liwei out of the Earth's atmosphere, China already has a full team of astronauts ready to further our understanding of the cosmos.

Mission commander Jing Haipeng is on his fourth trip into space, making him the Chinese astronaut with the richest experience in space travel. In the 15 years between his first mission and this one, China has progressed from sending astronauts into space to supporting their stay for half a year on its newly constructed space station.

The country has already started preparing for a mission to land Chinese astronauts on the moon before 2030.

China's Tiangong space station will be the only one in service after the planned retirement of the International Space Station. With China's space program including the training of astronauts from other countries, no one should be surprised if a multinational crew is sent to Tiangong some day.

Likewise China has said that its plan to construct and operate a lunar research station is open to the participation of all nations, international organizations and international partners.