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Shenzhou XIX crew returns safely to 'beautiful, blue' Earth

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The Shenzhou XIX mission astronauts landed safely at the Dongfeng Landing Site in the Inner Mongolia autonomous region on Wednesday afternoon, wrapping up their six-month orbital journey.

The Shenzhou XIX spacecraft's reentry capsule, carrying the three crew members — mission commander Senior Colonel Cai Xuzhe, Lieutenant Colonel Song Lingdong and Lieutenant Colonel Wang Haoze — touched down at 1:08 pm at the Dongfeng Landing Site, which is located in the middle of the Gobi Desert, after flying more than nine hours on the return journey.

Their return was one day behind schedule because mission planners postponed the landing due to weather concerns at the Dongfeng site.

Following safety checks outside the capsule, ground recovery personnel from the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center, the home port for all of China's manned spaceflights, opened the hatch of the bell-shaped capsule and conducted a preliminary examination of the astronauts' health condition.

The Shenzhou XIX crew members were then helped out of the capsule and seated on chairs to share their experiences in a live program with a reporter from China Central Television before being taken to medical examination vehicles.

Cai said that he and the other crew members often gazed at the "beautiful, blue" Earth when they were in orbit.

"The mother planet is the shared home for all mankind. The Earth needs all of us to safeguard it," he said. "In this mission, we successfully completed all of our tasks given by the motherland and the people. We will continue striving to contribute to new chapters in China's space cause."

Song said that he was privileged to fly in space for China and that it felt good to return home.

"We are looking forward to seeing our families that we miss so much and also to meeting our comrades who have accompanied us day and night. We wish to express our gratitude for your hard work," he said.

Wang said: "After this mission, I



Ground recovery personnel check the reentry capsule of the Shenzhou XIX spacecraft after its landing at the Dongfeng Landing Site in the Inner Mongolia autonomous region on Wednesday. Astronauts Cai Xuzhe (above, center), Song Lingdong (above, right) and Wang Haoze (above, left) were all in good condition after their six-month mission in space. WANG JIANGBO / FOR CHINA DAILY AND MA JINRUI, LI XIN AND LIAN ZHEN / XINHUA

can now report to my motherland and its people with full confidence: I have the resolve and capability to complete many more challenging tasks. I am deeply convinced that we, Chinese space pioneers, will keep marching farther and farther. We are destined to explore the deeper reaches of space."

After the mandatory procedures were completed at the landing site, the crew members were flown back to Beijing. They will undergo a six-month quarantine and recuperation program, which is a standard procedure for Chinese astronauts returning from space.

The Shenzhou XIX spacecraft departed from the Tiangong space station at around 4 am on Wednesday. The vessel then flew in a return trajectory and gradually

reentered the atmosphere.

Before setting out on their return trip, Cai's team handed over their work to a new crew, transmitted scientific experimental data to Earth and sorted and transferred materials between the station and their spaceship.

Cai and his teammates were launched from the Jiuquan center on Oct 30 and arrived at Tiangong later that day, becoming the eighth crew to inhabit the space station.

After several days of handover work, the crew took over the massive outpost in early November from their peers of the Shenzhou XVIII mission.

They spent 183 days in a low-Earth orbit about 400 kilometers above Earth, completing many scientific and technological tasks as well as three spacewalks, the first of

which set a world record for the longest spacewalk.

With a total of five spacewalks to his credit, Cai now holds the record among Chinese astronauts.

Wang was the third Chinese woman to go to space, after Liu Yang and Wang Yaping, and the first female spaceflight engineer. Before her, Zhu Yangzhu, a male astronaut who took part in the Shenzhou XVI mission, was China's first spaceflight engineer.

Wang is also the only woman in the country's third-generation group of astronauts.

In the next six months, the space station will be manned by the three Shenzhou XX astronauts, headed by Senior Colonel Chen Dong, who arrived at the orbiting outpost on Friday.