

CHINA SUCCESSFULLY LAUNCHES NEW MANNED SPACESHIP WITH FIRST CIVILIAN ON BOARD

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Chinese astronauts for the Shenzhou-16 mission, from left, Gui Haichao, Zhu Yangzhu and Jing Haipeng wave during a send-off ceremony for their manned space mission at the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center in northwestern China, Tuesday, May 30, 2023. | Photo Credit: AP

China on Tuesday successfully launched the Shenzhou-16 manned spaceship, sending three astronauts, including the first civilian to its space station combination for a five-month mission.

The spaceship, atop a Long March-2F carrier rocket, blasted off from the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Centre in northwest China at 9:31 AM (Beijing Time), according to the China Manned Space Agency (CMSA).

About 10 minutes after the launch, Shenzhou-16 separated from the rocket and entered its designated orbit. The crew members are in good shape and the launch is a complete success, the CMSA declared, it said.

The astronauts are expected to dock with the station's Tianhe core module about 400km above the ground – after a journey of less than seven hours.

For the first time, China has included a civilian in its rotating crew for the space station which otherwise remained a domain of the military personnel.

Gui Haichao, a professor at Beihang University in Beijing regarded as a payload specialist was among the three astronauts.

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The other two are mission's commander Jing Haipeng, who is also making history by becoming the first Chinese astronaut to go into space for a record fourth time.

The astronaut flight engineer Zhu Yangzhu is also making his first journey into space.

The Shenzhou-16 will be the first crew mission after China's space station programme entered the stage of application and development, Lin Xiqiang, deputy director of the CMSA told the media on Monday.

The trio will stay in orbit for about five months, he said.

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Once ready, China will be the only country to own a space station as the International Space Station (ISS) of Russia is a collaborative project of several countries. The ISS station is also set to be decommissioned by 2030.

The significant feature of China's space station is its two robotic arms, especially the long one which has the ability to grab objects, including satellites from space.

After entering orbit, the Shenzhou-16 spaceship will make a fast, automated rendezvous and docking with the space station combination.

The Shenzhou-16 astronauts will conduct large-scale in-orbit tests and experiments in various fields as planned. They are expected to make high-level scientific achievements in the study of novel quantum phenomena, high-precision space-time-frequency systems, the verification of general relativity, and the origin of life.

The launch also marks the 475th flight mission of the Long March carrier rocket series.

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