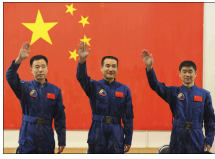


26 September 2008

By: Dan Talpalariu, Science Editor



The 3 Chinese astronauts (left to right): Jing Haipeng, Zhai Zhigang and Liu Boming
Xinhua

China's Third Manned Mission Blastoff

The unselected astronauts are heartbroken

Thursday, September 24th, China launched its third crewed mission into Earth's orbit. However, the three-man team is tasked to walk in the outer space for the first time in the nation's history.

President Hu Jintao assisted the 9:10 pm (13:10 GMT) launch at Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center in the northwestern province of Gansu, China, from a safe distance, wishing the astronauts the best of luck. "I have come to send you off, to wish you success," said the president to the three people inside the Shenzhou ("Divine vessel") VII spacecraft. After the rocket disappeared high above the crowd's heads, the three kept communicating with the technical ground staff and waving their hands at the camera in the cabin of the shuttle.

The 68-hour mission is led by 41-year-old Zhai Zhigang, an air force colonel who will carry out the space walking task on Friday or Saturday. "We're determined to complete the manned space mission of Shenzhou VII," Zhai assured Hu. "The motherland and the people can rest at ease."

This effort, soon to be followed by two other unmanned missions, as well as by another 3-men crewed one by 2010, precedes the next big Chinese attempt of building a permanent space laboratory, in order to "explore and make peaceful use of outer space," as foreign ministry spokesman Liu Jianchao states. He also adds that "We believe this will further promote our space flight technology and make a contribution to the peaceful use of outer space for all human beings. We wish the Shenzhou VII mission a complete success."

Out of several thousands of astronaut-wannabes, only 14 fighter pilots were chosen for China's space program 10 years ago, among which just 6 made it to actual space missions so far. The others have a really hard time readjusting to their former normal lives, transferring to other jobs and tasks. "Everyone wants to fly, but only a few get picked. Sometimes the wish has to give way to the fact," says Zhai, who was left aside in the first two missions. He is believed to be the one to wear the newly-developed Chinese spacesuit during his space walk. Wang Zhaoyao, spokesman for the Chinese space mission says: "The process of (space walks) cannot be simulated completely on the ground. Some of the newly developed products have to be tested in flight for the first time."

China's first two missions into space took place in 2003 and 2005, being the third country to reach outer space, after the Soviet Union and the United States. As experts say, Chinese do not like to repeat the previous successful space tests and experiments. The last mission's Shenzhou VII shuttle will land in the north of Mongolia when the tasks are carried out.