

# China launches ambitious space trip

Space-docking mission carries strong political significance ahead of leadership transition



PHOTO: REUTERS

BY PEH SHING HUEI

Beijing: China has successfully launched its most ambitious space

mission to date, putting three astronauts, including the country's first woman, into orbit.

The Shenzhou IX spacecraft

blasted off from the Jiuquan base in the remote Gobi desert at precisely 6.37pm yesterday, marking the fourth time China has sent

people into space since its first manned flight in 2003.

Beijing is pursuing space exploration relentlessly, at a time when the pioneering countries, the United States and Russia, are scaling back their space programmes.

China's latest mission, delivered by a Long March-2F rocket and beamed live on national TV, carries not only technological breakthroughs for the country but also strong social and political significance.

'It's a landmark event,' said space programme spokesman Wu Ping before the launch.

Most Chinese have been focused on the excitement of having a woman taikonaut - taikong is Chinese for space - for the first time.

Cargo plane pilot Liu Yang, 33, will take charge of scientific experiments in space. She is likely to become a household name

in China, just like the country's first taikonaut Yang Liwei.

'I know I am very lucky (to be chosen), and I will treasure it dearly,' she told reporters.

The buzz surrounding her has given the mission another coat of gloss and extra attention. That makes it a welcome propaganda coup for the Chinese Communist Party, as it prepares for a major leadership transition this autumn.

Its second-highest-ranking leader, legislative chief Wu Bangguo, was at the site to watch the launch.

But it is the technological aspects of the Shenzhou IX mission that will have a greater impact on China's space dreams.

The trio of taikonauts, rounded out by commander Jing Haipeng and veteran

Liu Wang, will attempt manual docking manoeuvres with the orbiting Tiangong I space module.

While the unmanned Shenzhou VIII spacecraft pulled off an automated docking attempt with Tiangong I last year, China has never done it manually.

It is essential to master this technique because it will ensure that future docking missions have a higher success rate, according to experts.

Space docking, which involves two vessels coming together at some 28,000kmh without destroying each other, will smooth the way for China to build its own space station. Beijing wants it operational by 2020.

Tiangong I, which blasted off last September, was lowered to docking orbit earlier this month, and is

awaiting the rendezvous with Shenzhou IX.

Once connected, the three spacemen will enter the Tiangong I to live, exercise and conduct medical and scientific experiments for 10 days, before returning to Earth.

'I wish you full success,' said Mr Wu. 'The country and the people are looking forward to your successful return.'

[shpeh@sph.com.sg](mailto:shpeh@sph.com.sg)

Chinese wax lyrical over space mission - Top News