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香港版
HONG KONG

CHINA DAILY

中國日報

WEDNESDAY, September 8, 2021

www.chinadailyhk.com HK \$10

Live space call offers youths out-of-this-world inspiration

Three of our nation's astronauts have been orbiting the Earth to construct China's first space station, performing engineering works in two spacewalks and conducting pioneering experiments in space. But in an unprecedented live chat on Friday with more than 200 university and secondary school students in Hong Kong, Nie Haisheng, Liu Boming and Tang Hongbo have done perhaps the greatest public relations job, promoting not only science and technology education for local youth, but also the greatness and ambitions of China's space program.

It's hard to imagine any students who didn't walk away from the encounter with a new appreciation of their great nation and the awe-inspiring sense of the vast universe.

The question-and-answer period lasting 20 minutes followed the trio's live chat with President Xi Jinping in June. Hong Kong SAR Chief Executive Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor also attended the extraterrestrial encounter. The extraordinary event highlights the importance the central government attaches to the future of Hong Kong's young people and the roles they can play in strengthening the nation's development. They will also be able to develop a greater sense of national identity — a nation working together for not just all Chinese, but humanity itself. After all, that is what science is about — finding truth for the betterment of people everywhere.

The astronauts didn't forget to subtly remind Hong Kong youngsters how lucky they are.

"We can see the smoke in Syria and Afghanistan," Liu said. "We can see the cityscapes of Beijing and Hong Kong at night, and think of Victoria Harbour. We can see six rings of highways encircling Beijing."

The highlights of the unprecedented space encounter also had its humorous and "yucky" moments.

Liu, for example, demonstrated how in space, with zero gravity, you can work out on your exercise bike not only sitting up but also upside down, and pedaling with your hands.

You can also drink your own urine, after waste recycling and distillation, of course, still, not exactly an appetizing thought, Liu told the students.

However, the space menu is rather enticing. There are more than 100 varieties of food, including fresh fruits and Chinese cuisine such as shredded pork with garlic sauce, kung pao chicken, stir-fried rice, Sichuan fish-flavored shredded pork, as well as ice cream and dessert dumplings. A minifridge and a microwave oven store and heat up the food.

At 400 kilometers from Earth, the three astronauts offered the students a space tour of the Tiangong station, inside the spacious module where they sleep, work out, cook and eat. Through a window, Liu showed the students a view of Earth and where they had performed spacewalks to carry out engineering work.



Jo Lee

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The three astronauts have been on a busy schedule since arriving in June. They have had to conduct more than 1,000 experiments and carry out various engineering missions for the station. They will return home later this month.

Chinese astronauts are no strangers to Hong Kong. Since Yang Liwei became the first Chinese national sent into space in 2003, the space program has always made a point of letting its astronauts tour Hong Kong. But this is the first time Chinese spacemen and Hong Kong people were able to communicate during a live mission.

They also telecast similar sessions with student representatives from different Chinese mainland provinces.

Hong Kong, however, was given its own special session. That amply demonstrates the care and love Beijing has for the city, and especially for its young people. Besides those who took part in the session, the broadcast was shown live to many schools across the city. Before the virtual tour of the Tiangong station, there was also a telecast seminar between the student audience and a group of space engineers and scientists in Beijing, including Yang.

The central and SAR governments consider it a policy priority to nurture a sense of national identity and pride among the city's youth. This is much needed, as the nation has developed so much and progressed at such an unprecedented speed that people in Hong Kong, especially the younger generation, don't have a good understanding of the nation as a whole.

Civic education is essential to teaching them about their many privileges and duties as Hong Kong residents and Chinese nationals. But the three Tiangong astronauts must also have inspired youngsters to pick up science, technology, engineering and math. Who knows, maybe a few of them will one day become astronauts. But if the city's government wants to promote STEM education, it also needs to create more job opportunities for such graduates. There are many more high-tech jobs available across the border, in Shenzhen, for example.

Hong Kong is slowly integrating into the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area, which is set to be the greatest growth engine in the world. For local young people with the drive, ambition and talent, they should learn from our astronauts that at this historic juncture of the nation's development, they can reach beyond the sky, literally.

The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.