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Shenzhou XIII crew gets ready to return to Earth

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China's Shenzhou XIII space mission crew has completed all of its tasks and will soon return to Earth, according to the China Manned Space Agency.

The agency said late on Thursday night that the astronauts — Major General Zhai Zhigang, Senior Colonel Wang Yaping and Senior Colonel Ye Guangfu — will depart the Tiangong space station in due course and land at the Dongfeng Landing Site in the Inner Mongolia autonomous region in the reentry capsule of their Shenzhou XIII spacecraft.

By Thursday night, the crew had finished all of the preparatory work for their return while the landing site and other systems had been readied to welcome the astronauts, the agency said.

Zhai and his crewmates have set a record for the country's longest manned spaceflight and laid a solid foundation for the next steps in the

Tiangong space station's in-orbit assembly.

The crew arrived at the Tiangong station on Oct 16, embarking on its six-month journey.

In the coming weeks, China will launch the Tianzhou 4 cargo spacecraft to transport supplies, experimental materials and fuel to the Tiangong station.

The unmanned spaceship and its carrier — a Long March 7 rocket — have arrived at the Wenchang Space Launch Center in Hainan province and are undergoing final tests, according to the China Manned Space Agency.

Soon after its launch, Tianzhou 4 will be docked with Tiangong's core module and will await the arrival of the Shenzhou XIV mission's crew members.

Each Tianzhou cargo spaceship has two parts — a cargo cabin and a propulsion section. Such vehicles are 10.6 meters long and 3.35 meters wide.

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It has a liftoff weight of 13.5 metric tons and can transport up to 6.9 tons of supplies to the space station, according to its designers.

Last month, Tianzhou 2 fell back to Earth with most of its body burning up during reentry, while Tianzhou 3 remains connected with the station.

After Tianzhou 4, three astronauts in the Shenzhou XIV mission will be

launched from the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center in northwestern China to the Tiangong station and stay there for six months. Two space labs — Wentian, or Quest for the Heavens, and Mengtian, or Dreaming of the Heavens — will then be launched to complete the station.

Zhou Jianping, chief designer of the nation's manned space program, said last month that the Shenzhou XIV crew will be responsible for monitoring the docking between the

Tianhe core module and the two space labs and then configuring the labs.

Around the end of this year, the Tianzhou 5 cargo craft and the Shenzhou XV crew will arrive at the station.

Upon Tiangong's completion around the end of this year, it will consist of three major components — a core module linked with two large space labs, two Shenzhou spacecraft and one cargo ship, weighing around

100 tons. A total of six astronauts will stay inside the station, the largest space-based infrastructure China has ever built, before the Shenzhou XIV crew returns to Earth, according to Zhou.

He said the Tiangong station will be a platform for scientific experiments and technology demonstrations in a wide range of research fields such as biology, materials science and microgravity hydrodynamics.

The station is scheduled to operate for 15 years and will be open to foreign astronauts, the space agency said.