



The three astronauts of Shenzhou XIV – Senior Colonel Chen Dong (center), the mission commander, Senior Colonel Liu Yang (right) and Senior Colonel Cai Xuzhe – are carried out of the capsule at the Dongfeng Landing Site in northwestern China's Gobi Desert on Sunday after flying for nine hours in a re-entry trajectory. PHOTOS BY LI GANG AND BEI HE / XINHUA

Shenzhou XIV crew return after 6-month mission

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The three astronauts of Shenzhou XIV returned to Earth on Sunday evening after a six-month mission that completed the in-orbit assembly of the Tiangong space station.

A re-entry capsule carrying the crew – Senior Colonel Chen Dong, who was the mission commander, Senior Colonel Liu Yang and Senior Colonel Cai Xuzhe – touched down on Earth at the Dongfeng Landing Site in northwestern China's Gobi Desert at 8:09 pm after flying for nine hours in a re-entry trajectory.

Ground recovery personnel soon opened the hatch of the capsule and conducted a preliminary examination of the astronauts' condition.

The crew members told them that they were "feeling very good".

After preparatory work, ground personnel carried the astronauts out of the capsule one by one to

place them on chairs in front of the capsule.

While seated, the astronauts shared their feelings with a group of domestic reporters, saying they are proud of the motherland and the country's space programs.

Then they were moved into special vehicles for health checks.

Over the next couple of hours, the astronauts were to be transferred to a nearby airport, where they would board a jet to fly back to Beijing.

It was the first time that Chinese astronauts returned to Earth at night. Equipment used in the recovery operation incorporated additional cold-proof layers or other measures to resist temperatures as low as minus 14 C in the landing area. Ground recovery personnel had rehearsed for weeks for the freezing cold and night conditions, as well as for other possible difficult scenarios.

Wang Yanan, editor-in-chief of

Aerospace Knowledge magazine, said that the Shenzhou XIV's night landing called for many careful calculations and considerations.

"It is true that a night landing is harder for the ground recovery personnel to carry out their work, but the time of the landing is determined by many factors like astronauts' safety and the space station's orbiting trajectory," he said. "If you want the astronauts to fly back in the daytime, you have to make them wait several days in orbit until the space station moves to the right point again."

Carrying Chen's team, the Shenzhou XIV spacecraft undocked from the Tiangong station at 11:01 am on Sunday.

On Friday evening, the Shenzhou XIV team had handed over control of the Tiangong station to the Shenzhou XV crew.

Chen's crew was the third group to go to the Chinese station, one of the

largest pieces of infrastructure ever deployed in Earth's orbit. The three were launched from the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center in the Gobi Desert on June 5 and arrived at Tiangong later that day.

During the crew's flight, they monitored the arrival of the Wentian and Mengtian space lab modules, which completed the Tiangong's in-orbit assembly. They also carried out three spacewalks and gave a science lecture to Chinese students.

With the departure of Shenzhou XIV the Tiangong station consists of the Tianhe core module, the Wentian and Mengtian lab modules, the Shenzhou XV spacecraft and the Tianzhou 5 cargo ship.

Currently aboard the station are Shenzhou XV crew members Major General Fei Junlong, who is the mission commander, as well as Senior Colonel Deng Qingming and Senior Colonel Zhang Lu. The three arrived on Wednesday.