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When Russian actress Yulia Peresild appeared at a downtown cinema in Beijing, she quickly stole the spotlight. "Hello, everyone, I'm *Jiukong jie* (space sister)," says Peresild, wearing a bright smile, greeting the local audience in her newly learned Mandarin.

As the first actress in human history to shoot a film in space, she was selected from around 3,000 candidates to spend 12 days aboard the International Space Station for the filming of the Russian movie, *The Challenge*.

Nearly one year after its debut in Russia, the film, which fictionalizes the story of a female surgeon sent to space to perform an operation on an injured cosmonaut, hit Chinese mainland theaters on March 15.

In addition to the tense plot, which is a race against time to save a life, the movie showcases the stunning scenery of space, taking the audience on a journey with the actress, offering a close look at how the cosmonauts work and live inside the ISS, which orbits more than 400 kilometers above the Earth.

Despite a tight schedule, Peresild, a 39-year-old native of Pskov in northwestern Russia, participated in a series of activities, from sharing her space-travel stories with Beijing fans to visiting scenic spots like the Great Wall and bustling Nantuoqiang lane.

Peresild recalls that she and director Klim Shipenko underwent rigorous training for three-and-a-half months at a cosmonaut training center in Russia between late May and early October in 2021, including 17 days in quarantine due to the pandemic. The training included taking a centrifuge test — Peresild endured a very respectable 22 minutes — and observing how thoracic surgeries are performed.

Before her historic space journey, Peresild wrote a farewell letter to her two young daughters. She only recently shared it with them while recording her book, *It's Space, Baby!*, during her journey into orbit.

After completing the space flight and docking at the ISS on Oct 5, 2021, Peresild, the director and their Russian cosmonaut guide floated inside to receive a welcome from seven other crew members, including those from Russia and the United States.

"We unloaded our filming equipment and were given a tour of the cabin, and shown essential items, such as masks and fire extinguishers. Although we felt a bit uneasy, we had to wake up at 6 am the next day due to the very intense shooting schedule," Peresild recalls.

The good news about space is that people need not worry about gaining weight in the gravity-free environment. Mentioning that an astronaut's regular caloric intake is around 3,000 calories each day, Peresild recalls she had a good appetite and found she tended to favor spicier foods while in space.

"The coffee in the American module is quite good, but the canned food in the Russian module is tastier," she says of the epicurean delights on offer.

Another lesson she quickly learned was how to adapt to the microgravity in space. As the film crew only consisted of two members, the actress had to do her own makeup, using adhesive hooks to keep cosmetic items in place and prevent them from floating away.

Looking out of the window of the Russian module offered her a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to witness a spectacular view, but it also posed



## FILM GIVES STARS THE SPACE TO SHINE

Actress delivers a stellar performance in Russian movie shot aboard the ISS. **Xu Fan reports.**

Russian director Klim Shipenko pictured aboard the International Space Station in 2021 while shooting *The Challenge*, the first movie to be shot in space. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



From left: A poster for the movie. Actress Yulia Peresild meets with Chinese science popularizers in Beijing on March 12. She poses with *Dream of the Red Chamber*, a classic Chinese novel, given to her as a gift at a promotional event in Beijing on March 10.

danger. She recalls a moment when the director instructed her to remain near the window as the Earth was aligning closely with the sun.

"We could see a blue arc line at the edges of the sun and Earth. He exclaimed, 'Wow, it's incredibly beautiful. Stay right there. Don't move.' The entire sequence lasted

just 30 seconds. However, after that shot, I ended up with sunburn," she recounts.

Without the protection of the ozone layer in the stratosphere that

shields the Earth, it's easy to get overexposed to ultraviolet rays, according to Chen Zheng, an associate professor of physics at the Beijing Jiaotong University and an expert of

the *Tiangong Class*, China's first extraterrestrial lecture series.

Chen comments that the movie gives the audience an extremely realistic account of space travel, especially the scenes featuring Peresild as the surgeon entering the ISS with her hair floating upward.

"As a physics teacher, I am a bit obsessed with details," says Chen. "So, I always focus on the actress' hair while watching the movie. When she enters zero gravity, her hair stands upright and floats. This weightless feeling cannot be achieved on Earth by any physical means."

Du Liang, the Chinese producer of the film, tells China Daily that he had heard about the movie when it was still in the initial development phase.

"I had the chance to read the script before filming began. While it was a truly intriguing concept, I couldn't envision it coming to fruition due to the high costs and complexities associated with launching a manned spacecraft to send a film crew into space. Moreover, the crew of the ISS would have to allocate time to support the filming," Du explains.

Graduating from college in Russia after specializing in film and television, Du is well acquainted with the Russian film industry, noting that the country has produced acclaimed and commercially successful movies, such as the fantastic romance, *I Am Dragon* (2015), and the basketball-themed tale, *Going Vertical* (2017).

Du says that Shipenko has had a passion for space stories for years, recalling that the director previously helmed the 2017 movie *Salyut-7*, a nerve-racking space movie adapted from the true story of two cosmonauts who fixed the damaged space station in 1985.

In 2020, Hollywood star Tom Cruise, alongside director Doug Liman, was reported to be planning to film in space with the aid of Elon Musk's SpaceX program. The plan has yet to be realized.

"Shortly after *The Challenge* wrapped, I heard that Cruise contacted Shipenko to inquire about the details of filmmaking in space, as he was very interested in the process," Du says.

When Du met the director during the Golden Rooster and Hundred Flowers Film Festival held in Xiamen, Fujian province, in November last year, the Chinese producer asked if the director had really seen the Great Wall from the ISS, as the depiction of spacemen observing the iconic Chinese fortification has been etched into the minds of generations of Chinese students from their school textbooks.

"Shipenko replied 'yes, I saw the Great Wall from space. Several times in one day.' It made me very excited," he recalls.

According to the website of NASA, the space station makes 16 orbits of Earth, traveling through 16 sunrises and sunsets, in 24 hours.

With the movie garnering 8.0 points out of 10 on the major review aggregator Douban, Du estimates *The Challenge* may become an inspirational example, leading to a greater influx of Russian movies to Chinese mainland theaters.

"China has a vast film market. I hope that the movie's screening will attract a larger local audience and spark interest in Russian cinema, potentially paving the way for the import of more high-quality Russian films in the future," he says.

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