

'Tough shift'

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Opinion Line

Precision landing boosts space program, signals self-reliance

As a space journalist who has covered dozens of launches across the country, I long assumed that I had grown accustomed to the routine of countdowns and the roar of liftoffs.

Yet standing atop a building at the Hainan International Commercial Aerospace Launch Center on Friday morning, waiting for the Long March 10B rocket to lift off, there was the same mix of nervousness, excitement and anticipation I felt at my very first launch assignment.

When the first stage was successfully captured by the cable-net recovery system roughly six minutes after stage separation, cheers erupted among reporters.

On the way back to the hotel, I was replaying the recovery footage on loop on my phone, swapping clips and screenshots with fellow reporters. That split second when the booster locked safely into the net is the kind of frame that remains etched in a reporter's memory for years.

Having witnessed earlier recovery attempts — of Long March 12A and ZQ 3 models — I know firsthand just how formidable the challenge of rocket reusability is. Guiding a massive booster back through the atmosphere with pinpoint precision, reigniting its engine at the right moment, main-

taining aerodynamic stability and executing a controlled recovery require flawless coordination across propulsion, navigation, materials science and real-time command systems.

Previous tests underscored how many variables must align for success. That is why Friday's breakthrough feels deeply gratifying.

I share the pride of the researchers and engineers at the China Academy of Launch Vehicle Technology, whose perseverance turned an ambitious vision into reality.

What makes this milestone even more remarkable is China's independent path of innovation. Unlike conventional landing on ground pads or offshore drone ships used by the United States and earlier domestic programs, the Long March 10B debuted the world's first operational sea-based net-capture recovery system. By transferring much of the landing hardware from the rocket to the recovery vessel, engineers reduced dead weight and opened a distinct and potentially cost-effective technical route. It is a vivid reflection of the ingenuity of Chinese scientists and engineers and the country's growing scientific and technological strength.

Beyond the technical feat, the Long March 10B carries far-reach-

ing strategic significance. Designed to support large-scale deployment of low-Earth orbit constellations and high-volume commercial launch missions, it promises to enhance China's competitiveness and influence in the global space sector.

More importantly, the Long March 10B is not a standalone model. It is an integral part of the Long March 10 family built for China's manned lunar missions.

Every commercial mission will validate engine reusability, recovery system reliability and rapid turnaround launch capability, forging a development model where commercial operations feed technological progress for future space missions.

This iterative approach will help build expertise for China's future manned lunar landings and deep-space exploration.

To be sure, we must remain clear-eyed. A considerable gap still separates China from the US in mature, operational reusable rocket technology, and accelerated, steady progress remains essential.

But after witnessing Friday's historic success, I have full confidence that China's space community will keep closing that gap and take its place among the world's leading space powers.

— ZHAO LEI, CHINA DAILY