

Chinese astronauts blast off to space station

BEIJING: China sent three astronauts yesterday on a six-month long mission to oversee a pivotal period of construction of its space station, whose final modules are due to be launched in the coming months.

The space station, when completed by the year end, will lay a significant milestone in China's three-decades-long manned space programme, first approved in 1992 and initially code-named "Project 921". It will also flag the start of permanent Chinese habitation in space.

A Long March-2F rocket, which was used to launch China's first crewed spaceflight on the Shenzhou-5 mission in 2003, lifted off from the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Centre in the Gobi Desert in northwest China at 10.44am with the spacecraft Shenzhou-14, or "Divine Vessel", and its three astronauts, a live broadcast by state television showed.

"I watched the launch of Shenzhou-5 when I was a primary student, and now we have Shenzhou-14," said Zanna Zhang, a social media developer.

"Of course I'm super excited, and I'm so proud as a Chinese. We're one step closer to becoming a space superpower," the 25-year-old said.

Construction began in April last year with the launch of the first and largest of its three modules — Tianhe — the living quarters of visiting astronauts. The lab modules Wentian and Mengtian are to be launched next month and October, respectively. **Reuters**



The rocket carrying the Shenzhou-14 mission lifting off at the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Centre in Northwest China yesterday. AFP PIC