

China Briefs

Three Chinese Astronauts Return to Earth After 3-Month Mission

The three Chinese astronauts, Nie Haisheng, Liu Boming, and Tong Hongbo, returned on September 17 from their three-month stay at China's space station. While there, they prepared the station for the arrival of two lab modules to be launched in 2022, tested the new space suits, conducted a number of EVAs to set up the equipment for the construction of the two future modules and conducted a number of tests in the station.

Construction of the entire space station, Tiangong-2 (Heavenly Palace) is scheduled to be concluded next year, inaugurating the "space station era" for China.

China's space program was established in 1992, largely due to the Herculean efforts of geochemist, Ouyang Ziyuan. In his lab work, modeled in many respects on that of the Institute of Geochemistry founded by Vladimir Vernadsky, Ouyang had dedicated himself to the study of the Moon, its structure and chemistry. Since his youth he had been fascinated by space, and astronomy would have been his second choice as a career. When China adopted its first major science agenda in 1986, Project 986, which included the study of space, Ouyang was asked to develop a proposal for what China should do in space. The China Lunar Exploration program, the Chang'e program, was the result. The Tiangong-2, the second and larger of the Chinese space stations, is a step in the direction of a manned lunar mission.

China's Modular Pebble-Bed Reactor Goes Critical: To Link to Grid This Year

China's pebble-bed modular reactor—a high-temperature gas-cooled demonstration reactor—reached the critical state (achieved a sustained chain reaction) on September 12. It is a world first; a similar reactor is being built in South Africa. Reaching the critical state is the first step toward grid-connected power generation later this year.

The pebble-bed reactor project is one of the 16 major national science projects, including lunar exploration and the Beidou navigation system, in the National Medium and Long-Term Science and Technology Development Plan Outline (2006-2020). It is also slated as an important element for export in China's "going out" strategy. This is a fourth-generation nuclear reactor with broad commercial applications, including power production and a number of heat applications. It reduces nuclear waste and makes fuller use of uranium resources.

China was working on a small high-temperature reactor as early as the 863 program in 1986, which provided the basis for China's rapid scientific development after the "reform and opening up." It is a joint project between Tsinghua University and the China National Nuclear Construction (formerly China National Nuclear Corporation). Zhang Zuoyi, dean of the Institute of Nuclear and New Energy Technology at Tsinghua, commented, "Regarding the fourth-generation nuclear power technology, we are the first in the world to actually build a power station."

The reactor is one of two at the HTR-PM plant in Shandong province.

The pair will produce 210 MWe. Eighteen more such HTR-PM units are proposed for the same site.

CPC Int'l Committee in Dialogue with Democratic and Republican Reps

In the aftermath of the Biden-Xi phone call on Sept. 9, the International Committee of the Communist Party of China and U.S. political party representatives held the 12th Sino-U.S. Political Parties Dialogue on September 13. China's top diplomat, State Councilor Yang Jiechi, addressed the meeting. He urged the United States to rectify its wrong China policies and work with China in bringing ties back to the right track as soon as possible. Referring to the recent phone call between President Biden and President Xi, Yang said that "China hopes that the U.S. government will correct its wrong China policies, work with China to take positive actions to implement the important consensus reached by the two heads of state and bring bilateral relations back to the right track of stable development as soon as possible."

Yang noted that "Talks between political parties of China and the United States are very beneficial to enhancing mutual understanding and deepening dialogue and cooperation. It is hoped that people of insight from both parties and all walks of life in the United States will continue to play an active role in the development of bilateral relations."

About 50 people took part in the discussion, including representatives of both the Democratic and Republican parties, including the former chairman

of the Democratic National Committee and presidential candidate Howard Dean, and former U.S. Trade Representative under George H.W. Bush, Carla Hills. No list of the participants has been released. The discussion was characterized as “candid and in-depth.”

UK Parliament Bans Chinese Ambassador from Meeting in Parliament

In a major diplomatic insult, the Speaker of the UK House of Commons announced that Chinese Ambassador to the UK, Zheng Zeguang, who was scheduled to attend a reception by the All-Party Group on China, a group that was generally not hostile to China, would not be allowed to enter Parliament. Lawmakers who had been placed under sanctions by China—in retaliation for the British sanctions against Chinese officials falsely accused of “human rights abuses” in Xinjiang—protested the presence of the Chinese Ambassador in the British Parliament. The Speaker had also consulted the then Foreign Minister, Dominic Raab, before making the decision. The Speaker said that the ban would be removed once the sanctions are removed on the British MPs.

The Speaker of the House of Lords agreed. “The Speakers of both houses are in agreement that this particular all-party parliamentary group China meeting should take place elsewhere considering the current sanctions against members including two members of the Lords,” Lord McFall said.

This is not only an insult to the new Chinese ambassador, who arrived a few months ago, but is also a breach of the Vienna conventions on the treatment of diplomats. It is not clear how the Chinese government will retaliate, but some voices have been raised that the appropriate action would be banning the British ambassador from entering the Great Hall of the People in Beijing.

China Protests U.S. Decision To Share Nuclear Technology with Australia

In a speech delivered at the International Atomic Energy Agency’s September Board of Governors meeting, Ambassador Qang Qun, Permanent Representative of China to the United Nations in Vienna, called the U.S. decision to provide Australia with the latest nuclear submarines a “naked act of nuclear proliferation.” Such assistance, he said, “will apparently give rise to proliferation of nuclear materials and technologies by openly providing assistance to Australia,” a non-nuclear weapon state, in its acquisition and building of the nuclear-powered submarines.

“This contradicts the purpose, objective and core obligation of the NPT [Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons Treaty], to the detriment of the international nuclear non-proliferation regime with the NPT at its core and ongoing international efforts on this front.

“While firmly safeguarding the validity of the international non-proliferation regime, China wishes to register its grave concern at the development.

“Given the ongoing review and discussions of the Korean Peninsula and Iranian nuclear issues at the IAEA Board of Governors and the General Conference, it is essential that all members of the Board and international organizations including IAEA, make solemn position on the trilateral collaboration among the U.S., UK and Australia in helping Australia develop nuclear-powered submarines, in promotion of the full and effective implementation of international non-proliferation obligations under the NPT by all countries.”

177 Stanford Professors Call for an End to the FBI’s ‘China Initiative’

The notorious FBI operation labeled “China Initiative,” a program

launched in 2018 under FBI Director Christopher Wray to look for “reds under the bed”—or rather, in academia and scientific research establishments—targets Chinese and Chinese-American professors, scholars and scientists on the flimsiest of information or innuendo, or even simply due to their Chinese heritage. This program has caused a furor among Asian-Americans generally, and particularly in the academic community.

On Sept. 13, 177 professors at Stanford University from more than 40 departments, largely in the physical and natural sciences, made public their letter to U.S. Attorney General Merrick Garland, calling for an end to the operation. The letter characterizes the FBI operation as a “witch hunt” profiling Asian academics. Some of the cases have simply been thrown out of court for lack of any evidence. In others, it involves incidents that are far from espionage or intellectual property theft, such as failure to disclose previous foreign appointments or funding. Some eligible students coming to the U.S. to study were sent back if they were found to have a picture of themselves in uniform. (Most Chinese secondary and university students are required to participate in uniformed military training for a few weeks, without being in the military.)

More importantly, the letter notes that the FBI operation is also damaging the development of U.S. science:

“Without an open and inclusive environment that attracts the best talents in all areas, the United States cannot retain its world leading position in science and technology.... Instead of protecting the national security of the United States, we believe such actions harm the U.S.’s ability to innovate.... We believe ... that the China Initiative has deviated significantly from its claimed mission: it is harming the United States’ research and technology competitiveness and it is fueling biases that, in turn, raise concerns about racial profiling.”