

A Persistent Pursuit

By ZHOU JIANXIONG

Shortly before *Shenzhou 7*, China's third manned spacecraft, blasted into space from a northwestern launch center on September 25, it had already received great exposure. Media were awash with stories on a wide variety of related topics, ranging from the space walks by the crew and their life aboard the craft, to their stringent training sessions in the modules and the expensive spacesuits. Conversations among ordinary folks have also focused on the magic of space, reflecting a strong interest and great excitement stirred up by the mission.

It is the second of the three phases in China's manned space program. The initial phase was to launch a manned space flight, which was successfully carried out by *Shenzhou 5* back in October 2003, and the third and final phase is to build a space lab and a space station by 2020, according to China's manned space program drafted in 1992.

The Chinese aerospace industry was started from scratch in the 1950s, when the country was still faced with enormous difficulties developing the economy, and was hampered by its weak industrial and R&D bases. Still, tapping exclusively into national resources, the industry grew rapidly, in contrast to some other underdeveloped sectors of the national economy. The breakthrough came with the first satellite launched in April 1970, followed by the return to the Earth of the first retrievable satellite in November 1975. In September 1981, the first three satellites carried by one rocket were launched and this gave way to the *Shenzhou* missions that began in November 1999. At present, the industry has grown into a fairly dynamic sector, boasting advanced technologies in carrier rockets, applied satellites and other fields that not only powered the industry and turned it into a lucrative business, but also helped refuel the development of other key industries such as metallurgy, chemicals, materials, energy, mechanical treatment and communications.

With the successful completion of *Shenzhou 7*'s missions and the crew's safe return to the embrace of the Earth, China has once again demonstrated to the world its capability to explore the universe. Such a capability conforms to China's rising status in the world today, and should also help the country further pursue its space program in the days ahead. After all, space exploration has long been the cherished dream of our human race, and as a country with one fifth of the world population, China ought to make better use of its space technologies for peaceful purposes. It should also strive to contribute more to the progress and civilization of mankind, just as the forefathers of the Chinese nation did in ancient times. ■