

# Chinese astronauts dock with new space station

The country plans to have a fully functioning station by 2022

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The first group of Chinese astronauts on Thursday entered the country's under-construction space station, a major step in China's plans to have a fully functioning station by next year.

On Thursday afternoon, the Shenzhou-12 spaceship, carrying the three astronauts, completed an "automated rendezvous and docking" with the Tianhe module, the China Manned Space Agency (CMSA) said, adding this "signified that for the first time the Chinese

have entered their own space station".

Shenzhou-12 was launched on Thursday morning from the Jiuquan launch centre in the Gobi desert, and the astronauts entered Tianhe around six and a half hours later, the agency said.

The three-man crew will be in orbit for three months. This is the first of two manned space missions planned for this year, part of an intense schedule of launches aimed at completing the space station in 2022.

The official Xinhua news

agency said the mission will "help test technologies related to long-term astronaut stays and health care, the recycling and life support system, the supply of space materials, extravehicular activities and operations, and in-orbit maintenance."

The Shenzhou-12 mission follows a busy few weeks for China's space programme, coming after last month's launch of the Tianzhou-2 cargo spacecraft, which carried vital supplies for the space station. At least five more missions are planned for the year.