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Shenzhou XVII mission commander Senior Colonel Tang Hongbo conducts an extravehicular mission outside the Tiangong space station on Saturday. LI HE / XINHUA

Shenzhou XVII astronauts complete space repair task

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The Shenzhou XVII crew conducted their second spacewalk outside the Tiangong space station on Saturday, completing the first repair operation by Chinese astronauts, according to the China Manned Space Agency.

The agency said in a news release that mission commander Senior Colonel Tang Hongbo and crew member Lieutenant Colonel Jiang Xinlin returned to the Wentian science module at 1:32 pm after floating for nearly eight hours outside the colossal orbital station. The third crew member, Lieutenant Colonel Tang Shengjie, stayed

inside Tiangong to provide support, it said.

With the cooperation and assistance from ground controllers and the space station's robotic arm, the team completed all their assigned tasks, the agency said.

It was the 15th spacewalk carried out by Chinese astronauts.

During the spacewalk, Tang Hongbo and Jiang repaired damage to parts on the Tianhe core module's solar wings that was caused by tiny space debris. After the repairs, the wings resumed normal operations, the release said.

The duo also checked the condition of the space station's external structure, it noted.

The spacewalk was the third for

Tang Hongbo, who is also the first person to return to the Tiangong space station.

Wang Ya'nan, chief editor of Aerospace Knowledge magazine, said extravehicular repair operations are sophisticated and challenging.

"Repair operation is a very important task for astronauts during their stay inside a space station, because it is vital to fix broken parts so as to avoid safety hazards," he said. "During a repair task, astronauts need to cooperate with each other and ground controllers and usually need the assistance of robotic arms, and they must be familiar with required procedures and maneuvers."

According to Wang, solar wings

are most susceptible to external damage, because they are large and thin, making them fragile when hit by space junk.

The Shenzhou XVII astronauts, who are the sixth crew to inhabit the Tiangong space station, arrived at the colossal flying outpost on Oct 26 to take over from their peers in the Shenzhou XVI mission.

The crew performed their first spacewalk on Dec 21, completing a host of tasks including carrying out test repairs.

They are scheduled to wrap up their spaceflight at the end of April and will hand over the Tiangong space station to the Shenzhou XVIII crew before returning to Earth.