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Unforgettable 520 days on 'Mars'

Despite losing some weight and hair, Chinese researcher Wang Yue, along with five other astronauts from different countries, has successfully finished Mars-500, the 520-day mission of living in a confined capsule that simulated a trip to Mars.

In blue jumpsuits and badges, the international team consisting of one Chinese, one Italian, one French, and three Russian men on Tuesday appeared energetic and joyful as they recalled the challenging days on 'Mars' at their first news conference after returning to Earth last Friday.

As one of several experiments being staged in the world in preparation for a trip to Mars that Moscow hopes to try in about 25 years, Mars-500 is an unusual experiment designed to test the long-term effects of stress and isolation during a simulated journey to the Mars.

During the 520-day experiment, Wang Yue and his fellow astronauts have conducted a series of experiments, including three mock-up walks on the 'Mars'.

Since July 3, 2010, the all-male crew had been living in their 180-square-meter locked experimental module that has stayed rooted to the earth in a car park outside the research facility in Moscow, capital of Russia.

For much of the time, the six crew members had only limited contact with the outside world, complete with 20-minute time delays in communication designed to simulate the reality of radio signal between Earth and Mars.

"We received radio message instructions from the control centre outside every day. The tasks were different, but on average we work about seven to eight hours every day and spent at least four hours doing tests," Wang told Xinhua on Tuesday.

He said that the personal space for each crew member was a 3-square-meter room, which contained only one bed and one table. Every aspect of their daily lives, including eating, drinking, exercising, and sleeping, was also conducted strictly according to schedule.

"When the mission began, we felt much pressure," Wang said.

However, gradually, they each found different ways to relax. "Ancient Chinese practices such as calligraphy was very helpful for me," he continued.

For Italian crew member Diego Urbina, British rock singer Elton John's song, 'Rocket Man,' was his inspiration.

The days on Mars "put me in contact with my own humanity," Urbina said. "You learn that you are not superman."

Wang also enjoyed being an envoy to Chinese culture, teaching his colleagues simple Chinese language and inviting them to celebrate Chinese traditional festivals. In fact, Wang recalled that not long ago, they gathered to watch the video record of the successful launch of China's first space lab module, Tiangong-1.

"We are family members now," he said at the news conference.

As Wang summed up, the saddest thing for him during the mission was his hair loss and the

happiest was the completion of the project.

Xinhua

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