Sent: Monday, June 18, 2012 7:35 AM
Subject: Chinese astronauts go on board space lab

1. China's Shenzhou-8 automatically docked this morning with the Tiangong-1 space lab, as planned. Very smooth. VERY similar to US space rendezvous and docking operations.

2. Despite prudent plans to carefully check out the conditions in the small vehicle, and always leave one crewmember aboard the Shenzhou spacecraft, all three quickly moved into the new lab module and posed for an exuberant crew picture.

3. During the docking, the second Chinese pilot-astronaut Liu Wang was in the command seat. Mission commander Jing Haipeng had moved to the engineer's seat and woman-astronaut Liu Yang sat in the other side seat to monitor the Tiangong systems.

4. The crew will spend ten days aboard the lab, then return to Earth before the end of June. They will also practice a manual re-docking during the return phase. A second mission is to occur by December, the fastest-ever back-to-back manned launch in Chinese history.

5. Two manned space stations are now circling Earth. The last time this happened was at the beginning of the International Space Station project when Russia's Mir was also occupied, in 2000-2001.

6. Other examples have surfaced of photoshop-style manipulation of crew portraits, as first reported over the weekend.

7. The Beijing bureau did an interview commentary with me over the weekend.

8. Also attached is my pre-launch advisory on the amazing mission of the 'retired' moon probe Chang'e-2, now diverted into deep space for an asteroid flyby in six months. Together with the current astronaut mission, it hints at Chinese plans to send astronauts beyond low-Earth orbit before the end of this decade, before any other nation.

9.. But a manned moon LANDING may not be -- and never might have been -- their goal. Instead, farther destinations are more plausible.

10. My earlier assessments of China in space can be seen here:
http://www.jamesoberg.com/china.html and
http://www.jamesoberg.com/china_spacewalk.html