

China Inaugurates First Lunar Probe Engineering Center

August 23 2005

China launches its lunar probe engineering center Monday in Beijing as Chinese experts have started their work to develop a satellite to probe the moon.

The State Council, China's cabinet, approved on Jan. 23 of last year the country's first lunar probe program, and the Commission of Science, Technology and Industry for National Defense later on set up the engineering center.

China plans to launch a lunar satellite before 2007, which was designed to obtain three-dimensional images of the lunar surface, analyze the content of useful elements and materials, and probe the depth of the lunar soil and the space environment between the Earth and the moon.

Addressing the launch ceremony, Zhang Yunchuan, minister in charge of the Commission of Science, Technology and Industry for National Defense, called on the engineering center to go all-out to complete all the tasks set for the satellite program as scheduled.

The satellite program, which has a budget of 1.4 billion yuan (about 170 million US dollars), is part of the country's three-stage lunar project.

The satellite launch will be followed by the landing of an unmanned vehicle on the moon in 2010 and collecting samples of lunar soil with an unmanned vehicle in 2020.

Sun Laiyan, director of the China National Space Administration, said late last year that China has built two prototype lunar satellites and would begin work on the satellite to be launched to orbit the moon before 2007.

The lunar program is also known as the Chang'e Program referring to a goddess who reached the moon in an ancient Chinese fairy tale.

Last year China became the third country in the world to send a man into space. Chinese space experts said earlier this month that two Chinese astronauts are expected to enter space late next year on a several-day mission.

The commission also set up its evaluation center for military projects and its technological evaluation and supervision center for the safety of special nuclear facilities, which aims to ensure the safety of the country's nuclear facilities for military purpose.

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Citation: China Inaugurates First Lunar Probe Engineering Center (2005, August 23) retrieved 20 March 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2005-08-china-inaugurates-lunar-probe-center.html>

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