

First Chinese Unmanned Lunar Mission Set For 2007

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China is planning a three-stage programme of unmanned lunar missions, with the aim of bringing back rock samples from the moon in around 2017, aerospace officials said yesterday.

"If there are no major problems, China's first unmanned satellite to the moon will be launched in 2007," said Luan Enjie, chief commander of the country's lunar exploration programme.

This is the second time in a week Chinese scientists have confirmed the plan. On August 9, Ye Peijian, chief designer of the orbiter, said research and development of the satellite is going smoothly.

Luan made the latest remarks at a ceremony yesterday in Beijing to kick off a one-and-half-month campaign to solicit designs for a moon exploration programme logo.

The lunar orbiter, dubbed Chang'e-1 (CH-1), is named after the Chinese legend of a young fairy who flies to the moon. The orbiter weighs more than 2 tons and, if all goes to plan, will fly for a year, Luan said.

As the first phase of a three-part lunar probe programme, the unmanned fly-by mission will collect information for three-dimensional mapping of the moon's surface as well as studying its mineral content.

In the second phase, scientists plan to put a "lunar vehicle" on the moon to explore the lunar surface in around 2012.

Through the wheeled robotic explorer, scientists hope to get to know the moon's environment and analyze the composition of lunar rocks, Luan said.

Another soft-lander will be launched around 2017, with the mission of bringing back lunar samples.

Luan did not reveal when China will be sending a man on the moon, but said the 2017 mission would provide data for manned lunar missions and for choosing a site for a lunar base.

To accomplish the missions, scientists will have to solve a chain of problems regarding satellites, rockets and tracking systems, he said.

Sun Laiyan, director of the China National Space Administration, yesterday said the lunar missions constituted a new landmark in the country's space programme after the launching of satellites and manned spacecraft.

"The lunar probe indicates China has taken an important step towards exploration of deeper space," Sun said.

The moon will provide a platform from which to explore further into space, he said earlier.

China launched its lunar exploration programme belatedly. The former Soviet Union launched Luna 10, the world's first spacecraft to go into lunar orbit on April 4, 1966, a few months before the US launched Lunar Orbiter 1.

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