

China preps next lunar space mission

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Preparations for the launch of the Chang'e-2 probe, which will go into orbit within 15 kilometres (nine miles) of the moon, are going smoothly, People's Daily said, citing Wu Weiren, a senior engineer overseeing the programme.

The Chang'e-2 mission "is currently undergoing pre-launch testing and preparations -- the plan is to carry out a trial flight mission by the end of the year," the paper quoted Wu as saying.

Space programme officials had said previously that the mission would be

launched in October, but no precise date has been given.

The lunar probe will test soft-landing and other technologies in preparation for the launch of the Chang'e-3, which is slated for launch in 2013 and aims to be China's first unmanned landing on the moon, the report said.

The Chang'e programme, named after a mythical Chinese goddess who flew to the moon, is seen as an effort to put China's space exploration programme on a par with those of the United States and Russia.

[China](#) launched Chang'e-1, which orbited the moon and took high-resolution pictures of the [lunar surface](#), in October 2007 as part of China's ambitious three-stage moon mission.

China's lunar programme hopes to bring a moon rock sample back to earth in 2017, with a manned mission foreseen in around 2020, according to state media.

Chinese scientists ultimately plan to build an observatory on the surface of the moon, previous reports said.

China became the world's third nation to put a man in space independently -- after the United States and Russia -- when Yang Liwei piloted the one-man Shenzhou-5 space mission in 2003.

In September 2008, the Shenzhou-7, piloted by three astronauts, carried out China's first space walk.

The Americans have achieved the only manned lunar missions, making six trips from 1969 to 1972.

Beijing has other significant Asian competitors to reckon with as it vies

to become the second nation to put a man on the [moon](#).

India landed a lunar probe in 2008, and a top official said in January it was targeting a manned [space mission](#) in 2016. Japan, meanwhile, launched its first lunar satellite in June last year.

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