

China spacecraft to launch soon to test docking

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China will launch an unmanned spacecraft early next month that will attempt to dock with an experimental module, the latest step in what will be a decade-long effort to place a manned permanent space station in orbit.

In space, the Shenzhou 8 will carry out maneuvers to couple with the Tiangong 1 module now in orbit.

The ship and the modified Long March-2F rocket that will sling it into space were transferred early Wednesday to the [launch pad](#) at the Jiuquan space base on the edge of the [Gobi desert](#) in northern China, the official [Xinhua News Agency](#) said.

Its exclusive report did not specify a date for the launch. Chinese space officials rarely speak to foreign media.

The 8.5-ton, box car-sized Tiangong 1 launched last month has moved into orbit 217 miles (350 kilometers) above the Earth and is surveying Chinese farmland using special cameras, Xinhua said.

It is also conducting experiments involving growing crystals in zero gravity, the report said, citing the launch center's chief engineer, Lu Jinrong.

Following Shenzhou 8, two more missions, at least one of them manned, are to meet up with the module next year for further practice, with

astronauts staying for up to one month.

Plans call for launching two other experimental modules for more tests before the actual station is launched in three sections between 2020 and 2022.

At about 60 tons when completed, the Chinese station will be considerably smaller than the [International Space Station](#), which is expected to continue operating through 2028.

China launched its own space station program after being rebuffed in its attempts to join the 16-nation ISS, largely on objections from the U.S. It is wary of the Chinese program's military links and the sharing of technology with its chief economic and political competitor.

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