

China may send first woman into space

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China may send its first woman into space next year as part of a programme to build a space station by 2020, the official Xinhua news agency said Monday.

The announcement came as China said it would launch an unmanned space craft, the Shenzhou VIII, early Tuesday to carry out the country's first ever space docking with a module that is already orbiting the earth.

The experimental docking is part of China's preparation for building its first space station by 2020, where astronauts can live for several months, as they do on NASA's International Space Station or the former Russian Mir.

If it is a success, China will launch another two space craft next year to conduct more docking experiments.

At least one will be manned, and two female astronauts are among those being trained for the mission, Xinhua said. If they are chosen, they will be the first women China has sent into space.

China began its manned spaceflight programme in 1990 after buying Russian technology and in 2003 became the third country to send humans into space, after the former Soviet Union and the United States.

The Shenzhou VIII will blast off from the Gobi desert in China's northwest at 5:58am on Tuesday (2158 GMT Monday) before attempting to join with the Tiangong-1 or "Heavenly Space" module,

possibly within days.

A spokeswoman for China's manned space programme said data gathered would be crucial to the success of future missions.

"Although Shenzhou-8 is unmanned, we equipped the spacecraft with devices recording real images and mechanical parameters during its flight, both of which are vital to future manned missions," said Wu Ping.

China sees its ambitious space programme as a symbol of its burgeoning global stature.

The launch of Tiangong-1 on September 29 -- ahead of China's National Day on October 1 -- was attended by Premier Wen Jiabao, while President Hu Jintao watched from a space flight control centre in Beijing.

But it is playing catch-up in the space arena. The planned space docking will only emulate what the Americans and Russians achieved in the 1960s.

Xinhua said docking technologies were crucial to the success of China's ambitions for a space station.

Mastering docking technology "will make it possible for China to carry out space exploration of larger scale," it quoted Zhou Jianping, chief designer of China's manned space programme, as saying.

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