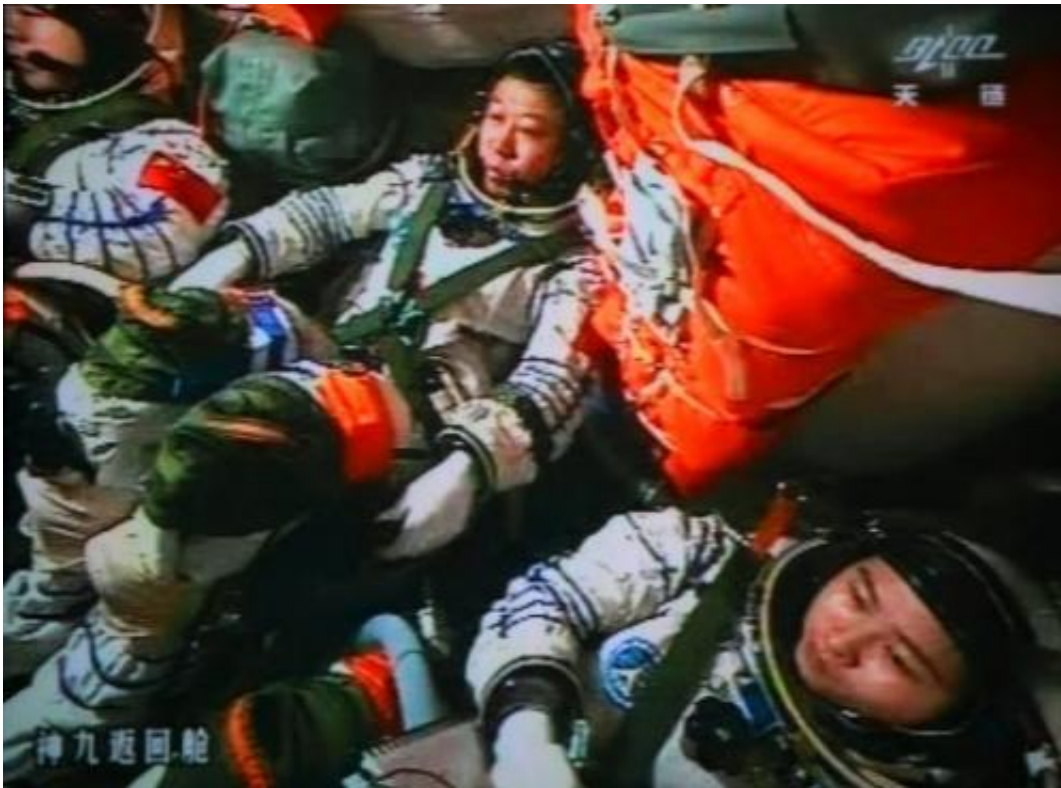


How China may be the next to land on the moon

August 27 2012, by Sebastien Blanc



Chinese astronauts Liu Wang (centre), Jing Haipeng (left) and Liu Yang in the Shenzhou-9 spacecraft during a manned space mission which includes China's first female astronaut on June 24. Neil Armstrong's 1969 lunar landing marked a pinnacle of US technological achievement, defining what many saw as the American century, but the next person to set foot on the moon will likely be Chinese.

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As the United States has scaled back its manned space programme to cut costs—a move strongly criticised by Armstrong, who died on Saturday—Asian nations have aggressively expanded into space exploration.

China, Japan and India all have their own space programmes. New Delhi, which envisages its first [manned mission](#) in 2016, recently unveiled [ambitious plans](#) to launch a space probe that would orbit Mars.

Japan participates in the [International Space Station](#) programme and launched its first [lunar probe](#) in 2007. It is planning a follow-up that it hopes will find "[organic substances](#) or minerals containing water" on an asteroid.

But experts say that China, which as recently as the 1980s was focused solely on developing satellites, is the closest to landing an astronaut on the moon.

Beijing launched its manned space programme in 1999 and has developed rapidly since, sending its first astronaut into space in 2003 and completing a [space walk](#) in 2008.

This year, it conducted its first manned space docking—the latest step towards setting up a space station—during a mission that included its first woman in space.



US astronauts Neil Armstrong and "Buzz" Aldrin deploy the US flag on the lunar surface during the Apollo 11 lunar landing mission in 1969. Armstrong's 1969 lunar landing marked a pinnacle of US technological achievement, defining what many saw as the American century, but the next person to set foot on the moon will likely be Chinese.

In its last white paper on space, China said it was working towards landing a man on the moon—a feat so far only achieved by the United States, most recently in 1972—although it did not give a time frame.

It will attempt to land an exploratory craft on the moon for the first time in the second half of 2013 and transmit back a survey of the [lunar surface](#).

"Nobody knows where the next astronauts on the moon will come from.

But I expect there is a good chance that they will be Chinese," said Morris Jones, an Australian space expert.

"China's space programme is moving steadily forward. If they continue at this pace, they will develop the capability to reach the moon around 2030."

China's space programme remains far behind that of the United States—as evidenced by the fact that the recent manual space docking trumpeted by Beijing was mastered by the United States in the 1960s.

US President Barack Obama said in 2010 he would drop the costly Constellation space programme, killing off future moon exploration.



A Japanese H-IIB rocket lifts off from the Tanegashima Space Centre in the southern island of Tanegashima on July 21. Japan participates in the International Space Station programme and launched its first lunar probe in 2007. It is planning a follow-up that it hopes will find "organic substances or minerals containing water" on an asteroid.

But the United States is developing a new rocket, and this month landed a rover the size of a car on Mars for a two-year mission to explore the Red Planet for signs it could support life.

Beijing has spent about 39 billion yuan (\$6.1 billion) on its manned space programme since it began 20 years ago, state media have said.

It sees the programme as a symbol of its rising global stature, growing technical expertise, and the Communist Party's success in turning around the fortunes of the once poverty-stricken nation.

Experts, however, say national pride is just one of the motivating factors in China's ambitious space programme.

"Trips to the moon have always involved prestige, but there is also science," said Jones. "A new trend could involve mining the moon for nuclear fuel. China has made no secret of their interest in this possibility."

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