

China to send 'jade rabbit' to Moon: state media

November 26 2013, by Tom Hancock



A model of a lunar rover that will explore the moon's surface in an upcoming space mission is seen on display at the China International Industry Fair 2013 in Shanghai on November 5, 2013

China will launch its first ever moon rover early next month, state media said Tuesday, with the vehicle named "Jade Rabbit" in a nod to Chinese folklore.

The name derives from an ancient Chinese myth about a white rabbit

which lives on the moon as the pet of Chang'e, a lunar goddess who swallowed an immortality pill.

The rocket carrying the probe will be launched in early December, China's official Xinhua news agency said, citing the State Administration of Science, Technology and Industry for National Defence.

It did not give a specific date. China has previously sent two probes to orbit the moon, with controllers sending the first of them crashing into the lunar surface at the end of its mission.

"China has named its first moon rover 'Yutu', or jade rabbit, following an online poll," Xinhua added.

The rabbit's outline is said to be visible on the moon's surface, similar to the Western concept of the "man in the moon".

Beijing sees its military-run space programme as a marker of its rising global stature and growing technological might, as well as the ruling Communist Party's success in turning around the fortunes of the once poverty-stricken nation.

It has ambitious plans to create a permanent space station by 2020 and eventually send a human to the moon, but its technology currently lags behind the expertise of the United States and Russia.



The Shenzhou X spacecraft carried by a Long March-2F carrier rocket is installed at the launch pad in Jiuquan, Northwest China's Gansu province in the morning of June 3, 2013

China showed off a model of the gold-coloured moon rover, with six wheels and wing-like solar panels earlier this month.

The vehicle can climb inclines of up to 30 degrees and travel up to 200 metres (yards) per hour, its designers said.

References to a moon rabbit in Chinese folklore date back to the Warring States period, which ended in 221 BC.

Ouyang Ziyuan, head of the moon rover project, told Xinhua that the ancient beliefs had their origins in the marks left by impacts on the lunar landscape.

"There are several black spots on the moon's surface, our ancient people imagined they were a moon palace, osmanthus trees, and a jade rabbit," he said.

China's first lunar probe, Chang'e-1, was launched in 2007.

The next, Chang'e-2, began its journey three years later and after orbiting the moon was sent on a mission into deep space to monitor an asteroid.

That probe is "expected to travel as far as 300 million km from Earth, the longest voyage of any Chinese spacecraft", Xinhua quoted an official as saying.

That remains a small fraction of the distance travelled by the US' Voyager-1, launched in 1977, which left the solar system and has travelled nearly 19 billion kilometres away from its home planet.

Chinese social media users welcomed the name on Tuesday. "I look forward to the jade rabbit visiting the moon palace, go Chinese aerospace!" wrote one poster on Sina Weibo, a service similar to Twitter.

The name was chosen in an online poll, with 3.4 million people taking part, Xinhua reported.

"Yutu is a symbol of kindness, purity and agility, and is identical to the moon rover in both outlook and connotation," it quoted Li Benzhen, deputy commander-in-chief of China's lunar programme, as saying.

"Yutu also reflects China's peaceful use of space," he added.

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