

For China, moon voyage signals something greater

December 18 2013, by Felicia Sonmez



Photo taken on November 5, 2013 shows a model of "Jade Rabbit" at the China International Industry Fair 2013 in Shanghai

In a darkened auditorium some 250 young Chinese sat spellbound in a projector's otherworldly blue glow, listening to the father of China's lunar programme chart their country's once and future voyages in the final frontier.

While the US retreats from manned [space exploration](#) China is seeking to establish itself as an ascending superpower, in the same way that the US and Soviet Union did when they alone dominated global politics.

Colourful maps of interplanetary flight paths and photos of the moon's craggy surface taken by China's two previous rover missions, Chang'e-1 and Chang'e-2, illuminated the screen in Beijing.

Then pictures of China's latest rover, which made its soft-landing last Saturday, and finally, another image, this time a mock-up: an astronaut standing on the moon, proudly planting a red Chinese flag in the lunar soil.

"We will send a Chinese astronaut to the moon," Ouyang Ziyuan told the rapt audience at the event, organised by China's popular science website Guokr.

"The Communist Party Central Committee strongly encourages us to go even beyond the moon, and China is already capable of deep [space exploration](#)," said the 78-year-old former chief scientist of the lunar programme.

"We will explore the whole solar system."

Ouyang's impassioned presentation, and the pride and wonderment with which the 20-something crowd greeted it, underscored the significance of the programme.

For many in China, while their country's steady progress into space is a technical achievement, it also signifies something much greater.

China's boom of the last 30 years has made it the world's second-largest economy, and it is increasingly seeking geopolitical heft of a similar

stature. The military-run space programme fits into that effort, specialists say.

"For China, it represents two things," said Maurizio Falanga, executive director of the International Space Science Institute Beijing and one of a growing number of Western space scientists seeking to strengthen collaboration with China.

"One, they're able to do it by themselves; they have the technology and they know how to do it," he said.

"It's also to be proud of the nation, to be proud to be Chinese, that 'we are on the same level with the US now, or the Russians... and start to become a world power'."

China first sent a human into space 10 years ago, and its ambitious future plans include a permanent orbiting space station to be completed by 2020.

Around the same time, the International Space Station operated by the US, Russia, Japan, Canada and Europe will go out of service.

The US has retired its remaining space shuttles without a replacement, and scaled back NASA funding.

Its activities have proceeded only "in fits and starts", noted Joan Johnson-Freese, professor of national security affairs at the US Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island.

"They're (China) trying to set up a programme that's long-duration, as opposed to the United States where we went to the moon, we did it very quickly, we said, 'Been there, done that'," she said.

Ken Pounds, a professor emeritus at the University of Leicester who has spearheaded British space research, said China's progress in space represented an "absolute transformation" in its stature over the last 40 years.

"When I was young, the US programme dominated everything, and we in the UK and in Europe tended to look at collaboration with the Americans as the first way to go," said Pounds.

"I think the situation is now different. I don't think there's any particular preference on who to work with, and in fact there are very significant collaborations with China," he said.

Saturday's successful soft-landing of the Chang'e-3 probe and Jade Rabbit rover represented a feat that both the US and former Soviet Union had accomplished decades earlier.

Yet for those within the Chinese space programme, the mission held particular import after the intentional crash-landing of their first moon probe, Chang'e-1, in 2009.

Such "hard landings" are routine in international space exploration, and it had already snapped enough photos to piece together China's first full map of the lunar surface.

"When Chang'e-1 crash-landed, we were really heartbroken," Ouyang said.

"It was the crystallisation of the collective labour of a billion people. In order to complete its final mission, it died the cruellest death. It died as a martyr."

The probe may have come decades after those of China's rivals, but the

map it produced was "the best in the world" at the time, he added.

"The things that others have done, we're going to do better than them," he said. "Moreover, there are still some things others haven't done yet. China is going to go do them."

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