

Chinese probe prepares to return moon rocks to Earth

December 6 2020



In this China National Space Administration (CNSA) photo released by Xinhua News Agency, a simulated image of the ascender of Chang'e-5 spacecraft blasting off from the lunar surface at the Beijing Aerospace Control Center (BACC) in Beijing on Dec. 3, 2020. The Chinese lunar probe lifted off from the moon Thursday night with a cargo of lunar samples on the first stage of its return to Earth, state media reported. (China National Space Administration/Xinhua via AP)

A Chinese probe that landed on the moon transferred rocks to an orbiter Sunday in preparation for returning samples of the lunar surface to Earth for the first time in almost 45 years, the space agency announced.

The upper stage of the Change'e lander blasted off Friday from the [lunar surface](#). If the mission succeeds, it will make China the third country after the United States and former Soviet Union to bring moon rocks to Earth.

The ascent stage docked with a robot spacecraft orbiting the moon at 5:42 a.m. Sunday (2142 GMT Saturday), state media reported, citing the China National Space Administration. A container with 2 kilograms (4.4 pounds) of rocks was transferred to the orbiter 30 minutes later.

A capsule carrying the rock samples is due to land in China's northern grasslands in the Inner Mongolia region in mid-December. They will be the first fresh samples of the lunar surface obtained by scientists since the Soviet Union's Luna 24 probe in 1976.

The CNSA released a photo taken by the orbiter showing the ascent stage rocket approaching for a rendezvous.

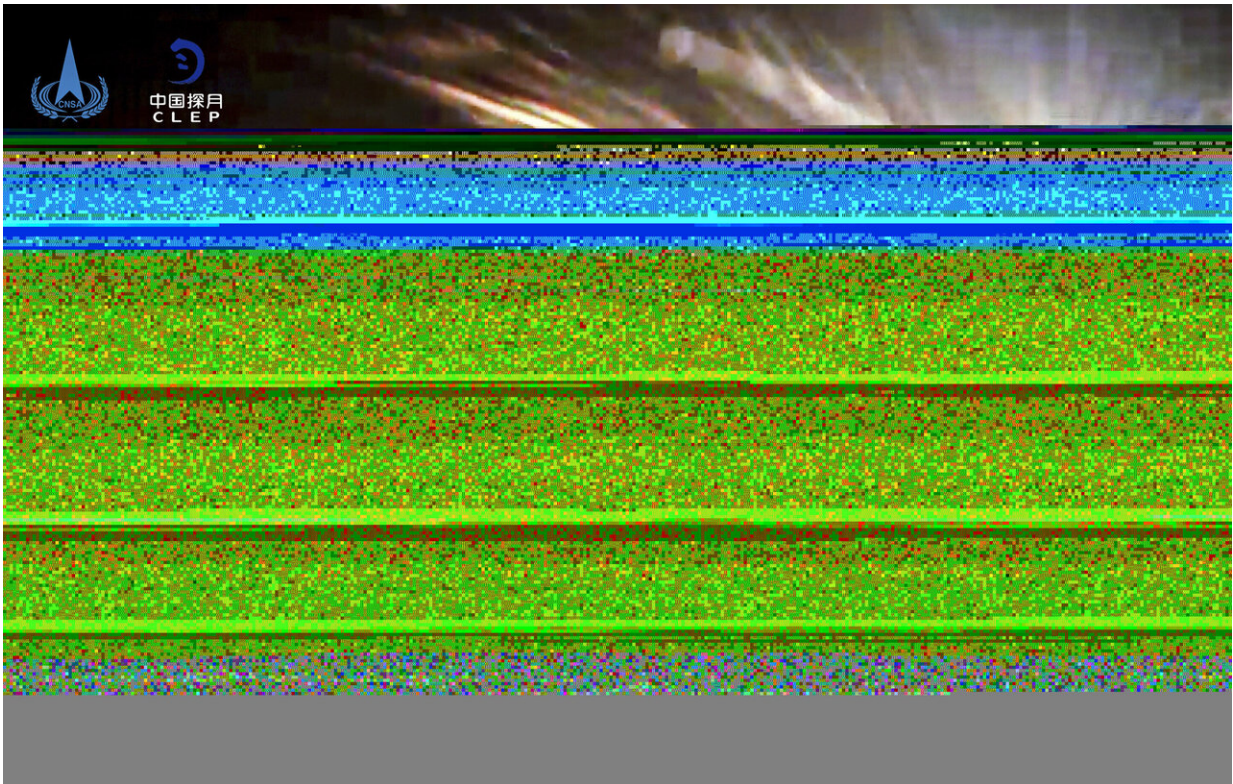
China is in the midst of a series of increasingly ambitious space missions including a probe en route to Mars and development of a reusable space plane. Plans call for returning a human to the moon five decades after American astronauts.



This image provided by China National Space Administration shows Chang'e-5 probe gathering samples on the moon surface on Wednesday, Dec. 2, 2020. A Chinese lunar probe lifted off from the moon Thursday, Dec. 3 night with a cargo of lunar samples on the first stage of its return to Earth, the government space agency reported, on what is expected to be a breakthrough mission for the rising Asian space power. (China National Space Administration/Xinhua via AP)



In this photo released by Xinhua News Agency, screens at the Beijing Aerospace Control Center (BACC) show the blast and the simulation of the ascender of Chang'e-5 spacecraft blasting off from the lunar surface in Beijing on Thursday Dec. 3, 2020. The Chinese lunar probe lifted off from the moon Thursday night with a cargo of lunar samples on the first stage of its return to Earth, state media reported. (Jin Liwang/Xinhua via AP)



This image provided by China National Space Administration shows the ascender of Chang'e-5 spacecraft blasting off from the moon surface on Thursday, Dec. 3, 2020. A Chinese lunar probe lifted off from the moon on Thursday night with a cargo of lunar samples on the first stage of its return to Earth, the government space agency reported, on what is expected to be a breakthrough mission for the rising Asian space power. (China National Space

Administration/Xinhua via AP)

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