

Asia's star burns ever brighter in space

April 10 2011, by Boris Cambreleng



Japan's H-IIIB rocket lifts off from the Tanegashima space centre in southern Japan, January 22, 2011. Asia's extraterrestrial ambitions have rocketed from nowhere in the 50 years since the first human space flight, with China shooting for the moon while India and Japan fuel up their own programmes.

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Since China in 2003 became the world's third nation to put a man in space independently, after the United States and Russia, its manned space flight programme has earned worldwide attention.

In October, it launched its second [lunar probe](#) Chang'e-2 -- the next step in a bold programme to become the second country to put a man on the

moon. Beijing also plans to build its own space station.

Wu Weiren, chief designer of China's lunar orbiter project, has said there is no timetable for a manned [moon landing](#), but that it would not happen before 2020, according to comments carried by state media.

China's space programme was launched in the early 1990s, thanks to the acquisition of Russian technology, and has become a symbol of its growing global stature.

The initiative is run by the country's powerful People's Liberation Army, which does not welcome international cooperation -- unlike its regional rival India, which is targeting a manned space mission in 2016.

"India is totally different from China in that it benefits from technology transfers. Beijing has meanwhile been isolated as it has built up its space programme," said Isabelle Sourbes-Verger, a French expert on China's efforts.

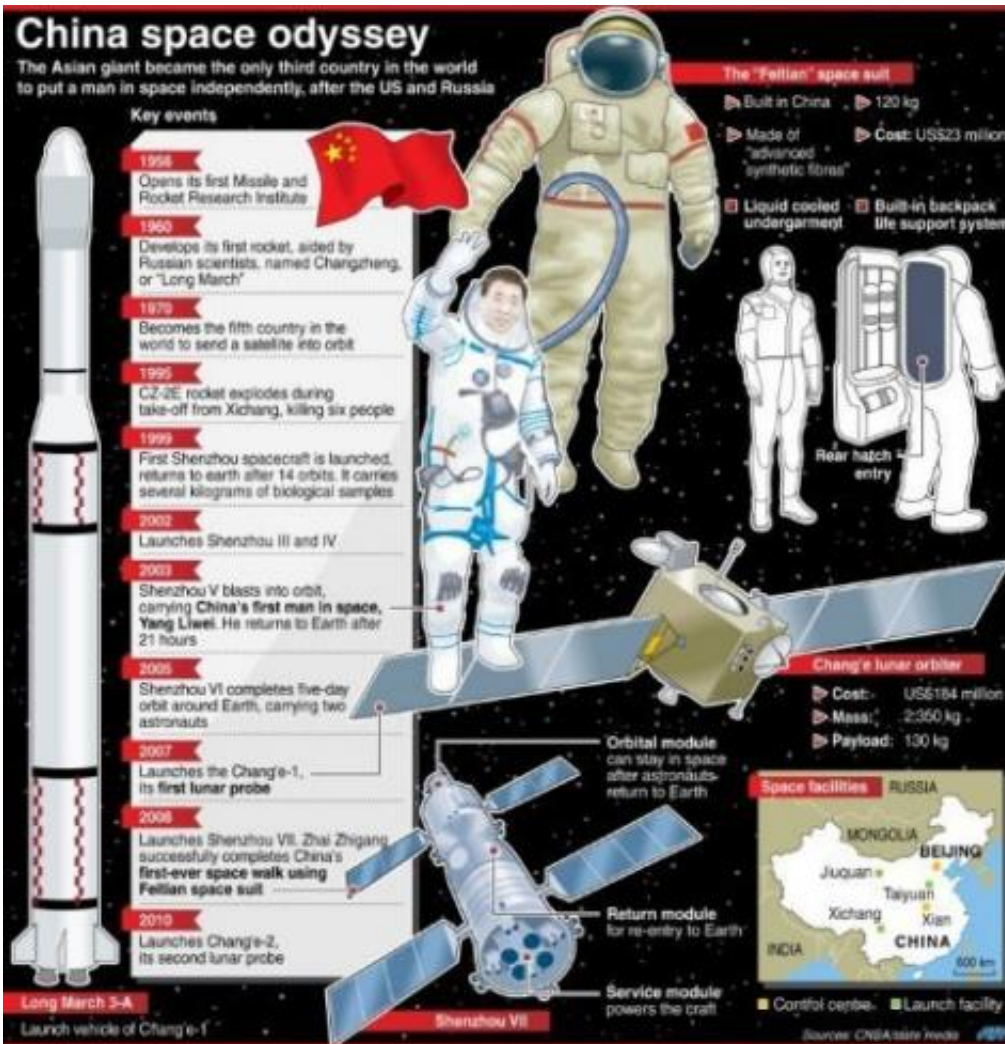
India has also focused on money-making space ventures rather than manned space exploration, according to Sourbes-Verger, who is based at France's National Centre for Scientific Research in Paris.

"They have high-performance [Earth observation](#) and telecommunications systems... with a logistics system on the ground to process the data that works very well," she said.

China lags about five years behind India in such areas, but has made major investments to quickly bridge the gap, Sourbes-Verger added.

The explosion of an Indian [space rocket](#) in December dented New Delhi's efforts to push further into the market for commercial satellite launches, but its space agency says failures have become stepping stones

for success.



Graphic showing the timeline and key points around China's space odyssey. Asia's extraterrestrial ambitions have rocketed from nowhere in the 50 years since the first human space flight, with China shooting for the moon while India and Japan fuel up their own programmes.

"India is recognised as a leader in the application of space technology for the development of the nation," the director of the Indian Space Research Centre (ISRO), S. Satish, told AFP.

Japan, which launched its first lunar probe in 2007, has also ploughed ahead with its space programme.

Like several European countries, it participates in the International Space Station programme and Japanese astronaut Satoshi Furukawa is scheduled to stay there for six months from late May.

The Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) said in November that its deep-space Hayabusa probe had become the first to collect asteroid dust, during a seven-year odyssey that ended in June when it returned to Earth.

"We can't really speak about competition per se, as the level of technological achievement really are not comparable, with Japan well ahead of China and India," Sourbes-Verger said.

JAXA says it is planning a follow-up probe which it hopes will find "organic substances or minerals containing water" on an asteroid named 1999JU3, adding that it wants to find out whether they bear "any relation to life on Earth".

The Japanese government's Strategic Headquarters for Space Policy says a successful space programme does much to lift Japan's profile.

"Our country's space technology, its achievements and human resources are truly diplomatic resources that boost our influence and position in the international community," it said in a policy report.

"We will promote them as a source of our soft power."

Sourbes-Verger praised Japan's advanced Earth observation systems, which are key to monitoring environmental protection. Brazil, another emerging space power, has chosen to specialise in the same area.

It has launched three observation satellites as part of a Sino-Brazilian project to monitor earth resources. Others will be sent into orbit to help map out the Amazon River basin, and to gauge rainfall and water resources.

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