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.
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, the government space agency reported, on what is expected to be a breakthrough mission for the rising Asian space power. (Jin Liwang/Xinhua via AP)

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