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Chang'e 1 lifting off the launch pad
AP Photo

Chang'e 1 Enters the Moon's Orbit

Chang'e 2 and 3 will follow in the next years

A month after the rival nation Japan achieved the same thing, China has its very own lunar orbiter as from today. Chang'e 1 is part of an exploration program named Chinese Lunar Exploration Program, which involves collecting data from the Moon's orbit for a future human mission and is composed of two other crucial stages called Chang'e 2 planned to launch in 2012, which will deploy a lunar lander for surface exploration and Chang'e 3 based on Chang'e 2, planned to launch in 2017 which will return lunar samples. In the same year as the launch of Chang'e 3, the manned program is supposed to start. Chang'e 1 has been launched on 24th of October for the launch pad at Xichang Satellite Launch Center in the southwest of China's Sichuan province, after it has been delayed ever since April 2007. China and some of its neighboring countries, India and Japan, have suddenly started to show interest for space programs, due to their economic growth, spawning some kind of rivalry between the three countries. The Chinese government denies it, saying there is no competition between the Asian countries, but rather innovation for a future wave of cooperation. Chang'e 1 is named after a mythical Chinese goddess who flew to the moon and is planned to be kept in the Moon's orbit for about one year, a striking similarity to the Japanese probe. Though China launched its orbiter late last month, Japan put its probe in space in September and India has plans to launch its own lunar probe in April next year. Chang'e 1 has as a primary objective to analyze the chemical and mineral composition of the surface of the Moon, using X-ray spectrometers and is expected to send back pictures this month. China has first put a satellite in Earth's orbit in 1970 and in 2003 it became the third country in the world to put its own astronauts into space. It also alarmed the international community in January, this year when it destroyed one of its old satellites with the help of an anti-satellite missile.