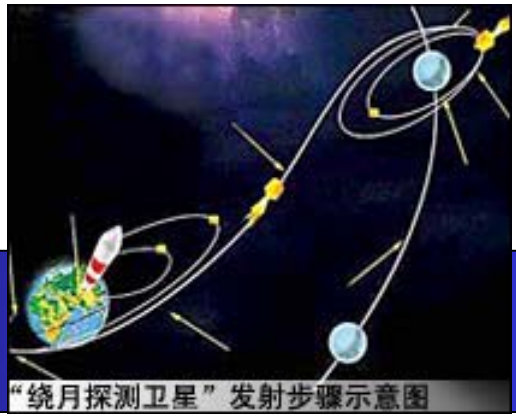
Fly Me to the Moon: The Great Debate



The China National Space Administration (CNSA) formally announced in March 2003 that it had begun working on its lunar probe project. The program is known as the Chang'e Project, named after the woman who flew to the moon in an ancient Chinese fairy tale. While the dream of landing the moon has inspired many Chinese, others have serious doubts about the value of the lunar probe.

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How much do we need helium 3?

Another point of debate is the moon's abundant store of helium 3. This element is considered by many scientists to be the perfect fusion energy source: non-polluting, potent and with almost no radioactive by-products. Although it is extremely rare on Earth, scientists estimate there are at least a million tons of helium 3 on the moon, enough to power the world for thousands of years.

China currently burns billions of tons of coal and petroleum every year to meet its energy needs. If it replaced these fossil fuels with helium 3, China would need only 10 tons, while 100 tons would provide power to the whole world. Exploring the depth of the moon's soil and the quantity and distribution of helium 3 are important goals of Chang'e I.

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When will Chang'e fly to the moon?

The Chang'e lunar probe project comprises three phases: orbiting, landing and a round trip including a landing. China plans to launch Chang'e I, the moon-orbiting satellite, before 2007. Phase two, the landing of an unmanned vehicle on the moon's surface, is projected to take place by 2010. Phase three will entail collecting samples of lunar soil with an unmanned vehicle that will then return to Earth, and should be completed by 2020.

"Our Chinese dream of landing the moon is sure to be realized," says Ouyang Ziyuan.

(*Beijing Sci-tech Report*, translated by Wang Qian for china.org.cn, June 24, 2004)