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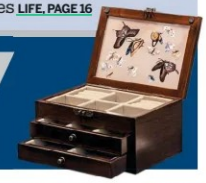

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2023: The year China's private space sector took off

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I'm used to writing dozens of stories a year about people and developments in the space sector, and each year a few important missions have stood out.

For me, 2019 was memorable for the landing of the Chang'e 4 robotic probe on the far side of the moon, while Chang'e 5 and Beidou were the buzzwords in 2020.

Then, in 2021, I was impressed by the Tianwen 1 mission that placed the first Chinese rover on Mars and the commencement of the country's Tiangong space station program, with Tiangong going on to become my keyword for 2022.

Looking back at last year, I would call it the year of the rise of China's private space sector, with a number of private companies achieving remarkable feats.

In April, Space Pioneer conducted the successful maiden flight of its TL 2 rocket, making it the first privately built Chinese liquid-fueled rocket to reach orbit. By doing so, it also became the first privately developed, liquid-propellant rocket in the world to succeed in its first orbital attempt.

Zhao Lei poses for a photo at Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center in northwestern China.

In July, ZQ 2, a rocket model developed by LandSpace, succeeded in its second attempt to reach orbit and became the world's first methane-fueled rocket to complete an orbital mission.

In December, ZQ 2, one of the largest and most powerful private rockets in China, successfully conducted its third flight.

Private players also showed their technological innovation and creativity in the satellite field.

GalaxySpace, a leading private satellite maker, built China's first satellite equipped with a flexible solar array and sent it into space in July, tasking it with verifying a next-generation low-Earth-orbit broadband communication system and other advanced satellite technologies.

Having witnessed these and other accomplishments, I was reminded of an assertion made by a senior rocket designer at one of China's top space institutes during a face-to-face interview with me nine years ago, and I quote, "Private companies should not be allowed to design or build carrier rockets, because only the State-owned entities have the responsibility and ability to do so. Moreover, I don't think private players can ensure the quality of their rockets."

He's no longer giving interviews, but it would be interesting to know what he would say now about the rise of those private enterprises. I guess he might agree with me that open, fair and free competition leads to strength and prosperity in any industry.