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Scientists get first samples from moon

17.5g of lunar dust and rock fragments from Chang'e 5 mission handed over

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The China National Space Administration distributed the first batch of lunar samples from the Chang'e 5 robotic mission to scientists on Monday.

The samples, weighing about 17.5 grams, were divided into 21 lots and handed over at a ceremony at the National Astronomical Observatories in Beijing to scientists from 13 domestic research organizations working on 31 scientific projects.

All of the distributed samples are from dust and rock fragments retrieved from the lunar surface by the Chang'e 5 lander. Subsurface samples brought back by the historic 23-day expedition are still being processed and undergoing preliminary analysis at the National Astronomical Observatories, said Li Chunlai, deputy chief planner of China's lunar exploration program.

The space administration published the Regulations on the Management of Lunar Samples in January.

In April, it established a selection commission for the distribution and use of the samples, and then started to accept applications for the first batch of 44 processed samples.

Thirty-seven scientists from 23 research bodies associated with the ministries of education, industry and information technology and natural resources, the Chinese Academy of Sciences and China Aerospace Science and Technology Corp submitted 85 applications, said Pei Zhaoyu, deputy director of the administration's Lunar Exploration and Space Program Center and spokesman for the Chang'e 5 mission.

Experts heard applications at a meeting last month and then approved 31 that requested a total of 17.47 grams of samples, he said, adding that the administration will hold a second hearing in Sep-

tember for updated and new applications.

Zhu Rixiang, chairman of the selection commission and an academician of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, said experts would review the scientific value, feasibility and research capability of each application, as well as the quantity requested, before deciding whether to grant approval.

He said experts hope that through research on the samples, Chinese scientists will be able to advance their lunar studies and help with the planning for future explorations of the moon and other planets.

Su Gang, director of the Chinese Academy of Sciences' Bureau of Frontier Sciences and Education, said researchers at the academy will analyze the optical, magnetic, electromagnetic, structural and other traits of the samples allocated to them.

Speaking of international cooperation, Pei said foreign scientists are welcome to take part in research on the samples, adding that the space administration is working with other government departments to draft rules for such international cooperation.

"Currently, foreign scientists can join a Chinese research team to get access to our samples," he said.

The world's most significant space activity last year, the Chang'e 5 mission was launched on Nov 24 from the Wenchang Space Launch Center in Hainan province. It landed on the moon on Dec 1, following its predecessors, Chang'e 3 and 4, to become the third Chinese spacecraft to touch down on the lunar surface. They have been the only successful lunar landings since the Soviet Luna 24 robotic probe brought the last lunar samples back to Earth.

The landmark mission returned with 1,731 grams of lunar rock and soil on Dec 17, a historic accomplishment 45 years after the Soviet Luna 24 robotic probe brought the last lunar samples back to Earth.