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A Y-20 transport plane lands after a flight performance at the 2022 Grand Open House Event of the People's Liberation Army Air Force and Changchun Air Show on Friday in Changchun, Jilin province. KUANG LINHUA / CHINA DAILY

Reusable spaceplane completes key flight test

By ZHAO LEI

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China on Friday carried out a key flight test of its reusable suborbital spaceplane, according to China Aerospace Science and Technology Corp, the nation's leading space contractor.

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The State-owned company said in a news release that the spaceplane started its own propulsion system and then conducted a vertical liftoff from the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center in northwestern China's Gobi Desert on Friday morning.

After completing a preplanned suborbital flight, the craft made a conventional landing on the runway at the Ala Right Banner Air-

port in the Inner Mongolia autonomous region, the news release said, noting that the test marked the first flight by a used suborbital spaceplane in China.

Incorporating both aviation and space technologies, the craft was designed and constructed by the China Academy of Launch Vehicle Technology in Beijing and was unveiled in July last year when it performed its first liftoff from the Jiuquan center and flew back to the Ala Right Banner Airport.

After the debut mission, the vehicle underwent a host of examinations and maintenance work, according to the company.

China Aerospace Science and Technology Corp has been progressing steadily in its reusable vehicle project.

So far, the company has flight-

tested two reusable experimental spacecraft from the Jiuquan center. Earlier this month, the second such craft was launched and seems to still be flying in orbit.

The company called the reusable spaceplanes "a milestone in China's path toward a world-class space power".

China Aerospace Science and Industry Corp, another space contractor, is also working on a reusable spaceplane and plans to start commercial flights by 2030.

Wang Yanan, editor-in-chief of Aerospace Knowledge magazine, said reusable spacecraft are a mixture of cutting-edge science and technology and state-of-the-art engineering expertise, so they can only be built by global space powers such as the United States and China.

Such craft can be used in a variety of operations including space tourism, astronaut commuting, satellite deployment, cargo transportation and emergency rescue related to space missions, he said.

"Compared with carrier rockets and space shuttles, the new type of vehicle features lower costs and a shorter preparation time, and will offer space industry users greater flexibility. It will also allow ordinary people to enjoy short-time space travel or make an ultrafast intercontinental journey at an affordable price," Wang said.

In addition to reusable spaceplanes, engineers at the China Academy of Launch Vehicle Technology are also designing reusable carrier rockets that are expected to have improved cost and operational efficiency.