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[Robots] Taiwanese Scientist Talks about Driving Mars 'Curiosity' Rover

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CNA - Focus Taiwan (2012/12/30) A Taiwan-born scientist who works on the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's (NASA) "Curiosity" robot rover project told an audience at the Taipei Astronomical Museum in Taipei Sunday what it was like to "drive" the rover on Mars.

Calling himself a "taxi driver," Jeng YEN said the "drivers" of the rover spend about 10 hours each day planning, analyzing and checking the movements of the space vehicle based on the latest images from Mars before sending their instructions to the planet.

The rover then follows the instructions of the "drivers" the following day and moves an average of 50-60 meters per day depending on the terrain it faces, YEN said.

He said an exciting moment of the mission was when the first photo of the rover's landing, taken by an artificial satellite orbiting Mars, was sent back.

Given that the rover was traveling at a high speed, YEN said it was "not easy" for the snapshot to be taken.

"It meant that our landing model was accurate, to know its trajectory," he said.

YEN helped design "Curiosity," which landed on Mars in August on a mission that is looking for evidence that there once might have been life on that planet. The 899-kilogram craft is part of the U.S. space agency's US$2.5 billion unmanned Mars project.

When asked about the rover's latest findings, YEN said scientists discovered a kind of white coating on rocks just below the surface along what could have been a dry lake.

Meanwhile, the Associated Press reported a day earlier that the rover will set off toward a Martian mountain, Mount Sharp, in mid-February and could reach its destination in six months if it drives nonstop.

YEN said that when the rover reaches and begins climbing the mountain, it may allow scientists to see different layers of sediment and gain a better understanding of the planet's geological history.

As the only Taiwanese on the "driver team," YEN said it was an honor for him to participate on the "Curiosity" mission and called it a "very meaningful" contribution to overall human knowledge.

Further Information:
CNA - Focus Taiwan 2012/12/30

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National Science Council International Cooperation Sci-Tech Newsbrief
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