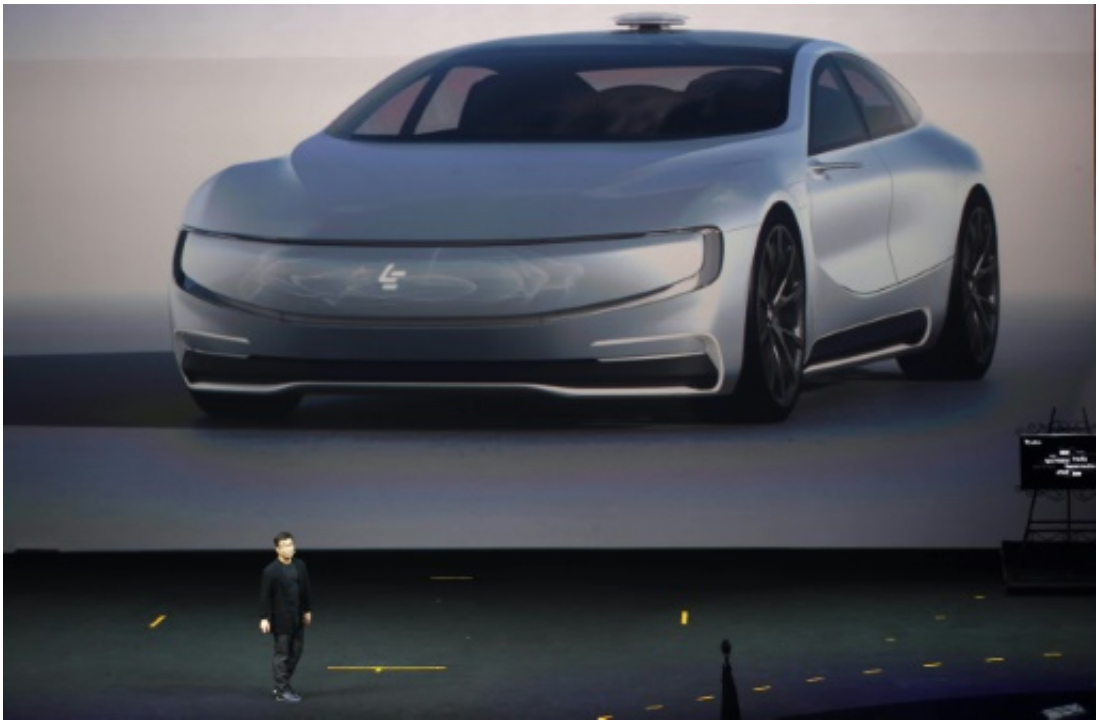
Chinese firms accelerate in race toward driverless future

April 23 2016, by Julien Girault



Chinese Internet giant LeECO Holdings Ltd unveils its internet electric battery driverless concept car 'LeSEE', during a launch event in Beijing, on April 20, 2016

Chinese manufacturers and Internet giants are in hot pursuit of their US counterparts in the race to design driverless cars, but the route to market is still littered with potholes.

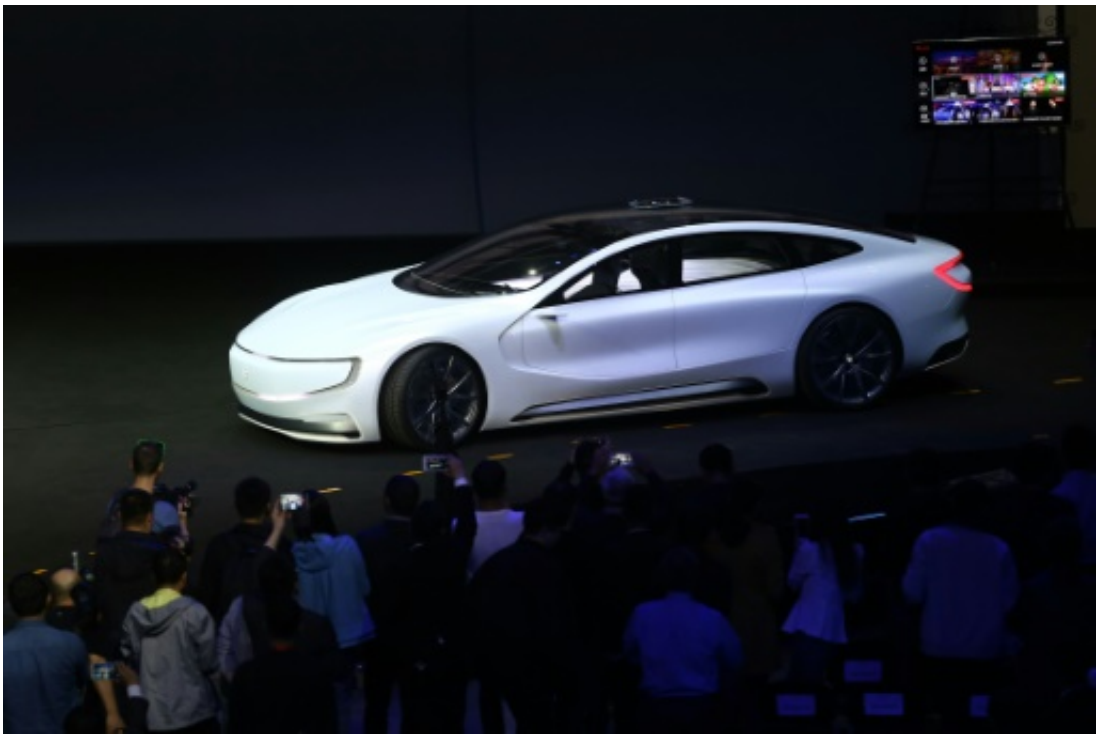
While Google has been working on autonomous vehicles for at least six years, with the likes of BMW, Volvo and Toyota in its wake, more recently Chinese businesses have entered the race, from Internet search giant Baidu to manufacturer Changan.

Last week, ahead of the Beijing Auto Show opening on Monday, two self-driving Changan cars made a mountainous 2,000 kilometre (1,200 mile) journey from Chongqing in the southwest to the capital in the country's first long-distance autonomous vehicle test.

Another Chinese Internet giant, LeECO, is also venturing into autonomous technologies, unveiling Wednesday in Beijing an electric car that can park itself and be summoned to its owner's location via smartphone.

And late last year Baidu tested China's first locally designed driverless vehicle, a modified BMW, with a 30 kilometre ride through the streets of Beijing.

Despite China's relatively late entry to the field, analysts believe the country could become a key market for driverless vehicles thanks to a more favourable regulatory and consumer environment.



An Internet electric battery driverless concept car 'LeSEE' is seen during a launch event in Beijing on April 20, 2016

The Boston Consulting Group (BCG) forecasts that global sales of driverless cars will reach 12 million by 2035, with more than a quarter sold in China.

Vehicles which automatically adjust their routes in response to real-time traffic information could solve chronic gridlock in China's major cities, BCG's Xavier Mosquet told AFP.

"If they believe this would ease traffic, Chinese authorities will do all they can to promote the development of this technology and then its use," he said.

Robot taxis

Public concerns over the safety of driverless cars are far lower than elsewhere, according to a survey by Roland Berger consultants in 2015, which found 96 percent of Chinese would consider an autonomous vehicle for almost all everyday driving, compared with 58 percent of Americans and Germans.

In a country notorious for accidents, the promise of better safety through autonomous technologies could also be appealing.

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The ultimate prize, say analysts, will be when mass transport firms such as taxi-hailing giant Uber, or its Chinese rival Didi, can deploy huge

fleets of robot taxis.

"The real payoff for truly driverless technology will come when cars on the road are no longer owned by people, but are owned by fleet management services," said Bill Russo, managing director of the consultancy firm Gao Feng.

"That's where you want to think about taking the driver out of the equation. Mobility on demand is hugely popular here."

In the Roland Berger survey, 51 percent of Chinese car owners said they would prefer to use robot taxis rather than buy a new vehicle themselves, compared with 26 percent of Americans.

With a ready market, China may soon become the top location for companies to refine driverless technology.

Swedish manufacturer Volvo, owned by China's Geely since 2010, this month announced plans to test drive up to 100 of its vehicles on Chinese roads this year.

Swedish manufacturer Volvo, owned by China's Geely since 2010, has announced plans to test drive up to 100 of its driverless vehicles on Chinese roads in 2016

Changan, a partner of Ford, is set to roll out commercial autonomous vehicles for motorways from 2018, while mass production of driverless city cars is projected to begin in 2025.

'Does the car choose?'

Baidu, meanwhile, says it will launch self-driving buses by 2018, which will operate on fixed routes in select cities in China.

Like Google, the Internet giant already owns detailed roadmaps and has experience in electronic security, and a company spokeswoman told AFP it had had "very positive feedback" from the government.

But analysts are more cautious, predicting slow-moving autonomous vehicles will not appear in towns until at least 2020.

Production costs were still too high to make a robot taxi fleet viable, BCG's Mosquet said.

"There are still many questions to be resolved" before fully autonomous vehicles can be put into public use, said Jeremy Carlson, a senior analyst for IHS.

He pointed to "chaotic traffic situations" on roads shared with cyclists and pedestrians, and less-than-adequate infrastructure.

Technology will be the first to see solutions, he said, but that still left regulation and issues around liability and insurance to be addressed.

For some, there are moral dilemmas as well.

"If you have someone jumping out in front of an autonomous car, does the car have to choose between killing that person, or swerving and crashing and killing the passenger?" asked Robin Zhu, senior analyst at Sanford C. Bernstein.

"If your car could choose to kill you, would you get in it?"

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