Cars and speakers: Baidu speeds up AI progress

November 16 2017

Baidu co-founder and chief executive Robin Li speaks during the annual Baidu World Technology Conference

Chinese web giant Baidu unveiled Thursday a smart speaker model and plans for a self-driving mini-bus, its latest foray into the hyper-competitive field of artificial intelligence.

Baidu will collaborate with bus manufacturer King Long to develop and

produce the first model of a fully autonomous mini-bus, Baidu CEO Robin Li said during the company's annual technology conference at a glitzy Beijing hotel.

The company aims to start "small-scale production" on the mini-bus in July 2018.

Baidu also plans to launch self-driving car models in 2019 in cooperation with manufacturers JAC Motors and BAIC, as well as the Chery car group, Li said, noting that these vehicles will be able to reduce traffic jams endemic to Chinese cities.

The company, regarded by some as the "Chinese Google", established in September a $1.5 billion fund dedicated to developing driverless cars.

In April it launched "Apollo," an "open platform" on which its technologies can be shared with developers and automakers. The platform signals a move to compete with Californian giant Alphabet (Google's parent company) and its subsidiary Waymo.

Baidu also unveiled Thursday a voice-responsive speaker—the "Raven H"—similar to Amazon's "Echo" loudspeaker.

A driverless car named "Apollo" is displayed at the annual Baidu World Technology Conference in Beijing on November 16, 2017

The product, which will be sold in China starting December for $256, takes advantage of Baidu's advancements in voice recognition and artificial intelligence.

Li likewise announced at the conference that the Baidu smartphone application will also be upgraded to better integrate voice recognition—no small feat given the tonal complexities of Mandarin and diversity of Chinese dialects.

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