

Robot home-help and virtual reality at Taiwan's Computex

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The Asus Zenbo robot steals the show as it serenades Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen (L) at the Computex computer exhibition on May 31, 2016 in Taipei

A knee-high robot designed to help around the house ended up serenading Taiwan's president as Asia's largest tech trade show kicked off Tuesday in Taipei.

The Computex fair comes as Taiwan looks to tech innovation as a way out of economic stagnation, seeking to diversify its reputation as a hardware hub best-known for manufacturing chips.

Organisers are hoping that new zones dedicated to smart living and start-ups will breathe new life into the show, as well as Taiwan's tech industry, which is increasingly under pressure from international rivals including China.

On the first day it was a small white robot called Zenbo from Taiwanese brand Asus—traditionally a notebook and smartphone maker—which drew the biggest crowds.

The voice-controlled, English-speaking robot is billed as a home-help, able to read receipts for the elderly and recite children's stories as well as carrying out tasks around the house.

Introduced to Taiwan's new president Tsai Ing-wen, who opened the show, Zenbo was seemingly on its best behaviour, saying it wanted to be "just like" her when asked what it would like to do when it grew up.

"Do you think I can be the first robot president one day?" it added.



The Zenbo, a voice-controlled, English-speaking robot, can serve as a home-help, read receipts for the elderly, and tell children's stories, its Taiwanese makers say

Tsai then asked the robot to play some music to her, although it took several goes to make herself understood before it pumped out some dance tunes.

In her opening speech, Tsai said her new government would promote Taiwan as Asia's "Silicon Village", focusing on talent-building and research and development.

Computex comes weeks after the CES Asia tech show in Shanghai, launched last year, putting extra pressure on the fair.

"There's been a lot of conferences that have been trying to get their

foothold in Asia, particularly China," said Bryan Ma, a technology industry analyst at market intelligence provider International Data Corporation (IDC).

While many "key parts" of the tech industry are still in Taiwan, said Ma, market leaders will also have an eye on other big shows.

Computex has put virtual reality (VR)—an emerging industry where Taiwan hopes to position itself as a trailblazer—at the heart of this year's fair.



A visitor tests out the HTC Vive virtual reality (VR) headset during the annual Computex computer exhibition in Taipei on May 31, 2016

"In the computing space, we haven't had fun for a while," said L.Z.

Wang, managing director of semiconductor company AMD Taiwan.

"VR is going to bring back demand and development that will encourage people to refresh their PCs."

Taiwan's ailing HTC phone brand saw queues of people waiting to try its new Vive headsets, which were linked to five different experience games, including one in which users lie on a moving chair and simulate flying over New York.

Struggling PC maker Acer also displayed a new line of VR-ready computer—Predator—expected to hit the market as early as July.

The global market size of virtual reality products may reach \$5.1 billion this year and is projected to more than double to \$10.9 billion in 2017, according to Taipei-based market intelligence provider TrendForce.

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