

China's Baidu rolls out self-driving buses

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The Apolong is designed to run at airports and tourist spots

China's internet giant Baidu announced Wednesday it had begun mass producing the country's first autonomous mini-bus, as the firm prepares to roll them out in tourist spots and airports.

CEO Robin Li watched the 100th vehicle roll off a [production line](#) of a factory in the southeastern city of Xiamen.

"2018 marks the first year of commercialisation for [autonomous driving](#). From the mass production of Apolong, we can truly see that autonomous driving is making great strides—taking the industry from zero to one," said the CEO.

The 14-seater Apolong, about one-third of the size of a normal bus, has no steering wheel, driver's seat, accelerator or brake.

Co-produced by Baidu and Chinese bus manufacturer King Long, they will soon be pressed into commercial use in enclosed areas such as tourist areas and airports in several cities including Beijing, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and the country's new megacity Xiong'an.

Early next year, they are set to enter Japan's self-driving market as shuttle buses at [nuclear power stations](#) or in Tokyo to ferry around elderly people in local communities.

The vehicles have the "fourth level" of automation as defined by the Society of Automotive Engineers, meaning they can operation within an enclosed location without human intervention.

This is one short of the highest level, where vehicles can operate anywhere on the road.

"I took a self-driving car to come to the developer conference last year, and ended up getting a ticket at (Beijing's) fifth ring road," Li quipped.

Baidu, often referred to as China's Google, operates the country's leading search engine and also invests heavily in services ranging from online payments to connected devices and artificial intelligence.

"In the past, China exported cheap commodities to the world. In the future, China will export AI technology to the world," Li said at the firm's annual AI developer conference.

He also announced a new AI chip called Kunlun at the conference, which can support a wide range of AI applications including voice recognition, [natural language processing](#) and autonomous driving.

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