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THE VIEW
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Take the robot fast lane

What better place than Hong Kong to implement driverless technology?
Within 10 years, pods could be shuttling us from home to work to airport

Just occasionally, the pace of technology slows enough to be able to glimpse the future. When I moved to Beijing in 2009, the streets were full of bicycles – electric bicycles. The industry had grown so fast that the business-destroying rules of the Transport Department hadn't caught up. It was a leapfrog in technology that otherwise wouldn't have happened in China.

Their fast but silent progress gave them the name the "Silent Death" as they could take out pedestrians with ease. Warp speed for my e-bike on a timed section of Tsing Hua Dong Lu was 24km/h, using a handheld GPS.

Those of you who own a Tesla, or Tesla shares, look away now. Tesla made 35,000 cars last year but the stock market values it at 40 per cent of General Motors. The loss-making company has taken just US\$2.5 billion to build – which makes you wonder why anyone would buy a company that costs US\$23 billion to buy and say US\$3 billion to make?

Tesla's establishment is a seminal achievement by its chief executive Elon Musk, whose bull-headed mindset made the big boys realise that electric cars were possible. But look what is coming up.

BMW is producing the i3, GM has the Volt, Nissan the Leaf, and Ford the imaginative Electric. Tesla has done a great job designing the drive train – the combination of batteries, transmission mechanism and motors that power the vehicle – but the box around it can be built by anyone.

Even the stimulus of low oil prices is unlikely to interrupt the current. Once the reasonably priced electric car reaches acceptable performance – say a



Tesla's Elon Musk, right, made electric cars popular. Photo: Bloomberg



Are our regulators smart or brave enough to adopt the concept early?

1,000km range (not 300), 0 to 100km/h acceleration in about nine seconds, and charge time shortened; the cleanliness, low maintenance and silence of the vehicle will win out over internal combustion.

Tesla has a future as a supplier of its drive-train components to other companies, similar to how Intel powers computers, or as a brand made by others.

The sector has taken a new leap forward, since rumours surfaced of Apple somehow entering the car market. Apple's stock market value is now US\$720 billion – so it can take on anything.

Apple is interested in the screen between the driver and the passenger. The console, once a parcel shelf, then a radio, then a sat nav, is perfect for an iPad.

Tablets already provide maps and navigation, voice recognition actions and safe voice calls. Car Play becomes the ideal vehicle for doing your emails, surfing the net, watching sport or movies – or indeed writing articles.

We forget, in Hong Kong, that our small size, intense infrastructure and good roads saves us the burden of tens of millions who spend two or more hours every day commuting around their metropolis by car.

Robot cars open up an enormous amount of time for other things, with the first losers being those of us who are petrolheads who like to drive for driving's sake. Driving a car will soon become a leisure pastime, as sailing is today.

Many of the components of remotely steered vehicles are already in use. In-car radar and on-board cameras are popularly used to give proximity warnings for reversing. More expensive cars have radar following the car in front, braking if the stopping distances get too close. Cruise control makes the accelerator pedal optional.

All that remains is to steer – and GPS, or visual images in Street View, or simply following a cable in the road, are all areas of current research, as Google's driverless car has demonstrated.

It could take just 10 years before car pods are taking us from home to work to airport, with Apple seeking to combine its work and entertainment roles by making drive-time useful. The technology is very destructive to many existing industries. Imagine the convenience if the taxi industry was just auto-drive – and it could fatally damage Uber, the taxi app.

What better place to implement this technology than Hong Kong, with its dense roads and population. Are our regulators smart or brave enough to adopt the concept early, or will they resist? As it is inevitable, we should invest in it.

The Day of the Auto Mobile has arrived along with a version of the Silent Death that should stop for pedestrians. The old joke about old cars would no longer be true – that every part makes a noise except for the horn!

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Illustration: Henry Wong