

Baidu unveils ChatGPT-rival Ernie Bot; 650 companies sign up

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Baidu CEO Robin Li introduces the functions of Ernie Bot during an event in Beijing, Thursday, March 16, 2023. Chinese search giant Baidu on Thursday unveiled its artificial intelligence chatbot Ernie Bot, with its CEO saying that there was high market demand as Chinese companies raced to develop an equivalent of Microsoft-backed ChatGPT. Credit: AP Photo/Ng Han Guan

Chinese search giant Baidu unveiled its artificial intelligence chatbot Ernie Bot, presenting its rival to the Microsoft-backed ChatGPT in a pre-recorded video presentation Thursday that appeared to disappoint investors.

Baidu CEO Robin Li said Ernie Bot was still not perfected, but the company went ahead with presenting it due to high demand. Shares plunged 10% after Li showed a prerecorded demonstration of the Ernie bot instead of the real-time live demonstration of its capabilities that many had expected. They closed down 6.4%.

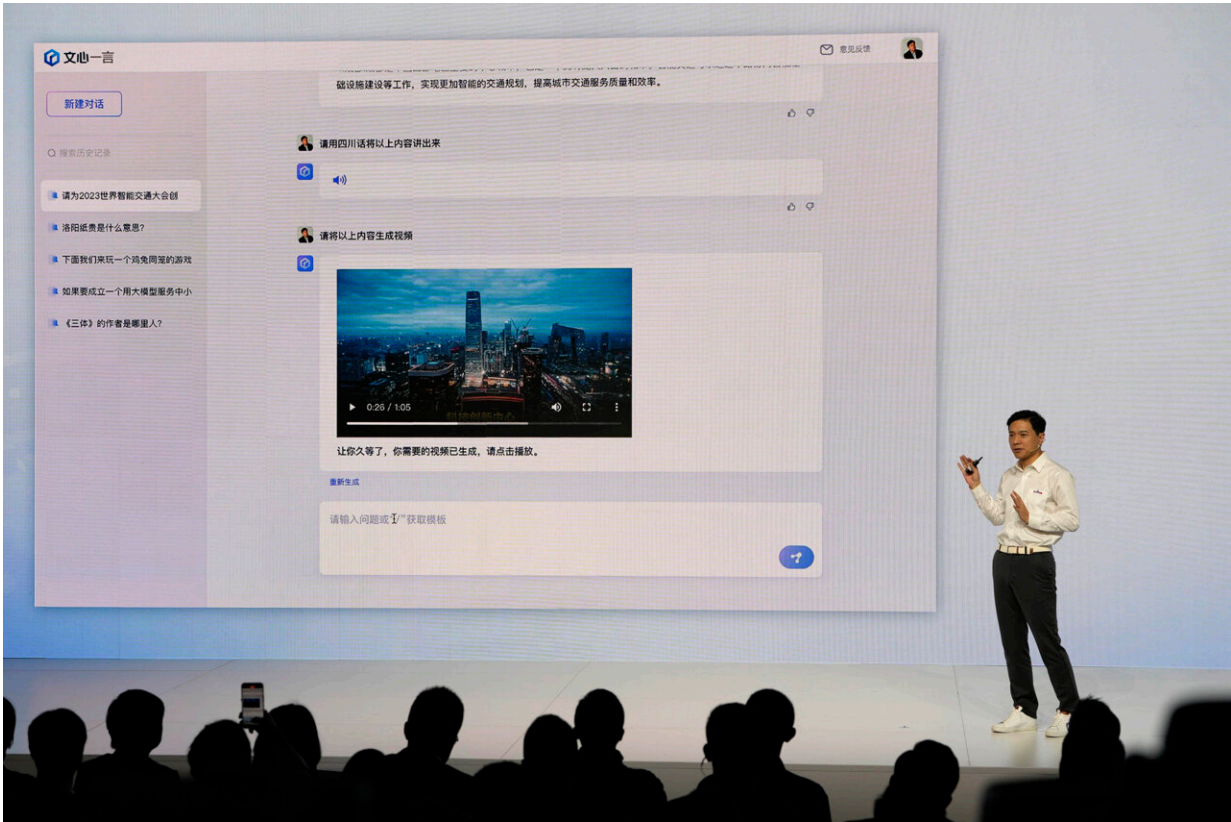
During the demonstration, Ernie Bot was asked questions about a Chinese science-fiction novel, "The Three-Body Problem," and was asked to make an image based on prompts.

The Ernie in Ernie Bot stands for "Enhanced Representation of Knowledge Integration."

"Baidu has for over a decade persisted in investing in artificial intelligence ... Ernie Bot is the result of many years of hard work," said Li. He said the first version of Ernie Bot was developed in 2019.

Li said 650 companies had signed up to use Ernie Bot, which can be implemented in a variety of applications such as searches, AI cloud, autonomous driving and in smart devices.

The Ernie Bot launch comes months after OpenAI's ChatGPT was first released, demonstrating the AI-chatbot's ability in answering questions and even writing essays. Baidu is among several Chinese firms working on similar chatbots.



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In February, Baidu first mentioned that the internal testing of its Ernie Bot was almost complete. The company, known in China for its search engine, has shifted its focus in recent years to artificial intelligence, including working on autonomous driving technology and other AI applications.

In its 2022 fiscal year, the company says it spent 23.3 billion yuan (\$3.4 billion) on research and development, equivalent to about a fifth of its revenue.

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