

Companies & Markets

FINANCIAL TIMES

Closing the gap China's carmakers are catching up with foreign rivals in the quality of their cars

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New battery set to revamp electric cars

Developers believe the lithium power source can cut costs and triple driving ranges and will be in use in 2016

PILITA CLARK - LONDON

A new battery that promises to solve two of the biggest grumbles about electric cars - high prices and low driving ranges - is heading for showroom floors in under two years.

The lithium battery, which experts say could be a game-changing "killer app" for the global car market, can triple the driving range of an electric vehicle and significantly lower its costs, say the US scientists who developed it.

It can also double the running life of a

smartphone or a laptop, said Dr Qichao Hu, who developed the device with his former professor, Donald Sadoway, a prominent battery expert at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

But its impact on the cost and performance of an electric car could prove transformational, said Prof Sadoway, whose work on other batteries has been backed by Bill Gates, Microsoft co-founder.

"We've got to get a car on the showroom floor for \$30,000, not \$130,000 and the big piece is the battery: it's too

expensive and it runs down too fast," said Prof Sadoway.

Batteries in existing electric cars can account for as much as 30 per cent of the cost. They also need temperature control to stop them overheating or catching fire. The new battery does not need the same systems because it operates safely at a wide range of temperatures, which should shave costs, said Dr Hu, and the battery itself will be about 20 per cent cheaper than existing ones.

Cost, safety and "range anxiety" are not the only problems for plug-in elec-

tric cars, which make up less than 1 per cent of new passenger car sales in most countries. Recharging times and access to charging stations are also a concern.

Still, analysts say a battery that can sharply improve price and range could be highly significant. "That's game-changing," said Arndt Ellinghorst, head of global automotive research at ISI Group, an investment research firm. "There are a lot of experienced battery makers trying to do exactly that because it's the killer application."

Independent experts in the US con-

firmed that prototype cells in the battery developed by Dr Hu and Prof Sadoway can store more than twice as much energy as conventional cells.

Dr Hu founded a company called SolidEnergy in 2012, just outside Boston to commercialise the technology and hopes the battery will be in production for consumer electronics in the first half of 2016 and in electric cars by the second half of that year.

Dr Hu said he had held preliminary discussions with Apple and Tesla, the electric carmaker.

Chinese coffee trade full of beans



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- LONDON

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