

This pocket city guide speaks

Jenny Hammond



Invention is the mother of necessity," said witty US social philosophy and economist Thorstein Veblen. He was right, and right about Shanghai.

Often the most obvious things make the best inventions, easy solutions to life's niggling problems.

Now, if you don't understand Mandarin and you want a really portable Shanghai city guide, there's a Chinese audio city guide for your mobile phone. It has English text and can speak Mandarin to your taxi driver, or anyone else.

It's downloadable to most phones released since 2006. Described as "a pocket-size Chinese interpreter," the XS2China makes the lives of non-Mandarin-speaking residents and visitors much easier in Shanghai and Beijing. It's said to be the first of its kind.

It has categories for restaurants, bars, entertainment centers, sports, shopping areas, transport, museums, galleries, parks, landmarks and other spots, chosen by foreigners who live and work in Shanghai and Beijing.

It has simple phrases and more



interesting ones, such as "I am a famous movie star" and "Is everyone a model?"

"This helps ensure that visitors experience their new surroundings in an expert," says Ken Lim, one of the co-founders.

With the city content and audio function made in China, the software itself has been produced in Amsterdam where the other co-founders, Sander Munsterman and Jan Willem Vaartjes, are from.

Two years ago the three friends came up with the idea as a way to overcome communication problems.

Lim, of Chinese-Indonesian descent, received an international

business degree in Amsterdam and moved to Shanghai in 2003.

"I moved here to discover my roots, but when friends from the Netherlands came to visit me they had trouble finding their way around," says Lim.

To overcome this problem, they recorded Lim's home address on an MP3 player for taxi drivers. It worked so well that they decided to develop it.

In addition to text in English, *phinyin* (phonetic Mandarin) and in Chinese characters, the application can "speak" more than 300 standard phrases. Its target is the expat community and tourists.

"This can also be used as a learning tool to improve basic

Mandarin and help with pronunciation," says Lim.

It works similar to an iPod. The software is downloaded from the Internet to a desktop or laptop, then transferred to a mobile phone via a cable or Bluetooth.

It was launched this month in Shanghai and Beijing on a free trial basis.

"We have a forum and people can e-mail us. We are keen for feedback. People have even started asking which mobile phone they should get that best accommodates our program."

After the introductory period, the application will cost 75-150 yuan (US\$10-19), and function for six weeks up to depending on the purchase.

"However, quality is everything, so before we start charging we want to make absolutely sure that it is the best it can be," says Lim.

Asked how Chinese cab drivers respond, he says: "Drivers see Shanghai developing so quickly with technology advancing so fast that they just accept it as the norm."

Maybe this new technology can not only help you find your way around but also help you collect a few friends along the way.

You can download it, temporarily, during a trial period for free at www.xs2china.com.

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