

ROADSIDE TIEMO

Onscreen Protection

By Sky Thomas Gidge

On a recent Monday night, Chuan Ran proves himself resourceful. A middle-aged woman is hesitating – will the phone cases Ran sells really fit her friend's iPhone?

Ran spots us standing near his small, tent-based shop and borrows my phone – slipping it from case to snug-fitting case until the woman settles on a mauve number, bedazzled with a sparkling angel wing. My phone comes back.

Ran is a low-level phone accessory seller and provider of the *tiemo* service, as the sign hanging above the tent-opening advertises. Directly translated, *tiemo* reads 'stick to membrane.' Rather than street-side biology, the service is a blast of compressed air to clean a phone's screen before a screen protector is deftly applied – a vexing task for most of us, but performed at ad hoc stations across China for around RMB10.

Many – or most – street-side *tiemo* operate with the ebb of city management, setting up in underpasses or on footbridges and ready to pack up their foldout tables and knock off phone cables when local 'enforcers' get wise.

But in a country obsessed with covering everything from hotel tables to home computers in protective foil, demand for *tiemo* outweighs the risk of doing business.

Ran is a step above that – though he eludes to a time when things were not so 'orderly' – now paying about RMB1,500 monthly



to rent a space in a Shenzhen neighborhood where *tiemo* is regulated.

Ran's workday starts around 3pm and lasts until about 11pm when business slows. When not hawking his wares, Ran sits behind his laptop watching Chinese television shows, surrounded on three sides with a rainbow of phone cases and other goods, most purchased wholesale at an electronics market a 10-minute ride away.

So it's a surprise when Ran says sales are not a big moneymaker for him – *tiemo*, he tells us, are what people really pay for.

THE DIRTY DETAILS

Monthly salary: RMB3,000

Days per week: 7

Hours per day: 10

Man on the Street is a monthly feature where we talk to someone doing an everyday job to gain insight into the lives of ordinary Chinese people.

