



CINEMA IN YOUR POCKET

New app claims to be the world's first to stream movies currently being shown in theaters

By XU FAN
xufan@chinadaily.com.cn

A new app enables film lovers to view movies currently showing in cinemas without having to physically visit the theater.

The app, Smart Cinema, which launched in May, claims to be the first of its kind in the world. It made a splash at the 14th Chinese American Film Festival that kicked off in Los Angeles on Oct 30.

Smart Cinema is a pilot project to develop new ways of screening movies, initiated by the country's top film regulator, the China Film Administration, in 2014.

The app was developed by industry veteran Jack Gao's startup Beijing Times Digiwork Films Technology Co.

It is different from other streaming sites and apps in that the films can be viewed while still in theaters, rather than afterward. Movies become unavailable when the licensing permits run out, usually about a month after purchase. Tickets average 25 yuan (\$3.60).

There are no time or space limitations. But it cannot connect to large screens — a feature intended to prevent piracy.

Gao said the product was inspired by his overseas career and his observation of China's booming internet industry. He was previously vice-president at Dalian Wanda and interim head of Legendary Entertainment.



Red Paper-Cut (top) and *Crying to Marry* (above) are among the first batch of digitally released Chinese films targeting Western viewers. Smart Cinema is available in a pre-installed app on phones produced by Huawei Technologies, which operates in about 170 countries and regions. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

"I've spent most of my time abroad over the past three years," Gao said. "I helped Wanda build the world's largest cinema chain, with 12,000 screens in 15 countries. I was also a part of Wanda's acquisition of Legendary."

Gao discovered that Chinese people overseas crave domestic films, which are rarely screened abroad.

China's box office generated nearly 56 billion yuan last year. But only 4.2 billion yuan of that, or nearly 8 percent, came from overseas markets.

About 60 million Chinese live abroad, according to the State Council's Overseas Chinese Affairs Office.

"The overseas market could be huge," Gao said. "Chinese who have immigrated to, or are visiting, foreign countries have a stronger sense of nostalgia than compatriots who

have remained in China."

Smart Cinema is available in a pre-installed app on phones produced by Huawei Technologies, the world's second-largest smartphone maker.

More than 20 films are scheduled for release on the app for users in Spain and Italy, and digital releases will expand to include more countries in Europe and North America.

The first batch of films targeting Western viewers includes *Red Paper-Cut*, which centers on a 9-year-old girl with a disability, and *Crying to Marry*, which recounts the story of a brave ethnic Tu bride who sacrifices her life to protect Red Army soldiers.

But some industry insiders have expressed concern that the app may lead to a decline in the number of people who visit cinemas.

"There's no need to worry about

that," Gao said. "We're not a competitor of traditional cinemas. We're a supplement."

Most of the films now running on Smart Cinema are comparatively low-budget art-house features that struggle to compete with Hollywood blockbusters or domestic tent poles.

For instance, *The Taste of Apple*, a biographical drama based on the true story of agriculturist Li Baoguo, was released on only 0.7 percent of all urban cinema screens in early August. A blockbuster typically occupies 30 percent of screenings on its premiere day.

China has 58,530 screens in 10,417 cinemas on the mainland. "But it's really a good movie that deserves more screenings," Gao said. "The film tells a very touching story about how Li was dedicated to helping resi-

dents of Gangdi, (in North China's) Hebei province, overcome poverty."

He recalled the distribution team releasing the film in Gangdi village. The village has no theater, and it takes at least three hours to reach the nearest town with one.

And despite China having the most cinema screens on Earth, many rural or mountainous areas in the country are without theaters.

More than 900 counties have only one cinema, and more than 300 towns do not have any, Chinese Minority Writers' Society secretary-general Zhao Yanbiao said.

Smart Cinema "will be good news for people who want to watch films but live in an area without a theater," Zhao said.

The China Promotion of Minority Culture & Art Association's film and TV committee recently signed a cooperative agreement with Smart Cinema in Beijing to promote ethnic films at home and abroad.

Also, China's top movie regulator gave screening permits to 970 films last year, but only 412 films, or 42 percent, were generally released in theaters.

China has 802 million internet users, who account for nearly 60 percent of the country's population, the China Internet Network Information Center's latest figures show. And 98.3 percent of China's netizens use smartphones to surf the web.

Gao said he believes online cinema will become a trend. He predicts the new screening model will push China's box office total beyond 100 billion yuan in 2020.