

China's biggest mobile firm starts selling Apple iPhone

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An Apple iPhone advertised in a China Mobile store in Shanghai on January 14, 2014

China Mobile, the country's biggest services provider, on Friday begins selling Apple's iPhone to its millions of customers, ending a six-year wait in a crucial market for the US technology giant.

The combination of China Mobile's existing base of 760 million

customers and its plans to roll out the world's largest 4G (fourth generation) network have executives from the Chinese firm and Apple forecasting a fruitful union—after a long engagement.

"China Mobile and Apple are newly wedded after six years of courtship," the Chinese firm's chairman Xi Guohua said Wednesday.

"Our married life just begins," he told a media briefing in Beijing, according to the official Xinhua news agency.

The iPhone is already sold through China's two other major telecom firms, 10 Apple stores in mainland China and a new online store on Taobao Mall—the leading business-to-consumer marketplace operated by Alibaba Group.

Smuggled iPhones are also widely available in China, carried back from overseas where they are cheaper, sold openly online and through small electronics shops.

"What this partnership does is, it allows us to take the iPhone to a different level in China, to marry it with the fastest network," Apple chief executive officer Tim Cook told the briefing, according to Dow Jones Newswires.

"I see a huge barrier being removed, because there are lots of people that love China Mobile's network and love iPhones and those two spheres are finally coming together."

Although analysts see China Mobile gaining new customers and Apple adding market share in China's highly competitive smartphone market, they caution that the US company trails South Korea's Samsung as well as Chinese competitors offering cheaper phones.

Samsung commanded more than an 18 percent share of China's smartphone market as of the third quarter last year, according to Chinese consultancy Analysys International, while Apple sat in eighth place with a 3.5 percent share.

But Apple cannot afford to ignore the world's most populous country, which Cook has forecast will overtake the United States to be the firm's biggest market in future.

The launch of the high-end iPhone 5s and slightly less expensive 5c in September helped propel Apple sales in Greater China—which includes Hong Kong and Taiwan—to a "record" last quarter, Cook said, though he gave no figures.

China Mobile has priced the iPhone 5s roughly the same as competitor China Unicom, according to leaked pricing details posted online, but it is touting 4G services.

Apple's iPhones and iPads are popular in China but recent product launches have been calmer than one in 2012, when customers desperate to get their hands on the iPhone 4s fought with security guards and threw eggs.

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