

China approves Alibaba AI models for Apple iPhones

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China has granted approval for Alibaba Group Holding's artificial intelligence models to be integrated into several Apple handsets, including the new iPhone Duo, in the Chinese market, clearing a key regulatory hurdle for the long-delayed launch of Apple Intelligence in the country.

Updated network access permits for the iPhone Duo, iPhone 18 Pro and several earlier Apple models from China's Ministry of Industry and Information Technology now include three approved AI systems: Apple Intelligence alongside Alibaba's Tongyi Qianwen and Tongyi Wanxiang.

Tongyi Qianwen, also known as Qwen, is a family of large language models developed by Alibaba Cloud, while Tongyi Wanxiang specialises in AI text-to-image and video generation. Alibaba owns the South China Morning Post.

Tim Cook, executive chairman of Apple, said during a visit to Shanghai on Thursday that the company would release a beta version of Apple Intelligence for the mainland market in late October, but the firm's revamped Siri AI would not be included in the update, according to a report by Chinese media outlet Jiemin.

Apple said in a statement on Thursday that the firm was "excited to have received approval for bringing the original, core set of Apple Intelligence features like live translation, Clean Up in photos and writing tools to our users in China, and we look forward to making them available in an upcoming beta later this month".

The regulatory filing provides more clarity on the capabilities of the iPhone Duo – Apple's first foldable smartphone – ahead of its scheduled release next week in China, where local regulations require stringent security evaluations and algorithm filings before any public AI deployment.

Apple has yet to roll out Apple Intelligence on the Chinese mainland, despite receiving regulatory clearance from Beijing in July. The service has already been deployed across other major markets, launching in the United States in 2024 and Europe last year. Core Apple Intelligence features, such as writing and image editing tools, are available in Hong Kong.

In July, the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) confirmed the licence for Apple Intelligence – which powers features such as email summarisation, report drafting and image editing – exclusively on iPhones.

An Alibaba representative said at the time that its Qwen model would "be integrated into Apple Intelligence experiences within iOS, iPadOS, macOS and visionOS for users in China" to enable text and image generation capabilities.

Qwen is a family of large language models powered by Alibaba Cloud, which are set to be used in Apple handsets in the Chinese market. Photo: AFP

Alibaba did not immediately respond to a request for comment on Wednesday.

While Apple relies on partnerships with Google and OpenAI to support its Intelligence feature in international markets, Beijing's stringent oversight has pushed Apple to collaborate with local tech firms, including Alibaba.

An Apple Intelligence roll-out is critical for Apple as it leans on AI features to stave off fierce domestic competition in China, the world's largest smartphone market.

Local players including Huawei Technologies have been pushing aggressively in the premium tier as the broader industry struggles with surging component costs.

China's overall smartphone shipments plunged 15 per cent in the third quarter, with Huawei the only player among the top brands to record an uptick in sales, according to an IDC report released on Tuesday.

Huawei led the market with a 21 per cent share, with shipments up 17 per cent year on year following the launch of its new trifold handset and flagship Mate 90 series in September.

Apple ranked second with a nearly 18 per cent share of the Chinese market, though its shipment volume was down 4 per cent year on year.

The initial response to Apple's recently launched iPhone 18 Pro series in China has shown positive signs. The company sold more Pro models in the first three days after launch in China last month than it did in an entire week following the release of the iPhone 17 Pro line-up last year, according to a report by Counterpoint Research.

That strong start propelled Apple to reclaim the top spot in China by smartphone sales for the week of September 14 to 20, with the company capturing a 33 per cent share of the market.

Additional reporting by Ann Cao