China Shutters Nearly 70,000 Movie Theaters in Response to Coronavirus Outbreak

China's cinemas — the most of any nation in the world by far — are going dark as the country grapples with the deadly virus epidemic.

China's 70,000 movie theaters — the most of any country in the world — are closing their curtains.

The country's leading cinema chains — including Wanda, CGV, Bona, Lumiere Pavilions, Jinyi, Dadi and others — publicly announced that they would be temporarily shutting down in response to the coronavirus epidemic that has infected hundreds and gripped the nation.

On Thursday, China's leading films studios canceled their plans to release their biggest movies of the year during the kickoff to the Lunar New Year holiday on Friday and Saturday. With no new product to offer and public health on the minds of millions, theaters had little choice but to shut up shop. A smattering of screens were still open as of midday Friday, local time, but most, if not all, were expected to close soon.
Chinese New Year is the biggest blockbuster period in the world by far, and the coming week had been projected to generate as much as $1 billion in ticket sales revenue. But as the coronavirus outbreak worsened throughout the week, medical experts began warning the public against congregating in crowded places. By Thursday, chances were high that cinemas would go empty even if studios were to hazard going forward with their original release engagements.

There is talk in the industry that the Lunar New Year slate might be rescheduled for later in the holiday — perhaps in three to four days — if public health conditions improve. But with the number of confirmed cases of the virus continuing to surge, optimism remains scarce.

As of Friday, more than 800 people had been infected by the virus globally, and 25 had died by it in China. Eight Chinese cities near the center of the outbreak — home to tens of millions — have been put on lockdown.

Among the big-budget movies that had been set for release on Saturday were Wanda’s comedy-action sequel *Detective Chinatown 3*, Huanxi Media’s comedy tentpole *Lost in Russia*, sports epic *Leap*, Jackie Chan’s *Vanguard*, Dante Lam’s action flick *The Rescue* and family animation *Boonie Bears: The Wild Life*, among several others (local regulators have always blocked Hollywood films from releasing during the festival period, giving local studios an uncontested run at the box office).

Presales had already reached $67.5 million (RMB468 million) by Thursday morning, but studios and internet ticketing platforms are now working to issue refunds. The U.S. releases of the Chinese New Year films also were suspended, including Warner Bros.’ sizable scheduled opening of *Detective Chinatown 3*.

Chinese studio Huanxi Media, meanwhile, unveiled a surprise plan to make its comedy tentpole *Lost in Russia* available for free online. The company advised film fans to "stay safely at home and watch *Lost in Russia* with your mom."

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