

Cyberspace court points to digital future

A new cyberspace court, set up to handle the soaring number of online piracy and e-commerce disputes, could act as a high-tech model for China's entire justice system, according to legal experts.

The Supreme People's Court established the court in April to handle five types of cases, mainly related to online shopping and intellectual property rights. It was formally approved by the central government last week.

Located in an existing court building in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, the cyberspace court has accepted about 1,500 cases so far.

"Setting up this type of court was inevitable," said Wu Fei, an attorney at Beijing Zhong Wen Law Firm who specializes in online cases. "The rapid development of the internet has brought lots of legal problems, including copyright infringements and e-commerce disputes."

The move comes after a successful pilot at four Hangzhou courts beginning in 2015. The courts were upgraded with technology that allow plaintiffs to file cases and upload evidence online and even to appear at hearings via video link if they did not live locally.

"This tryout paved the way for the cyberspace court, and it could end up helping create a justice system that harnesses the power of the internet to improve legal efficiency and provide better services," said Wu, who observed a number of trials during the test period.

"I saw judges handle cases entirely online," Wu said. "They received materials from litigants and defendants via the internet and then delivered their verdicts. It makes the process so much easier and saves time."

For many experts, Hangzhou is the ideal setting for the cyberspace court, as it is home to many technology enterprises, including Alibaba, the company behind the Alipay mobile payment system and Taobao online marketplace.

Alibaba alone receives more than 4 million complaints from customers a year, and those that go unresolved often end up in court, according to the Zhejiang High People's Court. Hangzhou courts handled about 10,000 cases related to e-commerce last year, up from only about 600 in 2013.

Attorneys see wider applications for the model being created by the cyberspace court, as does law professor Wang Sixin at Communication University of China.

"It is not just a court for online disputes but a center to study new methods and legal solutions for the digital age," Wang said.

Attorney Wu was enthusiastic. "Maybe one day we will be able to file lawsuits

and contact judges on our smartphones, and case hearings can be heard anyplace, anytime," he said.

Others have urged caution, including Zhu Wei, associate professor of law at China University of Political Science and Law, who warned that personal data protection could become an issue.

"Cybersecurity will be a key challenge for the court. When disputes are solved online, we must ensure that the information remains secure," Zhu said, adding that talent development is also important.