

The Activity

In ancient China there was no such legal idea as intellectual property. Knowledge was free, not something which a person could buy or sell. According to the Chinese, everyone was entitled to knowledge. In fact there was not a Chinese word for copyright until the 20th Century.

“How can you put a price on Thoughts & Ideas?”

People in the Orient believed that writing down the teaching of scholars was a high calling. Similar situations existed in ancient Greece where Plato, for example, recorded the oral wisdom of Socrates. Also, four followers of Jesus Christ wrote up his teachings as what today are known as the Gospels of the New Testament. “So copying peoples’ work is an important job.”

The Instructions

With the invention of block printing and movable type in China, four hundred years before Gutenberg (in Germany), the large scale copying of books became possible. Since the copying of works on a press was seen more as a way to promote learning than to make money, only the wealthy were able to afford to publish books.

Since authors were motivated more by a desire to advance the learning of their people than by an opportunity to make money, there was little need for copyrights. “Printing books and giving them away so people can learn is more important than making money.”

Several traders from the West recently have arrived at the Emperor’s Court seeking to sell books among other things. While the Court has tolerated Western traders in the past, never has the Court been asked to permit the sale of books! Several people have stepped forward to present their views.

As the Emperor the final decision will be yours...

The Presenters before the Chinese Emperor

3. The Chinese Scholar- He believes that knowledge is for everyone. His life is devoted to collecting and writing the works of Confucius. (Confucius was the philosopher whose work is the basis for many Chinese beliefs and customs).

On a separate sheet of paper reply to his statements-

“The wisdom of Confucius should not be limited to those able to pay money.”

“The sale of books is not part of Chinese tradition!”

“I am here to teach-not to make money.”

4. The Buddhist Monk:

The Buddhist Monk comes to you with a lot of concerns & a little bit of panic. He warns you that many books brought by the traders contain Christian teachings. He tells you that Christianity should not be welcomed in China.

On a separate sheet of paper reply to his statements-

“Emperor selling books is not even the real question. You need no decide if you are willing to risk allowing books from the West into China. Allowing books from the West will surely let Christian books in. Would you try to keep those books out & how could you be able to do that?”

“I know that these westerners and their religions will ruin our Chinese way of life.”

5. The Western Trader:

The Western Trader comes to you to “sell the idea” of his being allowed to bring books into and sell books to the people of your country. (Remember that Confucianism tells you that traders are low on the social status totem pole)

On a separate sheet of paper reply to his statements-

“Companies in my country own the right to copy these books and sell them. I was required to buy the books. By following your country’s tradition of giving books to people for free, I would loose money. Faced with this situation, I could not afford to bring books in the future.”

“Don’t you think it would hurt your country to lose access to all the great things I bring to you?”

“Aren’t there many things in these books that will help your country become better?”

“Would deny your country access to the knowledge in these books?”

“I think your traditions are noble, but if you want to continue getting our books, you will have to accept this change, selling books is not all bad.”

6. The Chinese Printer:

Ever since the printing press was invented in your country it has been the responsibility of a wealthy person to further the culture of the people. To state it simply- the people with money are the only ones who can afford to own printing presses. Their wealth allows them to give away what they print. You and most other people rely on them to do this.

On a separate sheet of paper reply to his statements-

“Emperor, if you begin to let books be sold in our Country you will change the way we see books. I will start to make money... but do you think this will really be a good thing?”

“I think if we start to see selling books as a way to make money it will discourage people like me to put much cultural value in printing books. I would be forced to view printing as a business.”

“What will happen to us if we print for money... won't we become greedy?”

“Before now everyone was able to obtain books and papers to read- this has been very good for our country. How will these people be able to afford books?”

“What will happen to this country if only the wealthy can read?”

7. The Chinese Businessperson:

You view the Chinese Businessperson in a similar light as you do the Western Trader. You know that they are necessary, but they are not high on the social totem pole. He is coming to you to encourage the selling of books.

On a separate sheet of paper reply to his statements-

“Emperor the tradition of publishing books for free is an honorable one, but is it fair for only those with money to be allowed to print them?”

“Emperor you might further our culture by permitting printers to own and sell copies of books. This would encourage more people to print books.”

“With more printers you are likely to get more books and therefore more knowledge out to the people.”

“Money will motivate people to make more books, which should help everyone.”

8. The Chinese Author:

The Chinese Author comes to you with a very complicated set of questions. He does not really know what he thinks would be the best solution for this problem.

On a separate sheet of paper reply to his statements-

“Emperor, you need to recognize that there are several issues before you. First and foremost is whether to allow the sale of the Western books at all and ultimately Chinese ones as well.”

“Second, if you decide to permit the sale of the books, who then owns the writings and the printed copies of the writings?”

“If you decide not to sell the books, how are we as a Chinese people supposed to respond to Western requests for books?”

“Should we really just be giving them away... even though we would not be buying their books, should we just be giving them ours?”

1. Getting to know the Chinese Emperor (you):

You grew up hearing about the voyages west which your grandfather paid for. You know that the money for these voyages is now used to strengthen the Great Wall to protect the north from the Mongols. Also, as a follower of the teachings of Confucius, you know that merchants are at the bottom of the social order, and that trade while trade is needed- it is also evil. Yet you wonder whether these traders from the west are here to stay.

On a separate sheet of paper reply to his statements-

& use them to think about your responses to the people presenting to you;

How could any of these books from the West contribute to Chinese culture?

Now that you can't send out voyages like your grandfather how are you going to get all those things from the West which fascinated you when you were young?

How do you think trading will affect your people?”

2. Your Advisor (Scholar-official):

The Advisor's job is to help you make decisions as the Emperor which are in the best interests of the empire. He wants to give you advice which both increases your power (but that also does not get him fired).

He knows you are fascinated with large sailing expeditions, yet the Court can not pay both for ships and for needed repairs on the Great Wall. But, the Mongols have been quiet for several years.

On a separate sheet of paper reply to his advice-

"Emperor, I know you want to see these goods from the West... but I really think you may be risking our country's money and wasting your time"

"You want to help the Emperor get what he wants, give him advice which helps your country- AND not get fired."

9. The final decision...

Ok Emperor, you have listened to a number of different arguments and now it is time to make up your mind. All of those who came before you to present and many members of your court are waiting for your decision.

Do not take this decision lightly... it could forever impact China's history.

In your reply to this question you first need to state your decision and explain your choice.

Make sure you address all the concerns of those who came before you (The printer, the businessman, the author, the merchant, the scholar and the Buddhist Monk).

10. And the reflection.

Reflect on & answer these questions:

What do you think would be the consequences if the Emperor chose to cut off foreign trade?

What do you think would be the consequences if the Emperor chose to allow books to become marketable merchandise?