

How a Singaporean was picked to head a top UN agency



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For *The Straits Times*

On March 4, the 83 members of the coordination committee (CC) of the World Intellectual Property Organisation (Wipo) chose Mr Daren Tang of Singapore over a candidate from China by a vote of 55 to 28 for the post of director-general (DG).

The CC's recommendation will be considered by Wipo's General Assembly in May. If endorsed by the General Assembly, Mr Tang will be the first Singaporean elected to head a United Nations agency.

Wipo is a UN specialised agency created in 1967 "to encourage creativity, to improve the protection of intellectual property throughout the world". It has 193 members. It administers 26 international treaties. It earns very substantial revenues from the fees it collects from facilitating the processing and registering of designs, trademarks and patents.

Historically, Wipo can trace its roots back to the 1883 Paris Convention for the Protection of Industrial Property, the 1886 Berne Convention and the 1891 Madrid Agreement.

Wipo's importance is growing because the world economy is being driven increasingly by innovation and creativity. It is not an exaggeration to say that, for some countries, their most important economic resource is their inventions, innovations and creativity – that is, their intellectual property (IP).

ELECTION OF THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL

The head of Wipo's secretariat, the DG, is elected once every six years.

The current DG, Dr Francis Gurry of Australia, will step down in September, after 12 years. Singapore put forward Mr Tang, chief executive of the Intellectual Property Office of Singapore (Ipos), to succeed him.

Nine other countries had also nominated candidates for the post.

This was the first time that Singapore had put forward a

candidate to head a UN agency.

Ipos was established as a statutory board in 2001. Its mandate is to use its IP expertise and networks to drive Singapore's future growth, and to build Singapore as a hub where innovative enterprises use IP and intangible assets to grow.

Ipos is highly regarded for its cutting-edge programmes, competence, efficiency and pro-business policies. Its academy trains Singaporeans and the nationals of Asean and other countries.

Singapore is regarded as having the top IP regime in Asia and one of the best globally, making us a credible country to offer a candidate for the Wipo post.

SINGAPORE'S CANDIDATE

The candidate we put up was Mr Tang, whom I have known for about 20 years. He is an excellent lawyer, a skilful negotiator and a consummate diplomat.

I was Singapore's chief negotiator for the free trade agreement with the United States. Although Mr Tang was then a very young team member, I appointed him to be one of our lead negotiators in trade in services. He did very well.

We subsequently worked together on the legal dispute between Singapore and Malaysia over Pedra Branca. I was the agent of Singapore. Mr Tang rendered valuable service to the team, both in preparing our written submissions and in the oral arguments at the International Court of Justice at The Hague.

He was appointed chief executive of Ipos in 2015. During the past five years, he has transformed Ipos into an innovation agency.

His agenda is to harness the use of IP to grow our economy, to support innovation, and to help our small and medium-sized enterprises to expand their business and create jobs.

At Wipo, he has been the chairman of the standing committee on copyright and related rights. He is therefore very familiar with Wipo.

He has a vision for Wipo. His vision is to work with all 193 member countries and help them to use IP to meet their national priorities.

Mr Tang is intellectually brilliant, yet humble. He is open-minded and consultative. He is a consensus builder. He understands the points



Mr Daren Tang, the first Singaporean chosen to be director-general of the World Intellectual Property Organisation, a specialised agency of the United Nations, speaking to the media in Geneva on March 4. PHOTO: EPA-EFE

of view of countries in the north and in the south, in the east and in the west. He is able to act as a bridge and unite a diverse family. He has the qualities of a good leader.

THE ELECTION PROCESS

The process to elect the DG has several steps. The first step is for the 193 member states to nominate their candidates. At the close of nomination, there were 10 candidates altogether.

Singapore was the second country to nominate its candidate, after Kazakhstan.

The second step is the "beauty parade", which was held at Wipo in February. By then, two candidates had withdrawn, so the eight remaining candidates were invited to make presentations to the Wipo family in Geneva, and respond to their comments and questions.

The third step is for the CC to elect one candidate. By March 4, only five candidates remained in the race.

The fourth step is for the General Assembly to approve the candidate, recommended by the CC, in May.

In the first round of voting, the

results were:

- Singapore: 37 votes
 - China: 19 votes
 - Ghana: 16 votes
 - Colombia: seven votes
 - Peru: four votes
- After the first round of voting, Peru was eliminated, and Ghana and Colombia withdrew. In the second and final round of voting, the results were:
- Singapore: 55 votes
 - China: 28 votes

UK, U.S. MEDIA REACTIONS

The *Financial Times* and *The New York Times* have reported the election of Singapore's candidate as a "big win for Washington" and as "a victory for the Trump administration", respectively.

Why did the British and American media get the story so wrong? I think it was for two reasons.

First, because they suffer from a big-country complex and cannot imagine how a candidate from a small country could have defeated a candidate from a big country. They therefore jumped to the conclusion that Singapore's victory must be

due to the Americans.

We are, of course, very grateful to the US for its support. However, we are not an American proxy.

We are also not anti-China. China is our largest trading partner, and Singapore is China's largest foreign investor.

The US is Singapore's largest foreign investor, and Singapore is the US' largest Asian investor. Singapore enjoys very good relations with both the US and China. Singapore's foreign policy is to be close to all the major powers, but not to be aligned with any of them.

Second, they were unaware of the success of Singapore's diplomacy. For example, on Sept 28 last year, Singapore was re-elected to the council of the International Civil Aviation Organisation for the sixth consecutive time.

Two months later, on Nov 29, Singapore was elected to the council of the International Maritime Organisation for the 14th consecutive term. The moral of the story is that, sometimes, a small country can have more credibility and support than a bigger country.

SUCCESS OF SINGAPORE'S CAMPAIGN

The success of Singapore's campaign was due to the following seven factors.

First, Mr Tang's candidature had the support of the Prime Minister, ministers and the whole of Government.

One of our ministers, Mr Edwin Tong, went to Geneva to lead Singapore's campaign.

Second, an effective lobbying campaign was orchestrated by Ipos and the ministries of Law, Trade and Industry and Foreign Affairs.

Third, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent four of its best veteran ambassadors, namely Ms Karen Tan, Mr T. Jasudasan, Mrs Mary Seet-Cheng and Mr A. Selverajah, as special envoys to 21 countries around the world, to ask them for their support.

Fourth, our ambassadors and non-resident ambassadors worked hard to persuade the countries they are accredited to, to support Mr Tang's candidature.

Fifth, Singapore's mission in Geneva, where Wipo is located, was extremely active in engaging other missions and in soliciting their support.

Sixth, my colleague Stanley Loh and I hosted a number of working lunches to introduce Mr Tang to the diplomatic corps in Singapore.

Seventh, and finally, Mr Tang himself travelled extensively and visited 27 countries and spoke to three regional groups.

His fluency in Chinese and his sincerity in learning French were assets. A lot of the credit must be given to him and to his special adviser, Mr Geoffrey Yu, a Singaporean diplomat who had previously served as deputy DG of Wipo.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I would attribute the success of the campaign to elect Mr Tang as the first Singaporean DG of Wipo to three reasons.

First, he is the best qualified of the 10 candidates for the post.

Second, he comes from a country that has an impeccable record on IP.

Third, Singapore may be a small country but it has many friends in the world.

This is the result of the good work of our leaders and diplomats over the past 55 years.

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