



LunchWithSumiko

# Singapore's IP Man in Geneva

Lawyer Daren Tang made history when he became the first Singaporean to head a United Nations agency. The director-general of the World Intellectual Property Organisation tells Executive Editor Sumiko Tan what's on his to-do list.

**W**hen Daren Tang was packing to move from Singapore to Switzerland for his new job posting, he decided to ship his trusted Yamaha piano along as well.

Music – in particular, jazz – is a big love for the lawyer who made history when he became the first Singaporean to head a United Nations agency.

Another passion, not quite as lyrical, but with a connection to music, is intellectual property (IP).

In October, Mr Tang took up the position of director-general of the World Intellectual Property Organisation (Wipo), which is headquartered in Geneva.

Wipo is one of the United Nations' 15 specialised agencies. Others include the World Health Organisation and International Civil Aviation Organisation.

The agency currently has 193 member states, including the United States and China. Among other things, it ensures the protection of IP and also the use of IP to support innovation and creativity to benefit the world.

Prior to this, Mr Tang was chief executive of the Intellectual Property Office of Singapore (Ipos), a statutory board which helps innovators use IP to take their ideas to market.

In that role, Mr Tang had served on a committee at Wipo. With Australian lawyer Francis Gurry retiring as Wipo director-general this year, Singapore nominated Mr Tang for the top job.

This was approved by Wipo's general assembly in a closely watched race. Other countries, including China, had also offered candidates.

We're meeting virtually in late November. The time difference means he will be having lunch while I will be eating dinner.

His people have arranged for him to do a Zoom call from Wipo's impressive studio, complete with three camera angles and a virtual

## BROADER CONTEXT

**I don't talk about patents, I talk about technology. I don't talk about trademarks, I talk about brands... I don't talk about copyright, I talk about content.**

MR DAREN TANG

on how IP is not just about technical legal matters.

backdrop showing a sunny Alpine scene of mountains and lake. I'm told it's a photograph of what he sees from his office window.

I'm calling in from The Straits Times' recreation room in our much less picturesque newsroom in Toa Payoh.

He appears on screen at our arranged time and settles into the studio chair. You have a nice view from your office, I remark.

"But today it's not sunny and brilliant like that," he laughs, referring to the virtual backdrop. "Today is cloudy and foggy. The temperature is about 5 deg C."

Over the computer screen 10,482km away, the 48-year-old is amiable – "call me Daren" – and has the careful, courteous manner one often sees in a diplomat.

He's having cream of pumpkin soup. It's what he normally has over there – "it's convenient and it keeps me warm". To add a Swiss touch, there's a plate of Swiss chocolates.

I've decided to go Swiss myself with a fondue. I'd gone to Carousell to buy a mini fondue set. It's filled with a gruyere cheese dip I made, and I've also prepared a plate of bread, vegetables and fruit.

"Bon appetit," he says.

## GO WITH THE FLOW

His Wipo role wasn't something he had foreseen. "I don't try to structure my life in a very planned way," he says.

He has a go-with-the-flow



attitude, and this has given him space to enjoy different experiences.

What he has discovered is that "later on in life, all those past experiences will enrich you and put you in a position where you can do your current work in the best possible way".

He grew up in a four-room flat in Commonwealth Avenue West. His father, now 74, is Eurasian-Peranakan. He was a businessman and ran a dental studio that made dentures, and is now a tour guide.

His housewife mother, who died 18 years ago, was Cantonese, and he has a younger brother in the food and beverage industry.

Mr Tang says he's grateful for his multicultural heritage. "My dad's side, they enjoy life, and from my mum's side, I got the discipline and the commitment to studying and all that. So it's the best of both worlds."

Another advantage of his background is how he grew up with lots of good food from both sides of the family.

One of the things he and his wellness consultant wife made sure to take along to Geneva was ikkan bilis for making soup, and another was chicken powder for use in stir-frying. He has three children – daughters aged 20 and 10, and an 18-year-old son.

He studied at Henry Park Primary, then Raffles Institution, where he was in the scouts, and Raffles Junior College.

He was always interested in music and had piano lessons, although he found music much more enjoyable without a teacher and exams.

Jazz has been a large part of his life, and he helped start the NUS jazz band when he was studying law at the National University of Singapore.

He's also a founding member of the Thomson Jazz Club and Thomson Jazz Band. "I don't think I studied very much in law school,"

he says with a chuckle.

A law schoolmate remembers him in the faculty band. "In between Madonna's Like A Virgin and Material Girl, he would quietly run through bits of jazz standards. I never quite found out if he was amusing or consoling himself. But there he was, a gifted jazz pianist playing rock and metal at boozy faculty jam and hops."

The schoolmate also remembers Mr Tang's dry and laconic sense of humour "plus a first-class poker face, so you can never quite tell when he is pulling your leg".

"He'll be going on about something very serious, like the Peloponnesian War, in that very serious way of his and everybody will be listening intently. And just when everyone is completely hooked, he will suddenly start guffawing. That's when you realise you've just been pranked by Daren."

At NUS, he did constitutional law and international law – not IP law – and thought he would enter private practice.

In his third year, he went on an exchange programme at McGill University in Montreal for a year. He had an amazing time there, but when he returned to his final year, all the pupilage places at law firms had been given out.

"I didn't really have that many choices left. So I thought, why not join the Government? It's going to be an interesting experience."

He joined the Attorney-General's Chambers, was a deputy public prosecutor for a while, then transferred to the international affairs division, where he later became senior state counsel.

He was posted to the Ministry of Trade and Industry to help negotiate the US-Singapore Free Trade Agreement (FTA), and was also part of the legal team which argued Singapore's case in the dispute with Malaysia over the sovereignty of Pedra Branca.

Working with experienced diplomats and civil servants gave

## OPEN-MINDED

**I've always been open to trying out new experiences. I don't try to structure my life in a very planned way.**

MR TANG

him a "broader, more holistic view of the law", he says.

The experiences also taught him about diplomacy, managing relationships and understanding geopolitics – all of which have come in useful.

In 2012, he moved to Ipos as deputy chief executive. "That started my arranged marriage with IP, but I've gone on to fall in love with it quite deeply", is how he puts it. He became chief executive in 2015.

## CREATING JOBS

Mr Tang will be the first to agree that IP is not a topic people find exciting. Most see it in legal technical terms, like trademarks, copyright and patents.

"But when you see it in its broader context, when you see how it impacts our lives, it suddenly becomes alive," he says.

He declares, with feeling: "I don't talk about patents, I talk about technology. I don't talk about trademarks, I talk about brands. I don't talk about industrial designs, I talk about design and packaging. I don't talk about copyright, I talk about content."

IP creates jobs, drives enterprise growth and spurs economic development. He points out how Singapore household names like Ya Kun Kaya Toast have been able to make it overseas because they are protected by trademark.

He refers to how Singapore's ST Engineering came up with the Air+ Smart mask, which has a unique microventilator. IP allows the invention to be sold globally and protected from being copied.

The coronavirus pandemic has also amplified the relevance of IP. The German company BioNTech, which worked with Pfizer to push out a Covid-19 vaccine, has filed close to 70 patents using Wipo's and other systems, he says.

In recent years, Asia has become a big driver of IP, and not just North-east Asia but also South-east and South Asia, like in Vietnam and India. Six out of 10 IP filings with Wipo now come from Asia, compared with four out of 10, 20 years ago.

"You see more and more countries looking at innovation as a way of driving economic growth."

His term at Wipo, which has 1,500 employees and a biennial budget of about \$1 billion, is for six years.

It comes at a time of continuing US-China tensions. The pandemic and race to develop vaccines and treatments have also resurfaced issues like pharmaceutical monopolies, IP protection and wider public access to medicine. I ask what's on his to-do list. He has many and lists them all, but high up there is to help innovators and creators take their ideas to market.

What does being a Singaporean bring to his UN role?

Singapore, he says, does well in world rankings on IP systems. "We are regarded highly for the development of our IP systems, so we are seen as being technically competent in this area."

Singapore is also viewed as a very neutral party that is a bridge builder between different countries.

The Republic's multi-ethnic background – and his own – allows him to connect to different parts of the world too.

Any downsides? "Singaporeans sometimes think that the technical solution is the only facet of a problem, and that once you arrive at a good technical solution, the problem can get solved," he offers.

"We tend to forget that the relational aspects are very important. We tend to downplay the political parts of it. That, I think, needs to be adjusted."

His background in international work, however, has taught him the requirements needed of a leader operating on the world stage.

Ambassador-at-large Tommy Koh says Mr Tang was an "outstanding colleague" when they worked on Pedra Branca and the US-Singapore FTA.

"He is a good lawyer, a good diplomat, a good team player and a conciliator. I am confident that he would be a very successful director-general of Wipo and bring great credit to Singapore," Professor Koh tells me when I ask for a quote.

Mr Tang and I wrap up the meal and he heads for more meetings. His days have been packed since he arrived and, no, he hasn't had time to play his piano.

We aren't able to take a portrait of him, so his office gets a photo done and e-mails it to me.

I couldn't tell from our Zoom call, but beneath his suit he has on cheery, multicoloured socks.

I write to thank him for the photo and ask: Are colourful socks a trademark?

"Hahaha," comes his e-mail reply. "It wasn't deliberate, but a bit of flair does no harm at all in an agency that supports innovators and creators!"

Mr Daren Tang started his six-year term as director-general of the World Intellectual Property Organisation (Wipo) in October. He is pictured here at Wipo's Geneva headquarters late last month. PHOTO: WORLD INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY ORGANISATION

**ST**  
SCAN TO WATCH

How the pandemic has impacted intellectual property:  
<https://str.sg/darentang>



**SCAN TO LISTEN**  
Discover back episodes of Lunch With Sumiko too:  
<https://str.sg/J6hQ>



**WHAT MR TANG ATE**  
Cream of pumpkin soup/  
Swiss chocolates

**WHAT I ATE**  
Cheese fondue with bread,  
fruit and vegetables

sumiko@spoh.com.sg  
Twitter @STsumikotan