

Intellectual property body gives artisanal businesses a boost

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Intellectual property body gives artisanal businesses a boost

Its initiatives help entrepreneurs, even from small communities, use IP to benefit their ventures

Dominic Low

The world body for intellectual property (IP) is making its mark even in small communities, bringing its influence to help groups around the world.

For instance, it is working with a group of women in Mexico's Oaxaca state to boost their handicraft business after their traditional silk weaving, called Seda de Cajonos, obtained geographical indication status in March.

Geographical indication is a type of IP which recognises and protects products that have a quality and reputation unique to their geographical origins.

The World Intellectual Property Organisation (Wipo) is helping the women in their efforts to leverage the geographical indication protection and other types of IP, such as

trademarks, to market and brand their handicrafts, said its director-general Daren Tang.

"They wanted Wipo to help them use IP to take their traditional product to the world in a way that respects their culture and heritage," he said last Tuesday.

This project is among several initiatives by Wipo aimed at helping communities around the world use IP to benefit their businesses.

"We're looking at IP as a way to help people to connect to the world, rather than just something that specialists and lawyers are interested in," said Mr Tang.

He also cited an initiative started in Uganda last year that has helped 70 female entrepreneurs incorporate IP management into their business strategy.

"We're helping backyard businesses – something quite informal, but we need to help them to grow," he said.

"And part of that growth means that they need to start looking at IP as one of the many tools they need to better (use) in order to be successful in growing their businesses."

Another example mentioned by Mr Tang was a partnership entered into between Wipo, the Singapore Manufacturing Federation and the Singapore Innovation and Productivity Institute last month to help small and medium-sized enterprises with their IP strategy.

The Singaporean, who is based in Geneva, was speaking to The Straits Times and Lianhe Zaobao in an interview during the annual IP Week at Sands Expo and Convention Centre.

He noted that countries, especially developing ones, are now seeing innovation, digitalisation and entrepreneurship as key to growing their economies.

"And because of that, they are getting more and more interested in IP," said Mr Tang.

He said seven in 10 IP applications filed in 2020 were from Asia, Africa and Latin America.

While China led globally in the number of applications for all IP types in 2020, including 17.1 million trademark filings, other Asian countries are not far behind.

For trademark applications, Iran is third in the world at about 515,000, while India is fifth at about 425,000, said Mr Tang.

The United States is in second place with about 870,000 applications, while the European Union is fourth with about 439,000 applications in 2020.

Full figures for all IP applications

filed last year have not been released by Wipo.

Mr Tang said that Wipo has made efforts to help countries understand that IP is not just a legal or technical topic, but is also relevant to many aspects of their economies, such as their home-grown businesses and artists.

Such efforts are in line with how the organisation has transformed its media and engagement strategies. "In the past, Wipo's communications focused only on IP experts and professionals," Mr Tang said.

"But if you look at our social media platforms and our media engagement now, we are telling stories about how IP actually affects people's lives."

A demographic that Wipo is focusing on is children.

The organisation has created a series of animated videos based on the popular cartoon character Pororo, which aims to help children around the age of 10 understand IP.

"(The videos) talk about how it feels to create something, how it feels to have a new idea and then what if someone comes along and takes away that idea," said Mr Tang, adding that the concepts are explored in a non-technical manner.

He said that Wipo is looking to expand the number of IP Training Institutions worldwide from 12 to 30. These institutions, which Wipo helps to set up, are run by member states and provide IP training courses for their citizens.

Wipo also collaborates with countries to connect research with market needs, including helping them to establish technology and innovation support centres that provide access to IP resources, and to upgrade existing ones to be places where ideas are incubated. About 1,280 centres have been set up in 88 countries.

One of the main aims of these centres is to help countries overcome their biggest challenge of translating research into a viable product.

"Even in developed countries, you've got good research and something that works... but when you commercialise it, it encounters a lot of challenges," said Mr Tang.

The organisation is trying to build a culture of innovation among young people and entrepreneurs, and foster in them the knowledge that there are resources and organisations to help them commercialise their ideas, said Mr Tang.

Wipo has also made efforts to make the field of IP more inclusive for women, he said, noting that only 16.5 per cent of international patent applications made in 2020 were by women.

"We think that's a shame. We want to change that," he said.

He cited a programme launched in July to help 35 women in Petra, Jordan, to register trademarks and grow their handicraft businesses. The initiative will also help the women create a collective "Made in Petra" brand that will be a symbol of quality for their products.

Mr Tang also hopes that fears of bifurcation of the global economy – where businesses have to choose between or operate on two separate systems – arising from rivalry between the United States and China will not be realised.

"IP and innovation need open collaborative systems in order to really be a force for good for the world," he said.

WAY TO CONNECT

We're looking at intellectual property (IP) as a way to help people to connect to the world, rather than just something that specialists and lawyers are interested in.



WORLD INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY ORGANISATION DIRECTOR-GENERAL DAREN TANG (right).

HELPING SMALL BUSINESSES GROW

We're helping backyard businesses – something quite informal, but we need to help them to grow. And part of that growth means that they need to start looking at IP as one of the many tools they need to better (use)... to be successful in growing their businesses.



MRTANG

COMMERCIALISING PRODUCTS

Even in developed countries, you've got good research and something that works... but when you commercialise it, it encounters a lot of challenges.



MRTANG on translating research into a viable product.

TOO FEW WOMEN

We think that's a shame. We want to change that.



MRTANG on the fact that only 16.5 per cent of international patent applications made in 2020 were by women.



PHOTO: WORLD INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY ORGANISATION

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Whether AI can hold patents among challenges S'porean chief of global IP body is working on

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Whether AI can hold patents among challenges S'porean chief of global IP body is working on

The rapid development of technology has given rise to challenges on the intellectual property (IP) front, with several recent patent applications filed by people naming artificial intelligence (AI) as the inventor.

Mr Daren Tang, director-general of the World Intellectual Property Organisation (Wipo), said: "IP offices (around the world) don't quite know how to react to this. But the... reactions so far have been that the inventor still has to be a human being."

The jury is still out, and the topic will be discussed during one of Wipo's forums later this month, he added.

The issue of AI as creator has been in the news recently, after a man won first place at a fine art competition in the United States by using an AI-generated piece.

The win last month created a stir online, with artists accusing the man of cheating.

Similar novel issues might be faced by Wipo in the coming

years, while the organisation continues to be led by Mr Tang, 50.

It has been a fulfilling two plus years for the lawyer by training at the helm of Wipo, which is responsible for shaping global rules on IP.

Mr Tang made headlines in May 2020 after he was appointed the organisation's chief, becoming the first Singaporean to helm a United Nations agency.

He was elected by members of Wipo's coordination committee on March 4 that year, beating lawyer Wang Binying of China by a vote of 55 to 28.

The Wipo General Assembly subsequently approved his appointment at an extraordinary session, making him the agency's fifth director-general since it began operations in 1970.

The former chief executive of the Intellectual Property Office of Singapore is also Wipo's first Asian director-general.

His predecessors at Wipo were from the Netherlands, Sudan, Aus-

tralia, as well as one who held Hungarian and US citizenships.

He is currently serving a six-year term from Oct 1, 2020.

Speaking to The Straits Times and Lianhe Zaobao last Tuesday, Mr Tang noted that intellectual property activity worldwide has

continued to grow despite the Covid-19 pandemic.

There was a record high of 277,500 international patent applications filed through Wipo last year, according to a Wipo statement in February.

There were 275,900 such applications filed in 2020 and 265,800 in 2019.

Mr Tang said the pandemic had created opportunities for businesses and countries to innovate.

"Innovation is a way of energetically and proactively dealing with disruption," he added.

"And it's also a way of looking for opportunities in the midst of disruption."

Mr Tang said Wipo also faces longstanding challenges such as geopolitical disputes, which can make it difficult for the agency to get member states to agree on issues.

He added that it also has to overcome the challenge of showing the world that it, like other UN agencies, is still relevant and in-

involved in overcoming global problems.

"People need to see that we can make a difference in their lives," he said, adding that Wipo cannot be a talking shop but has to be action-oriented.

"So it cannot just be (organising) seminars and workshops for a very small group of people," said Mr Tang.

"It has to be things which are impactful on the ground."

On his biggest achievement at Wipo so far, Mr Tang said he has been having a fulfilling time transforming the agency's focus from technical IP matters to helping businesses worldwide grow.

"It is to... bring the message to everyone that IP is not just for experts and specialists, but that it is a very powerful catalyst for jobs and investments, for business growth and for economic and social development," he said, adding that the organisation's transformation is still ongoing.

Dominic Low

277,500

Number of international patent applications filed through the World Intellectual Property Organisation last year, a record high.