

Oh, Tian Chua darling, give Mimi a scratch, won't you?
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By RITA JONG

Mimi is a name dear to the lanky six-footer everybody in Malaysia knows as Tian Chua.

His own real name? Chua Tian Chang. As for Mimi, she is one of his two 10-year-old civet cats, the other being her pal, Oliver.

They are the ones who greet him fondly when he returns home every evening as part of the confirmed bachelor's home filled with fish (live and swimming) and four turtles (yes, live too).

"I adopted Mimi when she was a few months old. Her mother ran away and I rescued her in a storm in Malacca while Oliver was given to me by one of my constituents," Tian Chua tells The Malaysian Insider in that rumbling deep voice.

But come on... he's famous! Surely one of Malaysia's most familiar faces can fill his home with the voices of more than two cats? Why is this not-at-all-bad-looking tall 50-year-old still single?

"I have had a few relationships before. I have broken hearts and got my heart broken too," he smiled.

"But yes, I am single and I think I missed my boat. I am way past the stage in life where I would settle down, get married, pay the house mortgage and have children."

Where he is in life right now is facing two pending sedition charges on the Lahad Datu intrusion and the Black 505 rally, another charge of obstructing police and another for participating in an illegal assembly. He stands to be stripped of his position as member of parliament for Batu if he is found guilty and fined more than RM2,000.

"I am not one bit worried," he said defiantly. "I don't mind risking my position for doing what I think is right."

The position that made him famous was that of a slightly hunched Chinese man sitting defiantly on the road in front of a Federal Reserve Unit water cannon truck as part of the reformasi movement in full support of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, who was jailed then. That picture of him was splashed across the news media in 1999. That was his first brush with the law, circa four years before the arrival of his cats.

Oh, he looks the same. Maybe a tinge of grey on his sideburns and a few wrinkles at the eyes hiding behind the thin black framed rectangular glasses.

Anyway from then on, Tian Chua has had numerous encounters with the police. He was arrested, even held under the Internal Security Act from 2001 for two years.

"I still remember my father's reaction when he found out about my detention. He said that when I was out and about, he had problems trying to find me. But with my arrest, it was easier locating me," he said as he threw his head back and laughed.

But on a serious note, he escaped the worst of it. "I was lucky I was not tortured or abused like others and I spent my two years painting and reading," he said.

Although he is of Hakka descent, he can't speak a word of the dialect but loves the famous Hakka dish lei cha farn, or pounded tea rice. His father is a rice wholesaler while his late mother was a schoolteacher.

Tian Chua is the eldest of four children. He has a brother who owns a tech firm, a sister who is an independent filmmaker and another sister who works in New York.

As for himself, the two-term MP is now vice-president of Parti Keadilan Rakyat. He never thought that he would be a politician.

"I have always liked politics but never thought I would be an MP. As a young boy, I wanted to be a scientist like Edison," he smiled, as he poked on his Ipad and looked at his Iphone on the table.

Tian Chua studied at Siang Lin primary school and the Malacca Catholic High School, where he was the head prefect. After Form Six at Gajah Berang high school, he studied Agricultural Science in the University of Sydney, Australia.

But into his third year, he switched to Philosophy in the University of New South Wales and his activism days began. His first protest was against the hike of university fees on foreign students.

He never looked back. He returned to Malaysia in 1995 and volunteered in Suaram to fight for human rights.

When he joined Parti Keadilan Rakyat, he had not yet met the party's leader, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

"I had sympathised with his approach and ideologies as during the economic crisis in 1997, Anwar had stepped up and admitted there was a global crisis and said we had to self-reflect and take responsibility," he said.

"I was very irritated at the then-prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad for blaming others and spreading this xenophobic thinking that everyone was conspiring against him."

Even as this interview went on, Tian Chua took time to entertain people who came to see him for their problems at his small office on the first floor of a shop lot.

"I don't believe in role models or subscribe to any motto in life. I believe that I am just a man whose experiences have helped shape who I am today," he said. – August 9, 2013.

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