

LEESAN

Travel gab

IN September, a calligraphy exhibition was held in Malaysia featuring veteran filmmaker, calligrapher, food critic and traveller Chua Lam. The exhibition marked his sentimental attachment to Malaysia and Singapore.

Unfortunately, I was unable to attend the exhibition at *Sin Chew Daily's* headquarters in Petaling Jaya, Selangor, though I still felt honoured to have taken part in organising it. Chua Lam, 82, flew in from his home base in Hong Kong to officiate the exhibition, and even took the time to participate in some interview sessions.

Chua Lam's long-time family friend Cherie Chung, who some would remember as the popular Hong Kong actress and former beauty queen, accompanied him on the trip and attended the launch of the exhibition too.

Notably, over a hundred pieces of Chua Lam's calligraphy works were booked the instant the exhibition kicked off. Those who managed to grab his works were elated, while others were disappointed, particularly those who were visiting from out of state, and from Singapore, Brunei, Indonesia, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Australia.

Chua Lam felt really bad and was very apologetic about that.

This was his first calligraphy exhibition overseas after the pandemic, and he appeared remarkably frail and weak, prompting many to worry about his health. Nevertheless, Chua Lam revealed that after eating durian and all the nice food during the four days that he was in KL, he felt like the illness had left him!

A few weeks after the exhibition, I flew to Hong Kong from Tibet via Chengdu to pay Chua Lam a visit, and he made a special arrangement to meet for lunch. I guess it was his way of thanking me for staging a successful exhibition, though I think it was him who made it a hit. Our lunch was at the iconic Kam Roast Goose Restaurant, and when we were there, I could feel how respectable he was as a legendary food critic, as many diners came forward to greet him.

On the walls hung one of his calligraphy works that reads: "Learn well, and drink seriously."

Chua Lam later ordered almost all the restaurant's signature dishes. The roast goose was their top dish, but after trying their char siew made with Spanish pork, I have since changed my perception of what Malaysian-style barbecued pork should be like.

The money chicken, watercress soup, red bean soup were all so divinely good. Chua Lam even ordered two pipa roast geese for me to take back to Malaysia!

Needless to say, we had an

Former Hong Kong actress and beauty queen Chung (third from right) was also at the opening ceremony of the exhibition, which delighted many fans.



The calligraphy exhibition collected a total of RM756,000 in sales and donations, which was then contributed to various Malaysian charitable organisations, including to the National Kidney Foundation. – Photos: LEESAN

A kind soul named Chua Lam

utterly satisfying lunch.

Chua Lam gave a brief description of each of the dishes that was served on our table, much to my admiration. As a result, I found myself carefully savouring every dish, which had taken hours to be prepared.

Compared to when he was in KL earlier, Chua Lam looked more energetic and chattier in Hong Kong. He revealed that he was not actually feeling very well while he was in Malaysia, saying that he felt uncomfortable taking his first medium-haul flight after undergoing major surgery in March.

He also had to attend a dinner gathering right after arriving in KL so understandably, things got a bit tiring for him.

Chua Lam is a determined and strong man, and those of us who know him, know that he will not usually tell people if he is in pain or feels sad. I visited him on April 30 at the HK Sanitorium Hospital; then we met again on Sept 23. After five months apart, Chua Lam was finally willing to tell me a little more about what was happening in his life.

A calligraphy exhibition in Malaysia by Hong Kong's celebrated food critic and traveller benefited numerous local charitable organisations.

Among others, he said he had moved to a new apartment with a huge floor-to-ceiling glass window that gave him an unobstructed sea view.

He also said that he missed his wife, who had recently passed away. Chua Lam opened up further about this. His wife had accidentally slipped and fallen at home earlier this year.

Chua Lam tried to stop the fall by rushing forward and extending his arm, without thinking about his own safety. As a result,



The writer (second from right) and Chua Lam (second from left) marking their first collaboration in 2016, with Tan Sri William Chen (left).

he also fell and fractured his pelvic bone.

He had to undergo surgery, and recuperated at the hospital for almost four months.

During this time, his wife had unfortunately passed away. We all felt sad for him upon hearing such bad news.

Apart from that, we also talked about his favourite Malaysian fruit, the durian. He shared that former actress Chung, who used to have a "phobia" of durian, developed a liking for it after she ate some. Chung said that she never knew durian could be so tasty.

That actually reminded me of what the late China premier Li Keqiang said about durian during his 2015 visit to Malaysia. He said that the first time he tried it, it was "unbearable", the second

time memorable, and the third time completely unforgettable!

By now I'm quite sure that Chung has reached the third stage. I do hope that she will make more trips to Malaysia to enjoy our fabulous king of fruits.

Travelling out of Hong Kong for the first time since the pandemic, Chua Lam appeared to have had a truly enjoyable trip to KL and Singapore.

Despite the bad events in his life this year, he remains as strong as ever. To him, the most important thing right now is to fully recover and stay healthy.

During the lunch, I gave him a report on the accounts and profits of the exhibition. He simply said: "Please channel all the RM756,000 in donation money to the designated organisations. You are fully authorised to handle this matter for me."

Of course, Chua Lam also thanked all his Malaysian friends and fans for their kind support and concern.

While durian holds a special sentimental value to him, to me Kam Roast Goose is what made my year. I hope that I get the opportunity to meet Chua Lam again soon, so that we can relaunch our "Travel with Lee San and Chua Lam" thematic tours once again.

The views expressed are entirely the writer's own.

Leesan, the globe-trotting traveller who has visited 137 countries and seven continents, enjoys sharing his travel stories and insights. He has also authored five books.

