



Transcript: Taken from alifeintravel.net

Ep 1: Lisa Huang – Life by her own formula

(Podcast begins, intro music plays)

Hi, I'm Siew Hoon and I love to travel. More than that, I'm in love with the power of travel to change lives. Welcome to 'A life in travel'. This season is brought to you Expedia Group – Bringing the world within reach.

In this episode, learn how Lisa Huang ended up in Hollywood as a stuntwoman and firearms expert, and then went on to write best-selling science fiction fantasy-thriller, 'Zero Sum Game'.

(Music fades)

SHY: Welcome to Singapore, Lisa.

Lisa: Thank you so much, it's so great to be here.

SHY: It's your first time here right?

Lisa: It is.

SHY: So how are you finding it so far?

Lisa: Amazing. I'm staying with a local friend of mine whose been taking me around to all of the places that she knows and it's just been an amazing way to see the city.

SHY: Yeah, I mean there's nothing better than discovering a city through a local, right?

Lisa: Indeed.

SHY: Did you get an excuse or a chance to pop into a bookstore and did you see your book there?

Lisa: [laughs] Yes, yes we did. We went to Orchard yesterday and went into the big Kino bookstore and we were looking, and my book was there. It was so fun.

My friend bought a copy and then I went and I asked the store people if they wanted me to sign the other copies for customers. This is very normal in the United States you know, when I go into a bookstore and say "Oh, I am an author, do you want me to sign stuff?" so then they can show customers and say "Oh, get a signed copy".

They looked at me like I was offering to deface their books. [laughs] They just kind of shook their head and I was like "Do you not do that in Singapore? Do you not let authors sign books?" and they were like "No, no we don't do that". [laughs]



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SHY: They probably thought you were some crazy loony trying to be Lisa Huang.

Lisa: Probably. [laughs] Like “No, it’s my picture on the back. See, that’s me.” [laughs]

SHY: But at least you saw your book there –

Lisa: Yes.

SHY: – you got a copy of the book.

Lisa: Yup...and took some pictures. [laughs]

SHY: Alright. [laughs] Now, let’s talk about travel. I’ve said before, your father was born in Hong Kong, you were raised near New York. You’ve lived in Los Angeles, lived in Tokyo three years and now you live in Chicago.

Tell us about your first trip ever outside the US. Where did you go to?

Lisa: My first trip was to Hong Kong. My parents weren’t really into big international travel (trips) when I was growing up, and I really wanted to meet my family in Hong Kong. We hadn’t gotten that chance, it’s very expensive, it’s a very long journey and I have two siblings so it would have to be a whole family trip.

When I was 12, I unfortunately got paediatric cancer, which is terrible but, there’s this great organisation in America called Make-A-Wish where they (help) kids with very serious illnesses. They say “We will give a wish, what do you want?” and I said I would love to go to Hong Kong and meet my grandparents, my aunts and uncles, and see this place that is such an important part of my history and culture and heritage. They paid for my whole family – my mom, my dad, my brother and my sister, and we flew out to Hong Kong for a couple weeks and I got to see my whole extended family and see Hong Kong for the first time. It was amazing, it was such an incredible experience.

SHY: What were your impressions of Hong Kong at that age? At 12 or 13 –

Lisa: I remember thinking it was such a colourful city. I really love visual art and I always have a picture of a colour palette of a city in my head. So when I get to a city and it’s kind of not what I expect it’s usually because the colour palette is a little bit different. I think I’m the only person who does this. But Hong Kong was so colourful and it was over a Christmas vacation, so they had these incredible light displays on every building. It was also my first time outside the United States, seeing a city that was set up in a different way and using all different types of transportation and ways to get around, it was a really eye-opening experience.

SHY: So your wish came true –



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Lisa: My wish came true.

SHY: – you saw you family home and you're clearly healthy and travelling once again as a traveller. People in Singapore are always kind of caught up with the comparison of Hong Kong –

Lisa: Oh, really?

SHY: – yeah, it's a bit like in the US, which cities are always competing with each other to say who is better. So, Hong Kong and Singapore have that. You were in Hong Kong recently as well, you've visited Hong Kong again. How do you compare Hong Kong and Singapore as a traveller?

Lisa: Oh that's really hard. [laughs]

SHY: Putting you on the spot.

Lisa: [laughs] That's definitely putting me on the spot. I find what's been really interesting to me in Singapore, I didn't know what I expected. But something I've observed here is what an incredible mix of cultures it is and (there are) a lot of influences from Malaysia, from China, from Indonesia. Singapore of course itself has its own unique culture and I find it truly amazing to me.

When I go to Hong Kong, me being Chinese by heritage – I can't speak Cantonese but I can speak some Mandarin – and I sort of know Chinese culture well enough to feel like even if I don't know exactly what is happening, I have a sense of it, I feel comfortable. In Singapore, that's not the case at all. I am definitely a foreigner and even though there is a lot of Chinese influence here, there's so much other culture that is not something that I have grown up with or understand and I love learning about it, I love meeting the local people and talking to people, so I definitely think they're very different cities. I would not put them in the same bucket or compare them (as) two Asian cities. In fact, I feel like that has struck me, how different Hong Kong and Singapore are.

SHY: You were lucky in Singapore to have your friend show you around. But as a traveller and you've lived in cities most of your life, what do you look for in an urban experience? How do you dig deep into the cities? Because I'm guessing that you are one of those travellers who love to discover more than what is on the surface.

Lisa: That's absolutely true. Before I travel, whenever I'm looking for experiences, I do a lot of searching trying to find these sort of offbeat interesting experiences, sometimes more local stuff that maybe the locals really like to do that the tourists don't know about. Another thing I really like to do is adventure type stuff, so for



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example when I go back to Hong Kong I'm hoping to do this rock climbing adventure tour where you climb up above the city and see all the landscapes.

What I look for in an urban experience, I just love finding those little niche places, the nooks and crannies and the hole-in-the wall places that are really interesting and give me some local flavour of the place. It can be really hard especially when I don't speak the language or don't know anybody local –

SHY: Do you find it hard to do that online before you actually come to the destination? Do you find those nuggets of information really hard to find?

Lisa: Yeah, absolutely. It's incredibly hard to find [laughs]. But I do my best and I sort of drill down and find people blogging about stuff and look for those, like you said, little nuggets of "this is a really cool place that is off the beaten path."

SHY: Well, clearly you are a very determined and driven traveller. [laughs]

Lisa: [laughing]

SHY: Just like with your books but we will get to that later. Now, cities have always inspired science fiction. William Gibson for example, was inspired by Tokyo in his book *Neuromancer*. As a writer, how have cities inspired your fiction?

Lisa: Well, *Zero Sum Game* takes place in Los Angeles and is very much my love/hate letter to the city of Los Angeles. There are so many things I love about LA, but there are also so many things I hate about it.

Working in film there, the really kind of off-the-wall thing about working in film is every week you're going to a different place, different location. One week you're out in the desert, the next you're under the Sixth Street Bridge, the next you're in a studio on the Westside and the next you're up in the mountains in the canyon roads.

LA has this huge diversity of neighbourhoods and environment and it is just this incredible sprawling mess of a city. So I really like having the city be almost a character in the novels and having that texture of environment.

SHY: Yeah, but your *Zero Sum Game* has more than Los Angeles as a character. Congratulations, by the way –

Lisa: Thank you.

SHY: – on a successful debut of a first novel in the science fiction fantasy genre. I read it, it's a pretty cool book. It's fast, it's furious and it's feminine. The main protagonist is a girl named Cas Russell who is described as deadly, mercenary,



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superhuman, not your ordinary math geek. So firstly, Cas Russell is not you right?

Lisa: [laughing]

SHY: Because you're also a math geek and you're a Hollywood stuntwoman as well as a firearms expert. So is Cas Russell, you?

Lisa: Well, I hope that she's a little bit more angry and violent than I am in real life. [laughs] Because –

SHY: Seems to be you're laughing a lot here. [laughs] (9.54)

Lisa: [laughs] I really love digging into the sort of action hero who's not the best person. She has a lot of growing to do. So I hope I'm a lot bit of a more stable and kind human being than she is. But I love playing with her, and I love playing with the math, with the firearms, and the stunt action stuff. I was in stunts because I love action movies as a genre and I think that's just a really cool place to play.

SHY: Yeah, she really kicks butt in this movie (sic). The reviews have been pretty good. Let me read one. You got four stars in Goodreads and this reviewer said “*Zero Sum Game* is enormously fun. Great action scenes and a main character who's definitely on the darker, more scuffed end of the moral shades of grey spectrum. Huang's taken liberal inspiration from old-fashioned noir, as well as from superhero stories and the modern high-octane Hollywood thriller to create a novel that's a souped-up blend of all three.”

Sounds like the cities you grew up in. Hong Kong is diverse, Singapore is diverse, and Los Angeles is this sprawl. What is the effect that you wanted this novel to have on your readers?

Lisa: I think pretty much that. [laughs]

SHY: [laughing]

Lisa: I am very happy with that sort of review. That is amazing, oh my gosh. I would say I want people to have fun. I really wanted (the novel) to be this great ride and people walk away feeling “Yeah that was fun,” like when you see a really cool action movie. I am a huge math geek, this is where the math comes from.

I majored in math at MIT and it has always been such a huge part of my life. This cycle (sic) of math. I love sharing that joy of mathematics and pairing it with this crazy action ride. It's actually one of the most flattering things to me when people



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come up and say “I have to confess I hate math, but I love your book.” Because math isn’t everybody’s cup of tea.

SHY: Especially young girls, right? Most young girls do not like math and that is why we have a situation in the tech world, at least in the travel tech world, where it’s very dominated by men right now. So, you want young girls to fall in love with mathematics?

Lisa: I would love that. I regret a little bit that this book is kind of violent and has a lot of profanities. People ask me if it’s appropriate to give to young girls and I said “Well, maybe wait till they’re a little older.”

But I do want that joy of math to be a thing that people can understand and at least to see where that can come from. I love that people look to me as somebody who is a woman in mathematics, and that I can somehow speak to younger girls who want to go into STEM fields, because I think that is so important. Making my main character in the series a woman was extremely intentional because of that.

SHY: Well, you definitely don’t look like the math geek that I perceive math geeks to look like, so I think you’re already breaking a mould there. The other thing is as a writer myself, struggling, some writers write for themselves and some write with (a) specific audience in mind. Before they even write, they are thinking about the audience and how they’re going to commercialise this book, how they’re going to distribute the book. What about you?

Lisa: I would say I write mostly for myself, but it would be disingenuous to say that I didn’t consider the commercial. When I was writing *Zero Sum Game*, certainly I was writing the book that I wanted to read. [laughs] If I was thinking about my audience, I was thinking about people like –

SHY: Like you.

Lisa: – me, yeah exactly. I wanted to read this action thriller with this love of math and science, but that also has an incredibly diverse cast and does deep things with theme that I think science fiction and fantasy needs some progress on. As I sort of progressed in my writing career, I have a really incredible agent, and a really incredible publisher and they advise me as well.

If I am looking at a few different ideas that I’m equally excited about and my agent advises me that one is more commercial than another, or as I get more experienced if I can judge that something will be easier to sell, I will take that into account. But I’m not ever going to be able to write something that I am not excited about, that always comes first. I think it has to.



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SHY: So, writing a book is one thing and sometimes it can take years before you complete a book. But the biggest thing is actually getting published and then getting distributed.

In the travel world, we have a lot of travel tech entrepreneurs who create wonderful products that they love to do for themselves because they are solving their own problem, but then they don't know how to get it to market.

You got your book published, distributed and clearly marketed well. What's one lesson that you learn (sic) from this process and what advice would you give to aspiring writers?

Lisa: One of the biggest things I learned was how not solo a career this is. I think we always have this impression of writers as being very isolated and working on their own in our little dark writing cave, and that's not been true for me at all. Like I mentioned, I have this whole professional team of my agent, publisher, publicist. I have a film agent and also foreign sub agents who are such a huge support for me and my career.

I actually first started self-publishing and I was not really good at that – you know trying to find visibility, it was not in my wheelhouse. Now that I have this incredible professional team, it's made quite a difference for me in my particular skill set in terms of getting my book out there. But even beyond my professional team, I have an incredible writing group online and my professional community of science fiction and fantasy writers who are just so supportive and make such a difference in everything I do in interacting with the industry.

SHY: So, you really need help from good people who believe in you and not be so precious about holding on control of your product. I mean you've got to share it and collaborate.

Lisa: I would say it's not so much that, first, is my publisher is very respectful of my artistic inclinations and I always get the final word. They are very respectful of that.

But in terms of not just being so much in my own little world, but community is so important in writing, or at least it has been for me. In terms of the business side and industry side in particular, having that community, I just cannot rate it highly enough.

SHY: Other than a writer – I was reading your profile, other than the fact that you love durians which speaks to my heart as a Malaysian, [laughs] and Penang has the best durians in the world, that's for the record,

Lisa: Oh, really? I will have to visit. Then I'll go, next on my list. [laughs]



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SHY: – you’re also a Hollywood stuntwoman and a firearms expert. So how did a girl like you fall in love with stunts and arms? I mean that’s pretty violent, you seem like a very gentle...

Lisa: Thank you. [laughs] Well, I may be pretty gentle in my real life but I also really like doing extreme sports, and I’ve always grown up doing martial arts. When I actually learned to shoot firearms at MIT, my coach there (was) very focused on safety and proper handling. He is now the coach of the US Paralympic shooting team, I think. So (I was) very focused and great at it as a sport.

I moved that to Hollywood and I was thinking I might do some acting stuff, and then I realised that the only roles I really liked doing were the action roles, because they were just the most fun. So that’s how I got into stunts, and I was also still very interested in learning more about firearms. I ended up apprenticing to one of the best (sic) in Hollywood for a few years, and he taught me everything I know about using guns for movies, which is a very separate thing, because we have very specific procedures and protocols. Because even though we are not using bullets in the guns, it’s all blank gunfire, but it’s still dangerous and it’s very, very important to do everything properly, keep everybody safe and making sure everybody feels comfortable, and make sure nobody is nervous about anything.

SHY: Clearly that’s a hot issue right now with all the gun violence that we’re seeing in the world. So (there are) lots of debates around gun ownership. But I want to bring you back to a more personal level.

I’m curious, for a girl who had paediatric cancer, and you made that wish to go to Hong Kong when you were 12 and (sic) 13, you’ve turned out really cool and full of life. You’re doing stunts and firearms and all that. How did you overcome those odds to be who you are today?

Lisa: I don’t really think of it like that I guess, because I’m just me you know, and I’m living my life. Certainly, paediatric cancer affected me but I’m just doing my thing and [laughs] that’s it, that’s everything.

SHY: Fantastic. So let’s talk about the thing that you do. What’s the most dangerous stunt that you’ve ever done?

Lisa: I don’t know if this would count as the most dangerous, but I’ve been lit on fire a few times and I love doing that.

SHY: Oh my gosh, you like being lit on fire?

Lisa: Yes, yes I do.



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- SHY: So what's the thrill in getting lit on fire?
- Lisa: [laughs] I don't know, I just really enjoy it. It's different. It's really quite a lengthy process because you're wearing all these protective stuff and gel that takes quite a few hours to gear up. Then, the clothes that are going to burn ... I've always had incredible safety teams who really know what they're doing. It's just kind of a cool thing and I've always really enjoyed it.
- SHY: We have a lot of pretty cool stunts in Chinese movies.
- Lisa: Oh yeah.
- SHY: Is there a Chinese stuntwoman or a Chinese movie star that (sic) you think really does cool stunts?
- Lisa: Oh gosh, I feel like there are so many. I'm gonna say Michelle Yeoh just because she's just one of my favourites, and of course she's been in both Chinese and Western cinema. She's an incredible actress, in both action roles and non-action roles, and she just seems like a really classy, amazing woman as well.
- SHY: Michelle Yeoh, she's from Malaysia by the way. She's from Ipoh.
- Lisa: I thought I remember that, yeah.
- SHY: Let me connect the dots here. You have a successful first novel, you have Cas Russell being described as a geek Jack Reacher, and you're a Hollywood stuntwoman. So I'm guessing maybe there could be a movie in the making here?
- Lisa: We are talking to some people about that, and I think that might be all I can say right now. [laughs]
- SHY: Alright, I won't push you on that. [laughs] Let's come back to travel because this podcast is about a life in travel. Clearly, travel's very much a part of your life, it has influenced your life. How has it influenced your writing?
- Lisa: I think more than anything, in doing all these travelling, especially living in so many different places, meeting people has been the most important. Of course seeing the trappings of different cities is always fascinating, but meeting people and having cross-cultural dialogues has really broadened my views of the world and my perspectives, and made me a lot more of a thoughtful person with a much greater understanding of humanity. Of course I'm still learning and will always be, (throughout) my whole life, but I do think that has been incredibly valuable for me as a writer.



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SHY: I guess that's why your book, *Zero Sum Game*, cuts across the cultural boundaries. It is a pretty global, universal book that most people can relate to...

Lisa: Oh, thank you.

SHY: Let's talk about a movie or a book that has inspired you to travel?

Lisa: I would say less a particular movie or book, but when I was growing up I was reading all of these books, especially science fiction and fantasy where people would go on these amazing journeys and quests, and see the world, go off to seek their fortune. So I think that mentality gave me the bug, so to speak, early on.

SHY: Given your love for action and adventure, and you're gonna be doing rock climbing in Hong Kong, what kind of adventures do you look for in your travels?

Lisa: It's certainly the outdoor stuff but not every place I go to has that as part of the environment (sic). I look for stuff that will be new to me and teach me something, that will be a lot of fun, and hopefully meet some interesting people and see some interesting things.

SHY: What's been your coolest adventure trip ever?

Lisa: Last year, I went to Dominica and swam with sperm whales in the Caribbean. [laughs] Sperm whales are huge, they're I think the largest toothed whale and they're like the size of a house. We were in their snorkelling –

SHY: Depends where the house is.

Lisa: – that's true. We were there snorkelling in the ocean with them and it was just a thrilling experience.

SHY: That must have been mind-blowing.

Lisa: Yes, absolutely.

SHY: After that, what's the adventure on your bucket list?

Lisa: I really would love to get to Antarctica someday. That is something that is definitely on there. [laughs] That wouldn't (be) so much to meet and talk to local people I guess [laughs] but it's definitely on the list.

SHY: We've talked about how travel has influenced your writing and meeting different people. In a word, how has travel changed your life?

Lisa: I think travel has consistently made me a better person, a better human; just in the way I interact with people. I think more, about the world and about people's



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different perspectives. It makes me question my own assumptions about the world – the more I see and the more diversity of humanity and human spaces that I move through and interact with. I think that.

SHY: Thank you, Lisa.

Lisa: My pleasure, thank you.

SHY: Happy travelling.

Lisa: Thank you.

SHY: Happy writing.

Lisa: [laughs] Thank you very much.

SHY: Happy kicking butt.

Lisa: [laughing]

SHY: Happy doing your math and spreading the love of math, travel and stunts.

Lisa: I love it.

(Outro music begins)

You've been listening to a 'Life in travel', a podcast hosted by me, Yeoh Siew Hoon.

Each season, we will feature stories of cool people doing cool stuff in a cool industry, folks who've built lives in travel and those whose lives have been changed by travel.

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