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talks about living
dream, whereve
the world takes

asia
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as its mysteries
gradually reveal
themselves, china
gives way to a new
cultural revolution

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where
the
world
takes
her

Lucy Liu

is on
a fast trip to everywhere,
determined not to stay
in one place or be
seen in one way



by Bonnie Tsui

photographed by
Andrew Marnham



Lucy Liu is on the move. In the last year, she has been in China, Japan and South Africa, and between her homes in New York and Los Angeles—"nonstop." She has been at Sundance promoting a film, and in Nova Scotia for a gallery show of her artwork (yes, she paints, too).

"I've gotten to be an expert with packing," she says, laughing, during a recent interview from Los Angeles. "I know how it's done: You just start with a basic outfit and layer up from there."

The globe-trotting 37-year-old actress has had more than her share of opportunities to sharpen her packing techniques. Since *Charlie's Angels* rocketed her to superstardom in 2000, Liu has been making tracks, reprising her role as Alex Munday in the sequel *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle*; playing murderess Kitty Baxter in *Chicago*; and, most memorably, demonstrating deft swordplay as deadly yakuza boss O-Ren Ishii in Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill: Vols. 1 and 2*.

Do fans ever read these tough-as-nails femme fatale roles into her real-life personality when they meet her? "People have actually been pretty nice when they approach me," she says. "I think they know it's just acting. I'm a nice person."

And she is. Her manner is thoughtful and down-to-earth, and she is always quick with a laugh. In a discussion about her early life, it's clear that she would have you think she grew up a regular American girl—albeit an American girl with a New Yorker's multicultural perspective.

"My family is from Beijing and Shanghai, and I was born in Queens," she says. "Growing up there, it was a really multicultural place. You kind of think that every place is like that. Walking around all the time, the smells of food everywhere—it's great, and you don't think about difference all that much because there is so much difference around you. It's the norm. It's not until you go somewhere else that you realize that most places in the world aren't like this."



Collared dress in taupe by Fendi.

Continuing to seek diversity and range might be a theme for Liu's career arc. She has always been up for trying new things. She transferred to the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor after a year at NYU, in pursuit of "something different from what I knew in New York—a real campus feel." Her first foray into acting was auditioning for a student production of *Alice in Wonderland* during her senior year of college. She hoped for a small role, but promptly won the lead.

"I think I was interested in acting from a very young age," she says, "but it wasn't something that I could really think about doing for real until college. You don't think about those things when you're young. You just have a feeling, an instinct, that it's what you want to do."

That instinct has proven keen, leading this one-time *Beverly Hills, 90210* extra through a series of eclectic roles—including her breakthrough part as the malevolent lawyer Ling Woo on television's *Ally McBeal*—that made her a bona fide movie star.

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When asked how her identity as an Asian-American informs her identity as an actress, she says that she is proud of her Chinese heritage. But she is adamant that the choices that she makes are, and remain, her own, and should not be interpreted as representative of any community.

"I don't think about it in terms of 'Asian' or 'not Asian' roles—I really just want to choose projects and roles that I find good and interesting and compelling, that stand on their own," she insists. "I think you can't overly concern yourself with what other people say, because then you'd be constantly looking to other people for validation of who you are, what you should feel, if I feel good one day or not the next. I don't try to do things to please this or that person, or community, because then you set yourself and others up to be disappointed."

The most important thing, she adds, "is to work with people I enjoy working with, and on projects that I feel I can bring something special to. I always want to mix it up, and do different things that are challenging."

Though she is resistant to being called a trailblazer for Asian-Americans, it's obvious that she has had some impact. One of her current projects is a deal to star and executive produce a contemporary film version of Charlie Chan, the fictional 1930s and '40s detective who was infamously played by a long line of white actors.

"We want to make sure that Charlie is actually Asian this time—that's a big thing!" she says. The project is still in development, but for her, the hope is that her team will be able to do Charlie Chan in a way that puts a modern stamp on the storyline. "That is what we are really hoping for."

Liu has begun to take on more serious work, too, both in film and in life. Recently, she headed to northern Thailand to shoot *3 Needles*, a small independent film by Thom Fitzgerald about the global HIV/AIDS pandemic, due out in December. She also quietly started work two years ago as a UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador, making field visits to places such as Balakot, the scene of earthquake devastation in Pakistan last year.

"There just has not been enough attention there," Liu says, describing what she witnessed in Balakot. "And when it comes to children—children everywhere are the same. Their needs around the world are the same. And when they're caught in devastation, in places of war, they're the innocent ones. They

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have nothing to do with what's happening in their country. But they need help just the same."

In *3 Needles*, a triptych that explores the spread of AIDS in China, Africa and Canada, Liu plays a pregnant Chinese health worker infected with the virus who goes from village to village buying blood. "We take for granted that AIDS is a manageable thing in Western Europe, in America; but everywhere else, it's not. You die from it, and many people don't even understand what it is," Liu says. The Chinese segment of the film was shot in Thailand; as Liu explains, the small production was unable to get around the labyrinthine rules to shoot in China itself.

Liu speaks Chinese in the movie (she learned Mandarin growing up) and says she would like to do more roles in which she doesn't speak English at all. "I enjoy languages a lot, and learning about the local culture wherever I go.

Liu learned Mandarin growing up and says she would like to do more roles in which she doesn't speak English at all.

People really appreciate that you take the time to learn something. And I know I react in the same way."

Because she is constantly on the road filming, or promoting a film, Liu declares that her home is "New York and L.A. and anywhere that I'm working." But where does this self-professed lover of travel go for fun?

"I think Hong Kong is such a fascinating city," she says. "It reminds me of Las Vegas, with all the flashing neon. Really dense, and very different from Beijing, which is organized chaos of its own kind." She has not been to other parts of China, but has made it a goal to explore further when she gets a chance. Another favorite: New Zealand. "The Maori people are friendly and wonderful, and it is a beautiful country, where you can be in the city one minute and on a black-sand beach the next."

One of her favorite hangouts in New York is the Isle of Capri, an old friend's restaurant on the Upper East Side, for "just really good Italian food."

"I love going there because it feels like home," she says. Then she pauses, aware that she is now, after all, a celebrity. "But I try not to let too many people know about the places I go, or they'll all turn up there." ●

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Hair: Enzo Angileri for Matrix/Cloutier
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Red gown by Dior. Black tights by Wolford. Black patent-leather shoes by Yves St. Laurent, available at Barneys.

