



Mr Lui is experiencing zero gravity in a weightless flight simulator.

Rocket Dream

by William Chan

Having travelled to exotic places like the North and the South Poles and the Gobi Desert, Peter Lui Kin-Chuen is making efforts to prepare for another trip: the space.

In September this year while China's Shenzhou VII spacecraft was being launched, Mr Lui was experiencing zero gravity in a weightless flight simulator in the United States, a facility where professional astronauts are trained.

Costing about HK\$40,000, the exercise gave the space enthusiast his first taste of being an astronaut.

Mr Lui described the experience as great and interesting.

"When the flight started to take off, pressure started to apply to my whole body," he recalled. "Then I started to float in the air and swang here and there."

He said the feelings somehow resemble that on a roller coaster. But he added that some people might find the flight dizzy and nauseous.

Mr Lui has also visited the US, Russia, Japan and China to take part in their astronaut training camps and to visit their space museums.

"I have acquired more knowledge about space," said Mr Lui, wearing his blue uniform designed for astronauts to work inside the spacecraft cabin. "What is even more impressive is that I got the chance to meet many astronauts from other countries, like Russia."

Mr Lui recalled his experience in Russia where he once tried on the spacesuit for astronaut working in space. "The spacesuit cost about 10 million (Hong Kong) dollars. They would let you try it on," he said. "The experience was a real eye-opener."

Mr Lui financed the trips out of his own pocket. Currently, besides working as a graphic designer, he is the president of the Hong Kong Aerospace Society and regularly gives talks at schools for which he sometimes gets paid.

Yet, the money is not enough to fund his trips. Although he tries to use the least amount of money on his trips, lack of money does not diminish his satisfaction.

Mr Lui's interest in space began at the age of 11 when he watched American astronaut Neil Armstrong walking on the moon on television.

"Witnessing the first man to land on the moon really amazed me," recalled 50-year-old Lui. He started to read books about astronautics and collect spacecraft models.

It was not until 1992 that Mr Lui developed an astronautics program in Hong Kong. On a whim, he



COURTESY OF LUI KIN-CHUEN



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1-2: Mr Lui participates in the Space Academy for Educator Programme in August 2008.
3: In 1996, Mr Lui joins the Russian Space Camp and visits the space cabin.



COURTESY OF LUI KIN-CHUEN

Mr Lui is in Guangzhou and he gets his powered parachute flying certificate.

sent a letter to apply for the Young Astronaut Programme organised by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) in the United States.

“I got the information about the programme from a poster enclosed in an aircraft model box,” said Mr Lui. “I did not expect a reply at all.” Yet, after a month, he got a reply from NASA and received a handbook.

Encouraged by NASA, Mr Lui introduced the Young Astronaut Programme in Hong Kong. Using the guidelines from the handbook, he became the first one to set up a program outside the US.

“When I started, some friends thought that it (the programme) would not work out,” he said. “But I just wanted to try something new and I was interested in everything about space.”

The programme received a cool response in the first few years. Mr Lui said that more people became interested in astronautics after the first Chinese astronaut Yang Liwei blasted into space.

He said he also started to gain media attention at that time. He was even nicknamed “Hong Kong’s Yang Liwei” as he looked like Mr Yang, especially when he wears the blue space uniform. “It was quite interesting,” he said.

His dream of going to space almost came true in July 1997 when his application for a space flight was accepted.

The US rocket Mayflower designed in a spaceship design competition was for a sub-orbital flight in which Mr Lui would have travelled if the design team had won the competition. He was the only one from Hong Kong who got the offer.



COURTESY OF LUI KIN-CHUEN

Mr Lui has travelled to many exotic places in the world. For example, (from left) the North Pole, NASA in the United States, the South Pole and the Gobi Desert in Mongolia.

In spite of his strong passion for space, he eventually turned down the opportunity. "It's too risky," said Mr Lui. "It is unfair to my family if I did not come back (from space)." He added that the chance of a successful journey was only 50 per cent.

He has no regrets. "It is distressing and sad when a goal is achieved," he said. "I will feel lost for a while." He compared this with his feeling after coming back from his trip to the North Pole which he had dreamed of doing for a long time.

It is these unrealised dreams keep him going. "I can still continue to strive for my goal since I have not yet achieved it," Mr Lui said.

He added that he enjoyed the feeling that he still had this goal to pursue. "Dreams and goals give people direction," he said. "You should never stop dreaming."

Keeping his goal in mind, Mr Lui now tries to do things that keep him close to space. One of these things is to teach.

"DREAMS AND GOALS GIVE PEOPLE DIRECTION. YOU SHOULD NEVER STOP DREAMING."

He likes to let more people know about space in a lively way and has dedicated himself to encouraging young people's interest in space. He said he would feel successful if he sees teenagers

that he has taught continue to find out more about space.

Mr Lui wishes that one day he can teach in space. "I want to do some experiments," he said, "First, I will mix water and oil on earth. Of course they cannot be mixed in a normal way, and then I will do the same in space, so everyone will know that the two can actually be mixed in space."

Whether or not Mr Lui can make his dream come true, his eyes are filled with passion and enthusiasm.

"If I am given the chance again I will certainly go for it," he said.

However, this would raise another problem. "After I travelled to space, where else should I go?" wondered Mr Lui. ▼

(Right) Mr Lui spends a lot of time today in giving talks about space in many schools. (Below) Mr Lui meets many friends from other countries who share the same interest.



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