

## Hong Kong Takes Flight: Commercial Aviation and the Making of a Global Hub, 1930s–1998

By John D. Wong. Harvard University Press, Cambridge and London, 2022. 360 pages. Hardback, \$60.00 USD, ISBN: 9780674278264.

Janet Bednarek

University of Dayton, Dayton, OH, USA

Author for correspondence: Janet Bednarek, E-mail: [jbednarek1@udayton.edu](mailto:jbednarek1@udayton.edu)

(Received 23 November 2022; accepted 23 November 2022)

While aviation's role in the second wave of globalization that began in the 1950s has been documented, studies examining the role of cities and their airports in the process remain relatively rare, particularly in the field of history. John Wong's work on Hong Kong, though more focused on the city's airline than its airport, nonetheless offers an important addition to the small, but growing historical scholarship on the role of aviation's infrastructure in the globalization process. More importantly, like Max Hirsh's (2016) work, it focuses on a non-Western city. *Hong Kong Takes Flight* traces the history of commercial aviation in Hong Kong from the 1940s through the late 1990s with a conclusion that offers a short examination of the impact of the turnover of Hong Kong to China in 1998 and of COVID-19 on the city and its airline, Cathay Pacific. Wong argues that aviation played a role in redefining the relationship between Hong Kong and Great Britain, supporting the city's growing economic prosperity and a measure of independence from British authority and influence.

The study begins with a chapter detailing the history of the city's original airport, Kai Tak airfield as well as the various airlines – both British and American – that began connecting Hong Kong to the emerging air map of the world in the 1930s and 1940s. By WWII, the flying boats of both Imperial Airways and Pan Am became common sights as Hong Kong became a key location in a network of flights connecting Europe with South Asia, Africa, and Australia. Even the Japanese occupation during the war contributed to Hong Kong's emergence as a key hub as the Japanese military expanded and upgraded the city's airport. After the war, and until the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Hong Kong thrived as a connection point between nationalist China and the West. The severe contraction of airline operations at Kai Tak once the PRC closed to outside air traffic highlighted what would be a major theme that shaped the history of commercial aviation in Hong Kong, as well as global events and developments and multi-national interests.

Perhaps the multi-national nature of Hong Kong's aviation development is most clear in the creation of a "Hong Kong" airline, Cathay Pacific. After WWII, two airlines, Cathay Pacific and Hong Kong Airlines, vied for dominance. Cathay Pacific began as small charter operation created by an American and an Australian. Its rival, Hong Kong Airlines, started as an offshoot of British Overseas Airways Corporation (BOAC). After a complex series of buy-outs and reorganizations involving both airlines, BOAC eventually agreed to merge Hong Kong Airlines with Cathay Pacific, which at the time of the merger in 1959 was owned primarily by the Swire Group, a British conglomerate involved with the import/export trade as well as the shipping business. Chartered in Hong Kong, Cathay Pacific worked to position itself as a "local" airline serving a Pacific Asian region. And though Hong Kong was not sovereign, in many ways Cathay Pacific served as its "flag carrier," forging links between the city and both regional and global aviation networks.

The author detailed how Cathay Pacific created an image of itself as a regional Pacific Asian company in an exploration of the design of the uniforms worn by the airline's cabin crew. This section of the book clearly draws on some interesting scholarship that has come out of a series of conferences

focused on aviation cultures held in Australia over the last few years.<sup>1</sup> In the early 1960s, Cathay Pacific replaced the original crew uniforms with a new design said to be “China inspired.” The airline further reinforced the effort to brand itself as a Pacific Asian airline by recruiting stewardesses from the several nations Cathay Pacific served. Asian themes also informed the uniform redesigns in 1969 and 1974. It should be noted, though, that the airline turned to Western designers for these versions of cabin crew uniforms for as long as Hong Kong remained a British colony. Throughout that same period, while the cabin crew reflected the various nationalities served, the cockpit crew remained European and white. Only in the twenty-first century did the airline turn to a Hong Kong-based designer and diversify its cockpit crew.

While most of the focus on the book was on the airline industry, at various points the author returned to the aviation infrastructure, detailing the growth of what became Kai Tak International Airport and its eventual replacement with the new Chek Lap Kok International Airport. Of particular interest is how the author detailed the way in which the complex boundary situation in Hong Kong challenged efforts to expand the original airport. The British colony included essentially two different parts, the Island of Hong Kong and the Kowloon area, ceded to Great Britain in treaties in 1842 and 1860, respectively, and the New Territories, leased to Great Britain for ninety-nine years beginning in 1898. After the completion of the initial runway extension in the 1950s, colonial authorities worried that the new runway might be part of the leased New Territories rather than the ceded area. As it was the 1950s and any transfer of land back to China well in the future, the issue remained “unresolved.”

Expansion of the airport also highlighted the changing relationship between local Hong Kong authorities and the colonial office in Great Britain. As Hong Kong grew as an important aviation hub in the 1960s and 1970s, increased passenger numbers as well as significant growth in air freight drove a need to upgrade and expand airport facilities. Authorities in Hong Kong initially turned to the British government for aid in financing the needed improvements. Great Britain, experiencing economic woes, resisted providing the funds, insisting that the now flourishing colony pay for construction. After considerable back and forth negotiations, the local authorities in Hong Kong eventually decided to take on the project. This represented an important example of Hong Kong’s growing economic independence. The author emphasized that Hong Kong became not only more economically independent, but because of the prosperity created through its role as an aviation hub it also forged an independent social and cultural identity.

While the author details how Cathay Pacific expressed Hong Kong’s emerging identity, it is less clear that the same type of branding happened at the airport. It would have been interesting to see how the airport’s terminal architecture and interior design might also have worked to position Hong Kong as both a regional Asian center as well as a global hub. Although social scientists have defined large international airports as “non-places,” places that reflect a global rather than a local identity (Auge 1995), international airports are both global and local. Local authorities employ architects to create terminals that not only enhance their city’s position in a global network, but also reflect that city’s particular social and cultural identity.

What is clear throughout the book is that the global connections made possible with aviation technology played an indispensable role in Hong Kong’s emergence as an important global transportation hub. The ability of local interests to promote and forge the creation of such ties, however, depended on continuous and complicated negotiations first with Great Britain during the colonial period and then with the Chinese government after the handover in 1998. Under international law Hong Kong authorities could not negotiate the agreements that create international air routes. And, further complicating the situation, while most flag carriers were government-owned airlines, Cathay Pacific, like Pan Am in the United States, was a private company. Over the colonial period, the company remained British enough to serve as an important node in Great Britain’s efforts to connect its sprawling commonwealth and local enough to forge an identity as a Pacific Asian carrier. After the turnover in 1998,

<sup>1</sup>For information on these conferences see <https://aviationcultures.org/about-aviation-cultures/>.

Cathay Pacific navigated a complex process that restructured its ownership to allow for greater Chinese investment, taking the British-based investment to below 50 percent.

The Cold War also positioned Hong Kong as a key connection point between not only Asia and Europe, but also Asia and the United States. Hong Kong's unique position as a western colony located on the Chinese mainland had made it an important shipping center in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The city built on that history both during the early years of aviation and during the emerging jet age. In the early years of the Cold War, as noted, Hong Kong provided important air traffic connections to nationalist China. The PRC's closing of China to western air traffic initially had a devastating effect on air transportation through Hong Kong. That downturn, however, proved temporary as Hong Kong's location attracted passenger traffic not only from Europe, but from the United States. It then became a key global exporter. By the waning years of the Cold War, once the PRC again opened to international air traffic, Hong Kong, already re-established as a major global air passenger and cargo hub, again emerged as a key node in the new connections being forged between the PRC and the West.

Although it might have benefited from greater detailed attention to both the city and its airport, Wong's study of Hong Kong is a valuable addition to aviation history. It reflects a growing scholarship focused not on planes and pilots, but on aviation's infrastructure and its larger role in globalization process since World War II.

## References

**Auge, Marc** (1995) *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*. London and New York: Verso.

**Hirsh, Max** (2016) *Airport Urbanism: Infrastructure and Mobility in Asia*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.

doi:10.1017/S147959142200047X

## Workers and democracy: The Indonesian labour movement 1949–1957

By John Ingleson. Singapore University Press and University of Hawai'i Press, 2022. 392 pages. Cloth, \$68.00 USD, ISBN: 978-0824893606.

Teri L. Caraway

University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, Minneapolis, USA

Email: [caraway@umn.edu](mailto:caraway@umn.edu)

(Received 30 March 2023; accepted 30 March 2023)

*Workers and Democracy* is John Ingleson's third monograph chronicling the history of the labor movement in what we know today as Indonesia. The first, *In Search of Justice: Workers and Unions in Colonial Java, 1908–1926* (Ingleson, 1986) analyzed the "first stage" of Indonesia's labor movement, which ended with the PKI rebellions of late 1926 and early 1927. Almost 30 years later, Ingleson published the second monograph, *Workers, Unions, and Politics: Indonesia in the 1920s and 1930s* (Ingleson, 2014), which examined the period after the PKI rebellions until the Japanese occupation of March 1942. *Workers and Democracy* skips ahead to 1948.<sup>1</sup> It is the first of Ingleson's three

<sup>1</sup>For an analysis of developments in the early independence period see Suryomengolo (2013).