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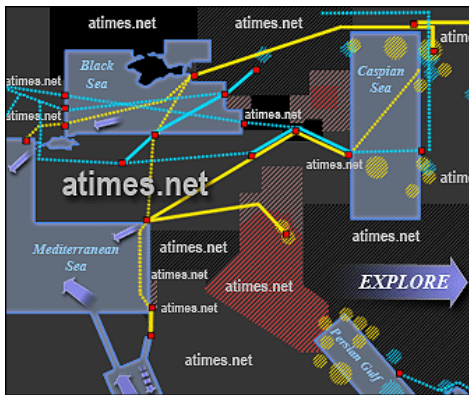
Plane crash revives China safety fears

By Kent Ewing

HONG KONG - A plane crash last month at a small airport in China's northeastern Heilongjiang province evoked memories of the nightmares of China's aviation past, when CAAC (Civil Aviation of China), then the only civil aviation operator, was bitterly read as an acronym for China Airplanes Always Crash.

Flying at night in a blanket of fog, the pilot of the Brazilian-made E-190 aircraft reportedly missed the runway at Lindu Airport in the city of Yichun by more than a kilometer. The plane broke in half and burst into flames, killing 42 of the 96 passengers on board.

Lost in the wreckage perhaps was China's remarkably improved safety record in the skies over the past several years. Indeed, while the 1990s were marked by repeated tragedies in China's



airline industry, the Yichun crash was the country's first fatal commercial-airline accident in six years. Considering the general aviation boom in Asia - with China leading the way as the world's fastest-growing market - and the intense competition this has created for qualified pilots, the Chinese record is nothing short of remarkable.

That record has been easy to forget in the three weeks of revelations that followed the August 24 disaster in Yichun. First, the CAAC, now the country's top civil aviation regulator, raised questions about the judgment and qualifications of the pilot of the Yichun flight. Although there has not yet been an official announcement on the cause of the crash, China Business, a newspaper associated with the respected Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, reported that "low-level" error by Henan Airlines pilot Qi Quanjun was likely at fault.

The report quoted CAAC officials as stating that Qi, who flew J-6 fighter jets for the Chinese military before becoming a commercial pilot seven years ago, had failed to qualify to fly Boeing 737s, although he was cleared to fly the E-190 starting in July of 2009. The August 24 crash flight was his first time flying to Yichun from the Heilongjiang capital of Harbin, a route that had only been

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inaugurated on August 10.

Raising concerns about safety precautions taken by Henan - which has since, at the insistence of officials in Henan province, changed its name to Kunpeng - the newspaper also reported that the carrier maintained only one aircraft in Heilongjiang which made 10 flights a day within the province. Before the crash, Qi had piloted four previous flights that day to different [destinations](#) in Heilongjiang.

On the heels of the China Business story came the announcement that the CAAC had launched an investigation of all China's commercial pilots - estimated to number between 12,000 and 13,000 - after discovering that 200 of them had lied about their qualifications on their resumes between 2008 and 2009. At least half of those who misrepresented themselves worked for Shenzhen Airlines, owner of Henan Airlines.

"Some of the pilots changed their jobs many times, and they constantly distorted their resumes," a CAAC report said. "Some of them were former military pilots and became civil pilots. After [their misrepresentations were] discovered, a lot of them were grounded and had to go through re-examination and re-assessment."

An emergency landing by a China Eastern [Airlines flight](#) at Beijing Capital [International Airport](#) on September 3 further heightened alarm about China's rapidly expanding [airline](#) industry; three days earlier, a Shanghai Airlines plane bound for Hong Kong had been forced by equipment failure to return to Shanghai. And, prior to that, another E-190, this one belonging to Tianjin Airlines, overshot the runway during a landing in Nanning, capital of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region in southern China. Although no one was injured in any of these mishaps, they fed into the perception that it is unsafe to fly in China.

A broader look at China's aviation safety record, however, belies this perception. While complaints about delayed departures and late arrivals are commonplace among passengers on Chinese airlines, the country has maintained a stellar safety record amid dizzying growth.

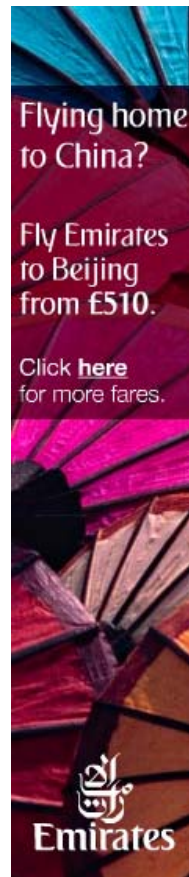
True, that record has been tarnished by the Yichun crash but - unlike in other aspects of China's commercial life, such as food security and product safety - the official response to the disaster has been prompt and transparent. Besides launching a thorough probe into the crash, the CAAC has also ordered stepped-up safety checks on all of the country's burgeoning fleet of 1,300 commercial planes.

Yichun's Lindu Airport, which opened only a year ago, is one of more than 100 small, regional [airports](#) built in the last 10 years. There are now, according to the CAAC, 165 airports in China. In another decade, the country is expected to have 300 airports.

While such growth is impressive, it should be put in perspective. The United States, for example, with a population of 310 million, has 5,300 public airports; China's population is 1.3 billion. But while the US economy is still reeling from the global recession, China is racking up double-digit economic growth that is making its huge population richer and more mobile. This means more planes, [trains](#) and automobiles.

The fear among aviation experts is that such breakneck expansion could lead to a decline in safety standards, with the Yichun crash serving as an awful prelude to a more hazardous future. To make a profit, regional airlines such as Henan must maintain small fleets and run frequent flights at cheap prices; meanwhile, qualified pilots are hard to find. Against this background, it is not difficult to see how safety standards could become compromised.

But the same could be said about the commercial airline industry across Asia. This year carriers based in the Asia-Pacific region purchased 23% of the global total of commercial jets with over 100 seats, according to Ascend Worldwide, an aviation forecaster based in London. As air traffic grows in China and India, with a combined middle class estimated at 1.1 billion people, Airbus expects Asian airlines to buy 8,000 planes worth US\$1.2 trillion



over the next 20 years.

But who will fly these planes? The world's airlines will need an average of 49,900 pilots annually over the next 20 years, according to the International Civil Aviation Organization, but current training capacity is just above 47,000. The shortage has already started a heated competition for pilots, with Emirates now offering captains tax-free salaries starting at US\$9,300 a month as well as luxurious four-bedroom [accommodation](#). AirAsia, the region's biggest budget airline, is now giving its pilots free training. This explains the spate of canceled flights on Philippine Airlines over the past two months after 27 pilots bolted for higher-paying jobs outside the Philippines.

Beyond Asia, Airbus projects that the number of cargo and large passenger planes worldwide will increase from 15,750 last year to nearly 32,000 by 2028 as world passenger traffic rises by an average of 4.7% a year. Even the US, where 4,500 pilots have currently been laid off, will be short on pilots in the future.

With China in the lead, Asia is fueling an aviation boom that has created a global bidding war for qualified pilots who are increasingly in short supply. In this environment, an airline's safety record could well depend on its ability to pay those who are flying its planes.

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