



# Flying in China

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As a potential applicant, knowledge is truly your trump card to a sound and successful future when choosing to relocate your skills from one employer to another.

The aviation cultural difference between Western countries and the East is one which should not be ignored and should be understood prior to making a move. Failing that, you could be a very unhappy pilot in the East if you expect things to be “like at home”. The differences are notable and understanding these and preparing for these will ensure you make a sound choice for your future, not only, but this understanding will ensure that you go into your new direction with a clear understanding of what is expected of you.

Undoubtedly Chinese airlines are currently the financial future of the airline pilot as the Chinese airline industry is blossoming beyond its own capability with a serious need for skilled and experienced manpower. This phenomenon gives rise to a seemingly never ending competition between the airlines to outbid each other in order to secure experienced pilots needed to aid in the growth of the airlines.

The intention here is not to discuss the difference in flying techniques or the nature of operations as it is felt that a pilot would adhere to the requirements of the company paying his or her salary as long as that requirement is legal and safe.

Notable however, is the screening process normally employed as well as the time span required to reach these positions. Let's first look at the screening process and then a little more about general flying.

## From the application to your first trip

The process from application to actually flying in China can be a lengthy process in comparison to that found in most Western airlines. Due to the strict controls required by the CAAC and the entire process, depending on the airline of choice, the process can last from 3 months to over 1 year and one should be well prepared for this.

**flySerra** believes that openness and knowledge about what you are going towards are crucial to ensuring not only that you get the position you desire but that a good and sound relationship between you and your employer will be formed due to it starting on understood and fair terms.

**NOTE:** at this point the pilot needs to understand a very interesting dynamic which is employed in this environment:

1. Pilots are handled in a similar manner to football stars in China. This means that you are owned as a commodity and changing “clubs” is almost impossible unless your club manager lets you go. Changing companies is not your decision;
2. Simply put – choose well where you want to be as the competitive nature of the environment means that should you resign from one company before contract completion, your paperwork could be withheld as long as possible to ensure that



the other companies cannot use you. Thus, if you are expecting to simply go check out one company and then move onto another, you need to understand that that is not the case in China. You need to commit;

3. Once you embark into recruitment with one company, you are pretty much defined to remain with that company. Average document releases have taken from 3 months to over 2 years.

Choosing the company you want is vital due to the above reasons as changing companies is very very difficult if not nearly impossible.

You should get the following documentation ready:

1. Your CV copies and scans
2. Passport copies and scans
3. License copies and scans
4. License verification letter (with your CAA – in most cases to be notified)
5. Medical copies and scans
6. Logbook (last 3 pages) copies and scans
7. A police clearance record (valid and not expired)
8. A letter from your last employer confirming you flew there and how much (if you are currently flying and do not want to inform your employer, a previous one will suffice or even just a proof of employment – you could say this is for other purposes such as a loan)
9. Any other substantiating document you deem necessary
10. Where documents are not in English, you will need to have these translated at your expense in English or Chinese

Once your basic documentation has been screened, you will be invited for your first trip to China during which you will generally do the following:

- Write an ATP exam;
- Undergo a simulator company check ride;
- Undergo a CAAC medical.

During this phase, the company will decide whether they want your services or not. The time frame from first submission to the completion of the first trip can be from 1 month to 3 months subject to when the ATP exam and simulator check can be arranged. The medical is quite flexible and regularly available. However, if you want to ensure that all 3 checks can be carried out, you should budget at least 10 days in China.

Costs are generally borne by the companies and tickets to bases from which you can commute as well as the taxes you pay are to be refunded when possible. However, most companies only refund economy tickets and you need to clarify the ticket price with the company prior to purchase on most occasions i.e. get approval.

**NOTE:** you will be required to obtain a VISA for this trip after receiving an invitation letter from the airline. Generally this will be a 3-6 month single or double entry VISA.



**TIP:** It's a good idea to check with the local Chinese Embassy and confirm how long it will take to get the visa and whether any additional supporting documents might be needed required.

### **The ATP exam:**

This exam is based on one question paper for which the company will supply you with a database which will cover about 50-60% of the actual exam. Thereafter, you need to understand that the exam is pretty much in line with FAA exams and thus your FAA or similar materials will assist greatly.

It is however important to realise that the level of English offered during these exams is at most, challenging. It is not abnormal to find translated questions which make little sense and thus the database which companies offer is very crucial in passing this exam. From these databases that you receive, the parts on Chinese Air Law (Regulations) carry the most weight with around 55-60% of the exam content being based on Chinese Air Law.

The remainder of questions will handle Boeing and Airbus performance (it doesn't matter if you are rated or not; mostly graphs based) as well as on basic performance diagrams just like in the FAA and JAA exams. The pass mark is 80%.

The exam is written in a computer centre, under camera surveillance and is in the format of multiple choice questions. Everything you need will be supplied to you and you cannot use your pathfinder or other devices but simply use the on screen calculator provided.

The CAAC will afford you two chances to pass this exam with your second attempt not being before 28 days after your first attempt thus the time of screening can be extended in this case. Your results will be valid for 2 years to allow for sufficient screening periods.

Like everything else in China – always keep a copy! Keep a copy of your results and guard it jealously.

### **The company simulator check**

You will undergo a simulator check which is generally based on multiple failures and maximum pressure to see how much you can handle.

This means lots of coloured lights and many checklists and you just have to cope. There does not appear to be much structure in the checks other than getting through as much work as possible in order to assess your abilities. The highest scoring and most assessed exercises include:

- Single engine work – this is very important in China as it is taken as the measure of your handling ability;
- Soft landings within the following limits, again crucial:
  - Touchdown – no greater than 1.6g;



- Touchdown distance – not less than 300m and not greater than 750m;
- Touchdown horizontal distance – not greater than 5m from centre-line;
  
- Single-engine, no FD, manual, RVR 550, ILS, max crosswind approach – this specific exercise is seen as the centre point of a captain's ability to fly the aircraft and is very important in China;
- Emergency descent – remember in China you must deviate 6 Nm to the right of track and the rest is pretty much the same as anywhere else;
- Maximum crosswind visual patterns – self-explanatory.

If you can do the above and handle multiple failures and checklists, then you are pretty much there and understand what is needed of you.

On passing a company simulator check in China, your next obstacle would be the CAAC check but it means the company has now decided – they want you!

### **The CAAC medical**

Your first medical in China can be quite daunting as it is practically a first military medical check for selection. This means that: everything but everything is checked.

Normally this will take around two days and you will even get to enjoy an MRI scan of your head. This naturally has benefits as you can take the picture back to your spouse to prove that there is definitely something happening in there but of course, if not, I would suggest you do not as that could be disastrous!

If you have any medical condition that you think may affect your results you should let your agency know so that you can be guided into providing whatever relevant medical record or certificate might be necessary in that case prior to the medical. Pilots who use eye correction (spectacles) must use these in their medical and also bring their second pair and prescription along with them to the medical screening. Herewith a list of items that will be assessed over a two day period:

- Blood test
- Urine test
- Heart: carotid arteries, B-ultrasonic, Cardiac ultrasound
- ENT: Hearing and Valsalva test, sinuses (no polyps), throat
- Ophthalmology (eyes): a standard aviation eye test
- Blood: two test tubes will be drawn and tested for Ph and all contents, blood pressure will be checked and the CAAC standard is 140/90
- Internal medicine examination: inclusive of ultra-sound check
- Surgery examination
- ECG: stationary and after a running exercise
- EEG: in rest position
- X-rays: these are of the chest and pulmonary areas to check for Tb
- Finally – MRI & MRA (usually of the head).



It is a long two-day stint and you are advised to be as comfortable as possible. As always lots of good rest and do not fool yourself that alcohol and other substances will not be found. Prepare well as you will get a second chance but only if something small and semi-insignificant is found. Transgressions e.g. drinking equate to an immediate dismissal of your candidacy.

## Time for the second trip

With the above battles successfully won you will move onto your second trip which is primarily based on the CAAC check and if it could not be organised the first time, the ATP check.

### The CAAC Check

**NOTE:** Here you need to realise something very important. If you fail this check, you get one more chance depending on your performance but if you fail it outright or for the second time, you can never ever fly in China again. The reason is simple; they, the CAAC determine whether you may fly in China while the companies carry their own check out only to have to ask the CAAC if you can fly in China.

This check will last +/-2 hours per pilot or 4 shared hours. The CAAC check is quite standard but can always vary depending on the examiner that you receive. The format is similar to the company check but generally the CAAC test fewer items making it somewhat more structured, however the same items carry as much weight as in the company check. A CAAC check captain, a company captain and an interpreter will be present.

The profile will be provided to you prior to the check but it is suggested that you sharpen your operational procedures knowledge. A typical profile would be similar to:

1. Start with a start malfunction;
2. Reset, taxi and take-off in min visibility conditions;
3. Immediately encounter wind shear;
4. Immediately thereafter have a TCAS event while also experiencing a system's failure;
5. You will always end-up doing an emergency descent! So expect to lose everything related to pressurization;
6. Emergency descent;
7. Straight into three stalls: from S&L, on base, on the ILS glideslope (unlike most western schools of thought the emphasis here is to keep flying the approach unless you're under 1000 feet and not stable);
8. Non-precision approach with go-around into the pattern (mostly manual);
9. Return for landing with an evacuation following some failure;
10. Reset for take-off, min visibility again;
11. Low speed abort;
12. Reset, take-off, failure with severe damage or fire;
13. Return for a single-engine, no flight director, manual, minimum RVR, maximum crosswind ILS;
14. Land;



Reset and take-off again, major system failure e.g. total hydraulic failure, jammed controls, etc.;

15. Return to land with a manual ILS;

16. Reset, take-off and fly minimum 2 x maximum crosswind visual patterns.

And that is about that. Now you have to realise that this generally happens in 2 ½ to a maximum of 3 hours meaning that there is a monstrous amount of rushing and resetting and load sharing to make it fit. At most, you will never have the time to settle and handle things in a slowed down structured way. An interpreter will always be present.

It's all about pressure and that is what you need to be ready for. As with all other sim checks, it is time for your best suit even though examiners have been known to attend with "uniforms" ranging from jeans and t-shirts to suits to uniforms. You should present yourself well as these examiners can make or break your aspirations entirely.

The checks are generally subject to the availability of examiners and if you are serious about flying in China it is suggested that you never postpone an opportunity for the CAAC check when it arises as you may never catch that train again.

## What now?

After this, depending on company specifics, will follow the lengthy process of completing the paperwork: residence permits following Z Visas and more, including the always present background checks. The Z Visa is a one entry Visa which allows you a single entry for the purpose of obtaining a residential permit.

Your CAAC license and company ID cards will also be arranged during this period and this phase can consist out of 1 long trip or a couple of trips and can last from 1 to 4 months.

Undoubtedly there is one piece of advice: be patient and be tolerant. Things take time in China and they will, whether you throw a tantrum or not, run their course in the end.

The Chinese are extremely helpful and keen to achieve their work goals. If there is one thing you could never say about anyone in China is that they might be lazy. You will meet some of the hardest working people you have ever met in your life and this will be expected of you too. However, you could also meet much internal resistance due to salary differences.

Part of the adjustment you must make is that in western based airlines, the pilots create unions and other similar instances. In western airlines it is all about the rule and not making exceptions which could create a prerogative while in China it is very much the opposite. One pilot recently joked that "everything is possible in China" and that is generally true as constant negotiation from individual to company can be expected. Unions do not exist.

People will always be ready to help you and will always listen however, you need to understand that you are going into a country where the language and culture differs enormously from a western one and your use of English should be clear and careful to prevent unnecessary misunderstandings; your cultural tolerance will need to be a priority.



## What about the flying?

This varies from company to company and seems often based on the composition of the personnel and not a company rule as such e.g. in most companies, many older guys are ex-military and a very high authoritarian gradient exists between captain and first officer unlike in the west where this gradient is much reduced.

Flying is closely “gated” by the QAR (same as FOCA) which is applied as a punishment and reward system rather than a tool to improve fleet dynamics. This means that seldom is the aircraft flown manually above 1000 feet and it also means that often flying techniques are adapted to steer around the QAR limits in the most “cost efficient” way possible as QAR events are more than often accompanied by hefty financial fines. That said, it seems to boost the reduction of accidents quite dramatically but not incidents.

SOP adherence is all the rage in the sim but seems to disappear in flight while the limited number of airways and the domination of ATC decisional power means that not only are delays your daily bread and butter but it also means that you will hardly ever fly in truly bad weather and strong winds as airports are simply closed on your behalf and flights are cancelled without your knowing it. This in many ways does make the pilot’s life much easier.

The congestion of airways means spending a lot of time at low levels in airliners, sometimes as low as 20000 feet for a three-hour long flight but that is well catered for with fuel by the gallons. At this stage China still employs a VFR type reserve of 45 minutes but you can load fuel almost at own will. ATC will pretty much fly your aircraft for you leaving little thought needed by you which again simplifies things quite a lot.

Chinese crews are generally friendly and helpful but like anywhere else you will always meet some obstructions. It should also be said that the cabin crew are pretty incredible in their ability to literally “slog” through long days, smile and always give the best of service.

Another change from western airlines is gifts on each leg that you receive from the airports instead of meals and the right to help yourself to anything needed from the on-board supplies unlike in the west where you would be summarily fired....this does however feel like a truly welcome change. You will be fed a lot and you will be well taken care of in as far as hotels and all other related issues go.

Flying in China can be fun even if it is highly regulated but most of all it is an opportunity to meet a new culture, make new friends and experience something you have not experienced before. It is not easy to work in China but again it can be done successfully and rewardingly.

Those are some points about what you can expect in China. Living in China is inexpensive (unless you are in Beijing or Hong Kong) and easy. People are friendly and helpful which counts for a lot and the companies are in constant need of good crew.

**Maybe time to get to know the world a little more?**

