



# The National Flag Carrier for China

An Interview with Zhou Yuelong,  
General Manager, Air China New York



Zhou Yuelong

**EDITORS' NOTE** Zhou Yuelong has held his current post since December of 2008. Prior to this, he was Director of Marketing for Air China Cargo, as well as Deputy General Manager at Air China Germany.

**COMPANY BRIEF** Air China Limited (*airchina.us*) and its predecessor, the former Air China, were founded in 1988. The former Air China consolidated with China National Aviation Company and China Southwest Airlines and founded China Aviation Group Company. Based on the combined air transportation resources of the three entities, the new Air China Company was established. On September 30, 2004, Air China Limited was officially launched in Beijing, operating air transport services as its primary business and controlled by the China Aviation Group. Air China is China's exclusive national flag carrier for civil aviation, a member of the Star Alliance, and it was the official airline partner of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. It ranks first among domestic airline brands and leads its domestic competitors in passenger and air freight transport and related services. Headquartered in Beijing, Air China has several branch offices such as Southwest, Zhejiang, Chongqing, Inner Mongolia, Tianjin, Shanghai, Hubei, Guizhou, and Tibet.

## Would you provide an overview of Air China's business and how it has grown within the New York market?

Air China has the highest market value in the world. Also, the average age of Air China aircraft is 6.5 to 7 years, so this influences the safety of the services because the planes are new and young. In addition, the brand value of Air China is important because it's the only aircraft company that is the national flag carrier for China.

### What type of fleet does Air China utilize?

The fleet is mainly composed of Boeing or Airbus for our big aircraft. The total number is

523. Air China has already ordered 124 new aircraft and they will be delivered over the next five years.

### In October, Air China will offer direct flights from Newark to Beijing. How important will that be for the Tri-State market?

Air China's first flight from China to the U.S. took place in 1981. There were only three Air China destinations in the U.S. at that time: San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York.

In 2013, we launched a direct flight to Houston; in 2014, we launched Hawaii as a destination; and that same year, we also launched a line to Washington, D.C.

Today, there are 6,000 flights between China and the U.S. annually provided by Air China. Once Air China opens the Newark direct, we will be the largest carrier between China and the U.S.

### Are there additional routes you're focused on that are important for the future?

For now, the major cities between Beijing and the U.S. have plenty of airlift. Air China is now focused on most of the second-tier cities in China. For example, Chengdu hosts Air China's second largest hub, so more lines are being planned from Chengdu to the U.S.

### What levels of service does Air China provider?

The initial goal for Air China is to offer good service to the majority of the population.

The UA Newark to Beijing lines only offers two types of service: business and economy classes.

Air China offers economy class, business class, first class, and premier class.

### Has China's slowing growth impacted travel?

No. I have no doubt that in the future, the biggest aircraft company will be in China because in the next 20 years, China will need an extra 6,000 aircraft according to a report from Boeing. In the second half of 2015, Air China is planning to add 29 more routes in its network. This means there will be one more new route every week.

### Is the focus on safety a key differentiator for the airline?

One of Air China's permanent goals is to offer safe service. Over the past 60 years, we have developed solid fundamental construction of the safety services and the right safety systems.

In China, we are one of the well-known safety service providers and it's one of the most important reasons that clients choose Air China.

### How much has technology changed the methods people use to book travel today?

Air China is concerned with mobilizing and digitizing their services but, in China today, there is still a heavy focus on booking through agents – it's different from the U.S. market.

The top three Chinese aircraft companies just cancelled the commission for the air agencies because they are trying to push travelers to go to their website or mobile devices to book their tickets.

### How important is the in-flight experience in capturing repeat flyers?

Air China is more Chinese-oriented than other Asian airlines. Even though Air China is a listed company, we want to keep our uniqueness.

In China, we do not have an Air Force One so when state leaders travel to foreign countries, they use Air China.

Air China is the only company that can carry the Chinese flag on their aircraft, so they are representing the Chinese aircraft industry, and are essentially its business card and brand ambassador.

As a result, Air China has to be very Chinese oriented as they are representing Chinese culture. Most of the pilots and the air attendants are Chinese.

They offer Chinese food and Western food on board – only two options. The interior is very Chinese and it's designed by one of the famous architects and designers in China.

### What has made working with the airline so rewarding for you?

One of the biggest advantages of working in this industry is I can travel around the world.

My father is a pilot so as a child, I was always fascinated by flying and have many happy memories of it.

The working experience for the staff at Air China is satisfying, and they work to spread this feeling to passengers and clients. They spend a lot of effort cultivating the corporate culture and on training of the new staff to cultivate these new ideas.

### What do you enjoy most about New York City?

In China, we have a saying: If you did not go the U.S, you cannot say you have traveled abroad; if you did not go to New York City, you cannot say you've been to the U.S.

For most Chinese people, New York City is one of the most symbolic, exotic cities. I enjoy it very much. ●