



INSIDE

- Dancing village fights poverty > p24
- Green focus for Tibetan community > p25

China's growing aviation market woos overseas talent with competitive pay and a good work-life balance

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Chinese airlines are recruiting more overseas pilots as the aviation market expands. The pilots say they enjoy the work, and records show their salaries are one reason why.

Alexandre Richer de Forges, 38, had worked for international carriers before joining China Eastern Airlines in 2013.

The move helped him to find a better balance between work and family life, and he said he will be happy to remain with the Shanghai-based airline through to retirement. Besides the money, he likes the company's considerate attitude and friendly crews.

"It's not only about the salary, the working hours, but both — and other things," he said. "I want to continue working here and retire here."

Richer de Forges is a French pilot who was born and raised in West Africa. At 15, he became the youngest French pilot and gained flying experience during the seven years he worked in Europe.

But to be closer to his family, Richer de Forges joined China Eastern Airlines, since his Chinese wife comes from Kaohsiung, Taiwan.

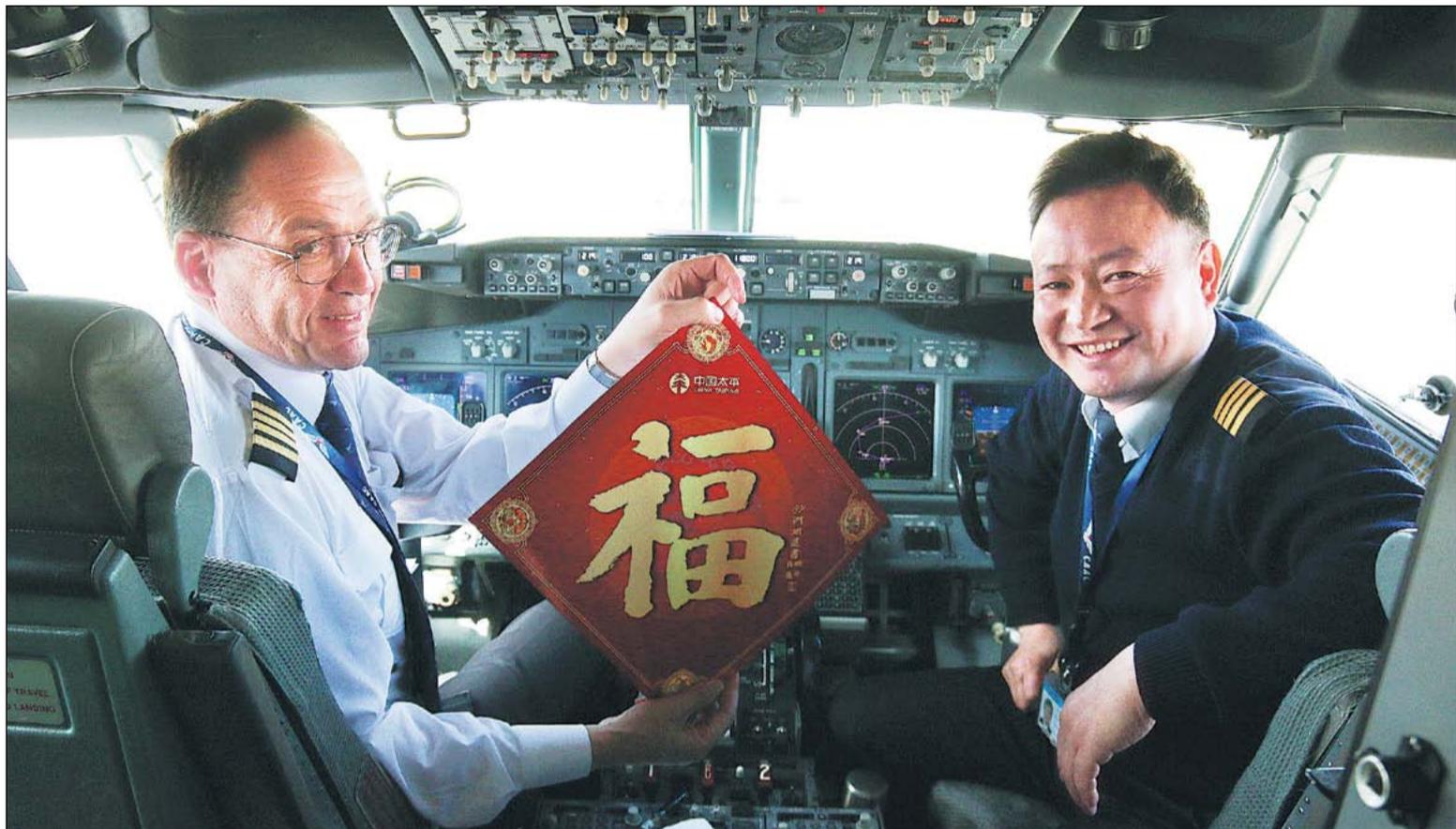
He did not enjoy his work in Europe. "So I tried to look for work that is close to home, with a decent salary and good quality of life," he said. "I applied to almost all the airlines in China."

In July 2013, he was among the first group of eight foreign pilots recruited by China Eastern, and he has never regretted his choice.

Last year, 1,005 foreign pilots were working in China, according to the Civil Aviation Administration of China (CAAC). State-owned carriers, such as Air China, China Southern and China Eastern, employed 160 of them, while the rest were working for local airlines and transport companies.

Lin Zhijie, an aviation industry analyst and columnist at Carnoc.com, a major civil aviation website in China, said the Chinese aviation market has been growing by double digits in the past two decades, as more domestic airlines have expanded their fleets and launched new routes. This has led to a pilot shortage.

CAAC data shows that the number of Chinese airline passengers increased by 11.1 percent year-on-year and now totals more than 1 billion. Domestic passengers amounted



The flight crew of Talal Mohamed (left), a British captain, and Captain Hu Zehui of Ruili Airlines work together in February aboard an aircraft. Airlines in China are recruiting foreign pilots as the industry expands. ZHANG HENGZHAO / FOR CHINA DAILY

Foreign pilots in high demand

to 914 million of that total, up 10.3 percent, while overseas passengers reached 102.34 million, up by 19.3 percent year-on-year.

The training of pilots in China is unable to keep pace with demand, and Chinese airlines have no option but to recruit more foreign pilots, which places higher requirements on airline management.

"Chinese airlines have to provide competitive salaries for foreign pilots to attract them to leave their hometowns and come to work in China," Lin said. "Providing high salaries for those mature and skillful foreign pilots is understandable, as Chinese employers don't have to train them."

Elgin Siasat Medina, 43, has enjoyed living in Shanghai over the past 11 years.

According to the commuting contract that Medina, from the Philippines, signed with China Eastern, he can have 10 days off to spend with his family in Manila after working 20 days in China each month.

"It's a balance of work and life," said Medina, who flies Boeing 777s for around 80 hours per month.

De Forges said he has seen the rapid development of the Chinese aviation industry during the past four years.

"When I arrived at China Eastern

four years ago, it only had a few European overseas flight destinations, such as London, Frankfurt, Paris and Rome. Now we fly to Prague, Moscow, Milan, Madrid, Amsterdam, etc. I'm sure its growth will continue."

Fan Haixiang, general manager of the foreign pilot management department with China Eastern's Shanghai flight department, said: "The fast growth of China's aviation industry demands a great number of pilots, and we see this trend continuing as the fleet of Chinese airlines keeps expanding."

According to Fan, since the first group of foreign pilots arrived in 2013, the department now has 66 from 15 countries, including the Netherlands, Australia, Canada, the United States, Brazil and France.

In China, pilots usually sign lifetime contracts with airlines, so the cost of poaching pilots from other airlines is extremely high, and sometimes even results in lawsuits. By contrast, the contractual obligation for foreign pilots is usually one to five years.

It takes eight to 10 years to cultivate a captain in China, as domestic airlines train pilots through lengthy contractual programs and fixed allocations. By contrast, hiring foreign captains only takes one year at most

for approval from the CAAC.

Fan said foreign pilots have advantages in English language skills, professionalism and self-management. Their salaries are usually 20 percent higher than those of their Chinese counterparts.

Industry analyst Lin said that, as a whole, the average wage for pilots in China is too high, with the salary for aircraft captains about 20 times the social average. The average salary of US captains is about seven times higher than the social average.

"Foreign pilots have to pass CAAC tests and get authorization. Some pilots can bring in advanced flying perceptions to China, but there are also some hidden problems. They may face cultural differences and communication problems with the airport coordinating staff in China," Lin said.

Foreign pilots working for Chinese airlines can be paid up to four times the salary they could earn in their home countries, such as Brazil and Russia, according to insiders.

Some Chinese airlines are willing to pay \$26,000 after-tax salary per month to foreign pilots, said Dave Ross, president of Wasinc International, a pilot-recruiting company.

Apart from the high salaries, foreign pilots also see their work expe-

rience in China as a boost for their career, which may help them land jobs with renowned international airlines once they return home.

"In addition to offering attractive salaries to them, we also try to make them feel at home," Fan from China Eastern said.

De Forges said he is impressed by his friendly Chinese colleagues, who have been willing to help him make the transition to living in China. He said he enjoys helping colleagues who do not speak Chinese in areas such as finding accommodation, taking taxis, paying bills and solving other problems.

China Eastern strives to offer a "local service" for destination flights by employing nearly 500 foreign flight attendants from Europe, Japan and South Korea, said Dang Donghong, general manager of the airline's foreign cabin crew division.

According to Dang, foreign flight attendants at the airline are becoming a cross-culture channel allowing passengers to get to know China better. The company is also offering the foreign employees themselves an opportunity for personal development.

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