

# Cathay Pacific crew say fear of China is fuelling paranoia and sackings amid Hong Kong protests

Saturday 11 January 2020, by [CONIFER Dan](#) (Date first published: 2 November 2019).

## Contents

- [Fear of China turns colleagues](#)
- [Cathay defends management](#)

Rebecca Sy was wheeling her carry-on luggage through Hong Kong International Airport ready to board a flight to China when she received the message that changed her life.

The Cathay Pacific flight attendant with 17 years of experience had trekked through the terminal countless times before, across its hundreds of metres of tiles and travelators.

But this walk to the gates was cut short.

*"I received a message that I needed to return home and wait for someone from the company to call,"* Ms Sy said.

She was summoned to a meeting the following day with Cathay Pacific executives.

In the days before, China had made clear it had zero tolerance for staff supporting the pro-democracy protests that were shaking the airline's home city.

When she entered the conference room, she saw printed **screenshots of her Facebook posts** laid out on the table.

- She said one showed the words '**happy birthday**' she had written on sticky notes for a colleague.
- Another printout was a screenshot from a Facebook Live story in which Ms Sy claims **she had simply mourned the resignation of the company's chief executive**.
- The third, she said, informed her friends of an impending work trip to the mainland.

Her Facebook profile was private, so she reasoned that the posts must have been sent to management by her own friends.

Her career of nearly two decades was over.

Ms Sy insists the posts were innocuous, and she believes there was one real reason for her dismissal.

Before she was sacked, **Ms Sy was the chair of the union representing cabin crew at Cathay Dragon airlines**, which operates most of the Cathay group's flights to mainland China.

As the protests unfolded, the union had released a statement defending Cathay staff's right to freedom of speech. *"Of course ... it is the pressure from the Chinese Government,"* she said.

Ms Sy said her termination hit the crew community *"like a bomb"*.

*"[My colleagues] would think even the chairperson of a union can be terminated because of her social media accounts,"* she said.

*"That simply means everyone could be sacked as well."*

## **Fear of China turns colleagues against each other**

Several large companies have been squeezed between Hong Kong's citizens and China's desire to quell dissent. But Cathay Pacific is uniquely vulnerable and the highest-profile victim.

Passenger numbers in September were down by about 7 per cent on the same month in 2018, and the airline conceded demand from mainland customers had fallen particularly sharply.

Hong Kong's flagship carrier depends on China — and the one-party Communist state knows it.

The Civil Aviation Administration of China (CAAC) issued a "safety" directive banning crew who support or take part in demonstrations from landing in the mainland or using its airspace.

Jane agreed to talk to the ABC only if she could conceal her face with dark glasses and a hood, and if the interview occurred in a secret location in Hong Kong.

She is one of **27,000 Cathay Pacific employees** in Hong Kong and has worked for the airline for more than a decade.

Cathay Pacific warns staff against breaching its strict code of conduct, which outlaws any activity that could prevent the airline meeting "*any applicable legal or regulatory requirements*".

And whistleblowing policies encourage staff to confidentially report any suspected violation by another colleague.

**That has fuelled paranoia and turned co-workers against one another**, according to Jane.

She said "*people can no longer talk freely*" about anything political for fear of colleagues informing on them to management.

*"It's like there is a dark hole there that everybody tries to avoid,"* Jane said.

*"I think all of us feel that Cathay is no longer the same company we have ever known."*

Some feel the scrutiny from mainland regulators and consumers is so intense that staff are being sacked over issues beyond their control.

A Cathay Dragon cabin crew member who wanted to be known only as Chloe said she lost her job after she discovered a leaking oxygen tank during a flight to Malaysia.

**She had heard a high-pitched noise during the flight and asked a colleague to double-check the canister.**

**The entire cabin crew on board the flight was suspended, and Chloe and the colleague who found the leaking tank were sacked three days later.**

*"I'm the one who discovered it, I checked it, and I reported it,"* she told managers through tears after being fired. Chloe said Cathay Pacific was "*squeezing*" frontline employees who were "so scared of doing anything wrong".

*"We are just a used tissue. They just throw you out,"* she said.

In the space of just a few months, the airline has been transformed dramatically — and maybe permanently — by political events completely out of its control.

Its workforce understands this, but many are also disappointed by the company's response.

Mixe Lee was sacked from his job as a Cathay Dragon crew member for condemning the harsh police response to

protesters inside a local shopping mall on social media.

*"Hong Kong is,"* he said, before correcting himself, "*was a place with freedom of speech, so I don't think expressing my political view will affect any relationship or especially my work*".

*"I still think that the staff and the crews in this airline perform very well as always. But ... this company did not deserve a crew like us."*

## **Cathay defends management style in tumultuous times**

Cathay Pacific declined to directly comment on any of the cases raised in this story.

In a statement, a spokesperson for Cathay Pacific said that for staffing decisions, *“all relevant factors”* are taken into account, *“including necessary regulatory requirements as well as the employee’s ability to perform their role”*.

*“Any actions taken by the group with regards to employees is always in strict accordance with the terms of their relevant employment contracts as well as all applicable laws and regulations.”*

The airline said it also must adhere to all global regulations, *“including those prescribed by the authorities in mainland China”*.

Most Cathay Pacific journeys pass through mainland Chinese-controlled airspace, including services to Europe and the United States, and the CAAC has demanded crew lists for all of these flights.

The CAAC has lifted inspections on Cathay’s fleet, after officials scoured crew members’ mobile phones for anti-China content.

The ABC sought interviews with Cathay Pacific’s new CEO and chairman, along with the chairman of its largest shareholder, Hong Kong-based conglomerate Swire Pacific.

No-one was available.

The ABC also contacted the regulator and the Chinese embassy in Canberra, but did not receive a response before deadline.

---

**P.S.**

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-11-02/hong-kong-cathay-pacific-staff-speak-out/11657254>