

Chapter 1

Introduction

- A. Background
- B. The Report

What the Government/Airport Authority said.....

“On the advice of the Executive Council, the SAR Government has decided to open the new airport at Chek Lap Kok on July 6 By the time of its opening, it will be a world class facility, which has least rivals in the rest of the world.....”¹

Mr Donald TSANG
Financial Secretary
13 January 1998

“I, as I am sure are all Hong Kong people, am confident that the new airport will not only bring tremendous long-term benefits to our community but will quickly establish a name for itself as one of the world’s truly great airports.”²

Mr TUNG Chee-hwa
Chief Executive
2 July 1998

“I am sure that the new airport will contribute to the revival of the economy.”³

Mr WONG Po-yan
Chairman/Airport
Authority
6 July 1998

“The new airport will lead Hong Kong into the 21st century and reinforce Hong Kong as an international aviation hub.”⁴

Mrs Anson CHAN
Chief Secretary for
Administration
6 July 1998

Source:

¹ “Transcript of FS’s media session”, *Daily Information Bulletin*, Information Services Department, 13 January 1998.

² “New Airport Opening Message”, Mr TUNG Chee-hwa, *Chief Executive*, 2 July 1998.

³ *Hong Kong Standard*, 6 July 1998.

⁴ *Hong Kong Standard*, 7 July 1998.

A. Background

1.1 On 2 July 1998, President JIANG Zemin officially opened the new Hong Kong International Airport at Chek Lap Kok (new airport). In his speech at the opening ceremony, Mr TUNG Chee-hwa, the Chief Executive (CE), hailed the new airport as “a combination of the wisdom, diligence and entrepreneurship of the Hong Kong people and symbolises the brilliant prospects of Hong Kong” and “an amazing engineering project, in which everyone in Hong Kong takes pride.”

1.2 The CE was probably speaking the minds of many people in Hong Kong at that time. They had no reason not to be confident that the new airport would be the pride of Hong Kong. As pointed out by the CE in the latter part of his speech, the new airport project, “which is described as a project ‘beyond 1997’, is the largest investment item in the history of Hong Kong.....it took seven years to complete and cost about \$155 billion.” The opening of the new airport was indeed eagerly awaited by the general public. In May and June 1998, many of them attended open days of the new airport and marvelled at its impressive looks. Some even participated in the terminal operations trials before its opening. Moreover, the massive overnight move from Kai Tak went off without a hitch. People were just looking forward to the Airport Opening Day (AOD).

1.3 Against all public expectations, the operation of the new airport on 6 July 1998 was anything but smooth. The media reported a spate of problems in passenger services, air cargo services and other areas. The following account was compiled from local newspaper reports on the first few days of operations:

Passenger services

- Most of the time the flight information display boards displayed inaccurate information (such as wrong gate numbers) or simply blanked out for up to an hour, causing passengers great difficulties in finding out when and where to board.⁵
- Some passengers had to wait for nearly five hours for their luggage.⁶ A flight took off with a passenger's baggage but without the passenger on board.⁷ Some flights took off without some of their passengers' luggage. Many bags were misplaced or undelivered.⁸ Some 2,000 pieces of baggage were reported to be left stranded up to 7 July 1998.⁹
- Inaccurate flight information and baggage handling problems led to delays of departing flights. One flight was delayed for as long as a day, and another was held up overnight in Taipei because late take-off resulted in its not being able to reach the destination airport in time before closure. Some passengers complained that there were no announcements for delayed flights.¹⁰
- Hundreds of arriving passengers were trapped on landed planes for up to two hours after four of the 38 airbridges were reported to have operational problems.¹¹

Source:

⁵ *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, 7 July 1998 & *Ta Kung Pao*, 8 July 1998.

⁶ *South China Morning Post*, 7 July 1998.

⁷ *South China Morning Post*, 11 July 1998.

⁸ *Tin Tin Daily*, 7 July 1998 and *Hong Kong Standard*, 8 July 1998.

⁹ *Apple Daily*, 8 July 1998.

¹⁰ *South China Morning Post*, 7 July 1998 and *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, 8 July 1998.

¹¹ *South China Morning Post*, 7 July 1998.

- There were long queues for public phones because most of the payphones at Passenger Terminal Building (PTB) were still unconnected on AOD. The mobile phone network also malfunctioned.¹²
- There were inadequate signboards at the Departure Hall and in restricted areas.¹³ Some signboards were wrongly placed, for example, one of the signs reading “Airport Passenger Terminal B” actually led to the Airport Express. Others were too small to be noticeable.¹⁴
- The breakdown of the cooling system resulted in the malfunctioning of air-conditioning in PTB.¹⁵
- Escalators in PTB were out of service for much of the time and lifts were often overloaded or out of order.¹⁶
- The breakdown of water and electricity supply caused great inconvenience to passengers and operators of the catering outlets in PTB.¹⁷
- There were not enough rubbish bins in PTB and they were not emptied frequently enough.¹⁸

Source:

¹² *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, 7 July 1998.

¹³ *Hong Kong Standard and Hong Kong Economic Journal*, 7 July 1998.

¹⁴ *South China Morning Post*, 7 July 1998.

¹⁵ *South China Morning Post*, 8 July 1998.

¹⁶ *Hong Kong Economic Times and Hong Kong Economic Journal*, 7 July 1998.

¹⁷ *Ta Kung Pao*, 8 July 1998.

¹⁸ *Tin Tin Daily*, 8 July 1998.

- The toilets were in a poor state due to the interrupted water supply.¹⁹

Air cargo services

- Import and Export cargo was held up at Super Terminal 1 (ST1) after Hong Kong Air Cargo Terminals Limited (HACTL)'s computer system had apparently crashed. Hundreds of trucks queued for up to 12 hours outside ST1 waiting to pick up and deliver goods.²⁰ Lorry drivers complained that they were not told how long they would have to wait.²¹ Some of them turned up to collect deliveries of live fish only to find that few of the fish were still alive and fresh flowers and fruit were no longer fresh.²²
- Cargo could not be located.²³ The operations were further slowed down by ramp handling operators who were unfamiliar with the new airport.²⁴
- HACTL had to suspend most of its services in ST1 almost immediately, without any indication of a firm date of resumption.

Other aspects

- On the security aspect, trespassers were found in the restricted areas of the new airport.²⁵

Source:

¹⁹ *Tin Tin Daily and Hong Kong Economic Journal*, 8 July 1998.

²⁰ *South China Morning Post*, 8 July 1998.

²¹ *Hong Kong Standard*, 7 July 1998.

²² *Apple Daily*, 8 July 1998.

²³ *Oriental Daily*, 8 July 1998.

²⁴ *Hong Kong Standard*, 8 July 1998.

²⁵ *South China Morning Post*, 12 July 1998 and *Oriental Daily*, 18 July 1998.

- Two unaccompanied bags were found on a KLM flight without their owners. This allegedly constituted a breach of aviation security rule.²⁶
- On the noise aspect, residents under the new flight path in Shatin, Kwai Chung and Tsing Yi complained about aircraft noise. Civil Aviation Department (CAD) received numerous complaints and inquiries. The ground noise level under the new flight path reached up to 70 decibels on average.
- An estimated 200,000 to 300,000 people under the new flight paths were allegedly affected by aircraft noise.²⁷

1.4 The chaotic situation on AOD aroused considerable public concern. Legislative Council Members, like members of the public, were surprised by the problems and anxious to find out the causes. On 9 July 1998, a special briefing was held at Members' request. Representatives from the Economic Services Bureau (ESB), Works Bureau (WB), Transport Bureau (TB), New Airport Projects Co-ordination Office (NAPCO), CAD, Transport Department (TD), Airport Authority Hong Kong (AA), HACTL and Mass Transit Railway Corporation (MTRC) attended the briefing. They briefed Members on remedial measures taken and improvements made. However, Members considered the answers to their questions unsatisfactory, particularly the explanation as to why the operation of the new airport was so chaotic, and who should be held responsible for the problems. They urged the Administration to ensure that normal passenger and air cargo services would resume as soon as possible. They requested the Administration to consider setting up an

Source:

²⁶ *South China Morning Post*, 11 July 1998.

²⁷ *South China Morning Post*, 9 July 1998.

independent body to fully investigate the causes of the chaos and identify the persons who should be held responsible. Members also decided to discuss the matter internally at the House Committee Meeting on 10 July 1998.

1.5 In the afternoon of 10 July 1998, the Chief Secretary for Administration (CS) announced that the CE had decided to appoint an independent team to be headed by a leading member of the local community and to include two international experts familiar with airport construction and operation to conduct an independent investigation into the various problems that had arisen, including baggage handling, flight information and breakdown of the cargo system at HACTL, and whether any person should be held responsible. However, to Members' disappointment, the Administration was still undecided as to the membership and terms of reference of the independent investigation team.

1.6 At its meeting that same afternoon, the Legislative Council House Committee agreed that a select committee should be set up by resolution of the Council within July 1998 to inquire into the matters relating to the problems of the new airport. However, Members agreed that the select committee was not to commence work for a period of not more than three months to allow time for the team to be appointed by the CE to complete its investigation and submit its report to the CE. A subcommittee of the House Committee was then formed to undertake preparatory work for the setting up of the select committee.

1.7 On 13 July 1998, the Ombudsman announced that there was prima facie evidence that the early problems in the new airport's operation involved maladministration, and an independent investigation would be conducted.

1.8 On 17 July 1998, the Legislative Council House Committee endorsed the Subcommittee's recommendation that the Chairman of the Subcommittee move a resolution in the Legislative Council on 29 July 1998 to appoint a Select Committee to inquire into the problems of the new airport.

1.9 Subsequently, instead of the team as originally announced by CS, the Chief Executive-in-Council appointed a Commission of Inquiry on the New Airport under the Commissions of Inquiry Ordinance (Cap. 86) on 21 July 1998 to inquire into the operation of the new airport. Mr Justice WOO Kwok-hing was appointed Chairman and Dr Edgar CHENG Wai-kin Commissioner. The Commission was expected to finish its inquiry in around six months.

1.10 At the House Committee Meeting held on 24 July 1998, Members decided that it was not desirable for the Select Committee to wait until the Commission had reported before commencing its work, having regard to the grave public concern about the chaos that had occurred, and the fact that some of the problems, notably the cargo services, had still not been resolved.

1.11 On 29 July 1998, the Legislative Council passed a resolution appointing the Select Committee without subjecting it to the three-month restriction, as the Commission of Inquiry was not expected to finish its inquiry and publish its report within three months. The Select Committee commenced its work immediately and held its first meeting on 30 July 1998, followed by a series of public hearings from 21 September 1998.

B. The Report

1.12 The Report of the Select Committee is in six volumes.

1.13 **Volume I** is the Main Report and Minutes of Proceedings. The Main Report contains the findings and conclusions of the Select Committee. The Minutes of Proceedings record the proceedings of the Select Committee on the consideration of the final draft of the Main Report.

1.14 **Volumes II to VI** contain the Minutes of Evidence (verbatim transcripts), in their original language, of the public hearings of the Select Committee arranged in the following order:

<u>Volume</u>	<u>Minutes of Evidence</u>
II	1 st to 6 th public hearings (21 to 30 September 1998)
III	7 th to 12 th public hearings (3 to 23 October 1998)
IV	13 th to 18 th public hearings (3 to 18 November 1998)
V	19 th to 24 th public hearings (19 to 30 November 1998)
VI	25 th to 31 st public hearings (3 to 19 December 1998)

1.15 In accordance with Rule 79(10) of the Legislative Council Rules of Procedure, the Report of the Select Committee is laid on the Table of the Council by its Chairman on 27 January 1999.