SMALLER CHINESE CITIES LURE MORE AIRLINES TO FLY DIRECT INTERNATIONAL FLIGHTS FROM THEIR AIRPORTS

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Expect an ever increasing number of direct flights connecting global metropolises with second- and third-tier mainland cities you may never have heard of, as the Chinese middle class's growing appetite for air travel puts more mainland airports on the map for airline companies.

Xi'an to Sydney, Chengdu to Osaka, Shenyang to San Francisco ... those are but a few of the direct routes being added this month according to CAAC filings, while America's United Airlines is going to launch a Xi'an to San Francisco service next year that will be the Shaanxi capital's first trans-Pacific route.

Mainland air hubs beyond Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou are quickly moving up in terms of global prominence, with a new airport connectivity report by industry consultancy OAG, showing that Kunming is now the world's 48th most connected report - only seven places behind Hong Kong, one place behind Beijing, and 17 places behind Shanghai Pudong, which in 31st place was

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the most connected Chinese airport.

While that may not be a fair reflection of those air hubs' relative importance as connectivity was measured by the ratio of flight connections to the number of destinations served, mainland airports claimed five places on the list of the 25 fastest-growing airports in terms of global connectivity.

Shanghai Pudong was the world's third-fastest-growing airport, seeing its connectivity score double in five years to have 89,698 connections on its busiest day this year, according to the report. Kunming was the eighth-fastest-growing one, with connections on its busiest day also doubling in the same period to 42,540. Xi'an, Chengdu and Guangzhou were the other mainland airports to make the top 25 fastest growing list, which was topped by Turkey's Istanbul.

Will Horton, a Hong Kong-based analyst with the Centre for Aviation, said it was hard to compare the strength of hubs based on such a methodology, pointing out that Brazilian city of Sao Paulo's regional airport, Congonhas, scored seventh place in the report's global ranking even though it only served less than 30 destinations, all of them domestic.

But "having a wide network is the objective of airlines and airports", he said, adding that "Chinese airports in a heartbeat would forgo domestic flights if they could land new international services."

An HNA Group executive said airlines were competing to establish themselves in China's under-served secondary hubs in order to gain an advantage in tapping the huge market potential in air travel from those cities.

"Second- and third-tier cities are where people have money to spend ... even if demand may not be that strong to make the route profitable yet, you have to get in there now," the executive said. "You start by starting the routes, build your network; otherwise you'd have nothing to fly in a few years."

Local governments' attractive subsidies for airlines, or their own equity investments to form new airlines -- made possible after regulations were relaxed two years ago -- were further encouraging the proliferation of flights, he said.

Apart from its flagship Hainan Airlines, HNA Group owns six other passenger airlines on the mainland with the local governments: Kunming-based Lucky Air, Chongqing-based West Air, Nanning-based Guangxi Airlines, Urumqi Air, Fuzhou Airlines and Tianjin Airlines, which is planning to start flying to Europe next year.

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