

Canadians can't disguise admiration and concern over masked traveller's stunt

BY SUZANNE MA, POSTMEDIA NEWS NOVEMBER 6, 2010



Canadian authorities were trying to determine how a man in his 20s was able to board a flight in Hong Kong to Vancouver having disguised himself as an elderly passenger.

Photograph by: Canada Border Services, Handout

HONG KONG — Canadians flying out of the same Hong Kong airport where a man in disguise boarded a plane for Vancouver expressed everything from admiration to concern Saturday over his Mission Impossible-esque stunt.

“I think he’s brave. He must have had a reason to do it,” said Ting-hao Hu, 21, who was among those lining up at Air Canada kiosks at the Hong Kong International Airport.

“In my mind, he’s just trying to escape from something or he wouldn’t have done something like that,” said Hu, who is an arts and music student at Carleton University in Ottawa

Last week, an Asian man in his early 20s successfully boarded a Vancouver-bound flight in Hong Kong wearing a mask that made him look like an elderly Caucasian man.

The incident happened on Oct. 29, on Air Canada flight AC018, according a confidential intelligence alert from the Canada Border Services Agency.

The man removed his mask during the flight. Upon arriving in Vancouver he was met by border services officers. He has now requested asylum.

The incident has put a spotlight on Air Canada's security procedures, and led to promises of a full investigation from the federal government.

Paul Bourgeois, a 50-year-old businessman from Moncton, said Saturday he found the entire situation "mind-boggling."

"There are so many people, so many passport checks at a number of locations," he said as he waited at the Hong Kong airport. "For anyone to have gotten through wearing a mask is mind-boggling."

Security at the Hong Kong International Airport is usually very stringent.

Passengers must first have their boarding passes and passports checked by as many as two guards before they are able to enter the "departures hall."

Once in the hall, boarding passes and IDs are checked again before passengers walk through metal detectors while hand luggage passes through X-ray machines.

Next, passengers must hand over their passports and stand face-to-face with a Hong Kong immigration official to be cleared for departure — a seemingly daunting task for someone wearing a mask.

The final check comes at the gate; airline staff members usually ask to see passports in addition to boarding passes.

"There are multiple identity checks before departure at the Hong Kong international airport, including Chinese government-run Hong Kong passport control and a passport check at the boarding gate, which Hong Kong-originating passengers must undergo," said Air Canada spokeswoman Angela Mah, in an e-mail to Postmedia News.

An airport spokesman declined to comment when contacted.

It's believed the man swapped boarding passes with a U.S. citizen and passenger who was born in 1955.

Immigration lawyer Richard Kurland has speculated that the man went through domestic security at the airport before putting on his disguise, after which he likely swapped boarding passes with another passenger, then feigned mobility and communication issues to pass through gate security.

Conservative House leader and former transportation minister John Baird said the incident is of “deep concern” and that there will be a “full investigation.”

Travellers on Saturday said they weren’t overly concerned about security issues raised by the incident.

“I don’t think he was a threat,” said Joel Matlin, president of the Toronto-based home security company Alarm Force. “He wasn’t armed and he wasn’t violent.”

Sheila McFarlane, a retired politician headed home to Vancouver Island, agreed.

“I think it’s a one-off. It won’t happen again,” she said. “If he was a danger in any way, if he was carrying a gun, or a bomb or a knife, then I’d be concerned.”

But Bourgeois, the Moncton businessman, said he was worried that Canadian immigration officials would grant the man refugee status.

“If Canada doesn’t say ‘no’ to this guy, we’re going to be the destination of choice for all people looking to move somewhere else,” he said. “As much as I feel for these people, if Canada is known for having such open doors, then I see serious problems down the road.”

Matlin, from Toronto, agreed.

“Send him back. He should taking the right channels,” he said. “We are a community of immigrants, but we should not give this man special treatment because of his eccentric behaviour.”

The Asian traveller, whose name and native country isn’t known, has been detained pending a hearing before the Immigration and Refugee Board.