

Revitalizing the air transport in Thailand: the posterior pandemic

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Abstract. This academic article reviews the air transport in Thailand, specifically the situation and the outlook. The authors surveyed and collect the data from secondary sources both internally and internationally including the public sector annual report, private, and academicians. The situation has been predicted into three phase cases including; best case scenario, moderate, and worst-case scenario. Additionally, the service quality, the reskills and upskills for employee acquiring new skills, the organization transformation, and the technology adaptation are required. More importantly, the health safety plan and policies of air carriers shall be implemented and communicate to the public to assure their safe journey. Meanwhile, the adoption of technology could also minimize the repetitive work and human contact but it could provide new air travel experiences. The earliest the air transport industry was revitalized; it means the socio-economic improvement. Keywords: Air transport, Thailand market, Health safety, Revitalizing.

1 Introduction

Currently, the pandemic situation was relieved and people life span get back to a new normal. Many countries, outwardly, gave up the strict measurement for travelling, trade, and certainly transportation. Since, the majority of people have at least three doses of vaccine against the coronavirus. In Thailand, the government has issued the Government Gazette dated September 29, 2022 reading the cancellation state of emergency declaration throughout the Kingdom.

It is allowed Thais to live their life as normal in terms of both economic and social activities. The tourism for economic recovery and building the confident on health safety plan was delegated to the Ministry of Tourism and Sport (Royal Thai Government, 2022).

This means that the massive tourists travelling by air transport would revive and yet the

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competitiveness among air carriers remain the same. It is noticeable that the air transport has a great importance on social, economic, and other related businesses. It generates enormous amount of revenue to the country both direct and indirect means. The air transport connects to remote areas and other countries carrying both goods and passenger. That is supporting tourism and trade which lead to economic and social as a whole. It, currently, is the only means of fast and efficient transport carrying hundreds of people and thousand tons of cargo. Albeit, the weak point of the air transport is highly vulnerable to all social phenomenon, such as the outbreak, economic, political, and technology (Kankaew, 2022). Besides, the cut throat on prize competition has worsening the airlines themselves.

This academic article intends to reflect the analysis of the expert in air transport from both public and private sector, and academicians on the revitalizing aspect, as the fastest recovering would beneficial to the country and related businesses. As well as, the uncertainty issues that has to be considered.

2 Literature Review

2.1 During the pandemic and outlook through the internal lens

The Office of Trade in Services and Investment Negotiation, Department of International Trade Negotiation by Janearksorn (n.d.) reported that in 2020 the Asia Pacific region got the highest impact from the pandemic where the number of passengers travel by air in Thailand, Malaysia, and Laos were among the largest decline countries, specifically Thailand. The report, also, disclosed that the aviation industry in Thailand will be shrinking 60%. Therefore, the airlines administered the cost cutting strategies by leasing aircraft, reducing salary, and laid off (Sukato, n.d.). These practices have led unemployment, and the burden cost to government supporting the jobless population. Furthermore, it could demolish economic as a whole, mental problem, and political unrest (Chantarapanich, 2021; Ushakov & Chich-Jen, 2018).

However, the report suggested airlines' workforces in different position to reskills and upskills. For instance, the growth of e-commerce has led to the needs of freight shipment that could be an overturn the crisis situation. This is consistent to Sukato (n.d.) cited the air carriers have adapted the aircrafts to carry goods and medical support. Other positions alike flight attendants whom have high customer service skills could be able to work in other service industries, such as health care, restaurants.

Whilst, those who the mechanic and engineer position are able to upskill to future needed akin to digital, data analytics, and innovation. Yet, the outlook for the aviation industry after the pandemic small and medium range aircrafts are required rather than big aircrafts. Subsequently, the skills for maneuvering small and medium range aircraft are essential.

Added to that, Sukato (n.d.) highlighted the new normal of flying that airlines shall stress on the passengers' health protection, amend the cabin class to gain higher load factor, allow passenger to change, postpone the flight without fee, and incorporate with other airlines rather than competing. Laophram et al (2020) draw attention to the good service quality along with health safety, social distancing, and apply modern technology in passenger processing i.e. check-in and boarding to reduce human interaction.

In respond to the quest of new technology, National News Bureau of Thailand, Kaewkham (2022) promulgated Bangkok Suvarnabhumi airport employed the passenger validation system (PVS) for scanning boarding pass or e-boarding pass. This will allow the screening of passenger to be accurate and efficient.

In the meantime, Chantarapanich (2021) admonished air carriers to adapt their aircraft

space for carrying more cargo either remove seats or place cargo on passenger seats. The scholar also excels on the airlines effort to stop bleeding as an instance; Thai Airways operating three hours flight without landing over Thailand, selling its renowned bakery both online and onsite. Given another example, Thai Air Asia proposed buffet ticket, educate its employees on e-commerce subject. Moreover, the assistant from government for airlines’ soft loan does help the airlines bankruptcy.

Whereas, the airport operators assist the air carriers by decreasing or waiving the landing and parking of the aircrafts.

It is worth noticing that the scholars recommended the air carriers resilience to the changes, including:

- Adapt their aircrafts to be able to carry more cargo, that is both in the belly and in passenger cabin;
- Educate their employees with 21st skills such as technology and digitalization, e-commerce;
- Prepare employees to be ready for the reopening of air travel i.e. the aircraft conversion training from big aircraft to medium and small aircraft;
- Occupational health safety and security both mentally and physically, and
- Employ technology to reduce human contact, but the service quality shall remain in high standard or else providing new customer experience by integrating human and technology

On the other hand, the Civil Aviation Authority of Thailand- CAAT (2021) summarized the overview situation of aviation industry in Thailand 2021 comparing with 2020. The number of passengers was dramatically decreasing to 64.1% in total, which composed of 90.2 percent on international travellers and 4% on domestic.

Whilst, the number of flights decreased almost at 50% for international, domestic ones and in total.

In contrast, the number of cargo flight increased 21.7% that was mostly from the international export and in reverse there was almost 40% decrease in domestic cargo as shown in Tab. 1 below.

Table 1. Overview of Air Transport in Thailand 2021, in million (Source: Adapted from CAAT, Annual Report of the Aviation Industry in Thailand, 2021).

Air Transport	Passenger		Flight		Cargo	
	No.*	Percent	No.	Percent	Tons	Percent
International	1.59	90.2 ↓	71,484	46.6 ↓	1,141,452	23.8 ↑
Domestic	19.33	4 ↓	186,464	49.1 ↓	20,476	36.4 ↓
Total	20.92	64.1 ↓	257,948	48.5 ↓	1,161,929	21.7 ↑

Further report of market share shown in figure 1, the number of domestic passengers increase due to the government project called Phuket Sandbox, Samui Plus, as well as the country fullest open policy. Since, the majority of people were vaccinated against COVID-19. And in Fig. 2, illustrating the market share of domestic airlines carries passengers and cargo in 2021.

It is interesting to note that Thai Air Asia has highest market share of passengers, follow by Thai Viet Jet, and Thai Lion Air. Considering that Thai Smile has highest domestic freight more than 30%, follow by Thai Viet Jet and Thai Lion Air.

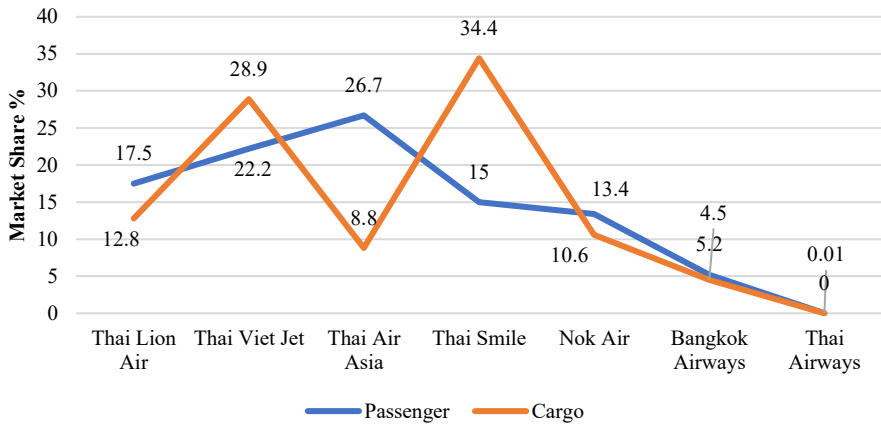


Fig. 1. Domestic Market Share of Passengers and Cargo by Airlines (Source: Adapted from CAAT, Annual Report of the Aviation Industry in Thailand 2021).

Though, the CAAT and related organizations such as airport operators, and government have issued the measurements to mitigate the outbreak effect of the outbreak to airlines. It is including the landing and parking charge were reduce 50% and waive for the airlines which cease its operations, expand the credit terms of the debt, negotiating with other countries to remain freedom of the air etc., Nevertheless, the CAAT (2021) expects three cases scenario of the recovering on Thailand’s air transport consisting of (1) best case in 2023, (2) moderate case in 2025, and (3) worst case 2026.

The best-case scenario is based on the pandemic getting better and the 3-4th vaccine was distributed broadly. The second scenario moderate refers to the vaccines were distributed thorough East and South Asian countries i.e. China, India, South Korea, and Japan. And there are more travelers from Europe, at the same time Thailand can control the spread of the outbreak. Lastly, the worst-case scenario means the pandemic could not be controlled or there is another new variant of COVID-19. There are some groups of travelers visiting sandbox. The expecting number of international passengers in accordance with the case scenario was predicted as shown in Fig. 2.

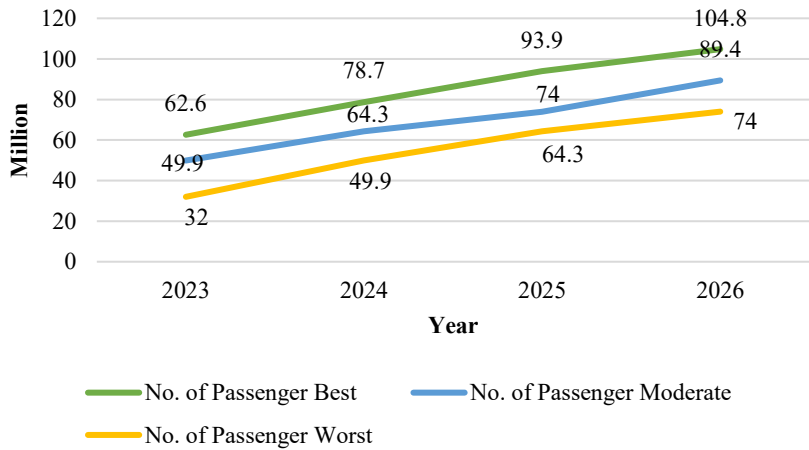


Fig. 2. The forecast number of international passengers on based case scenario (Source: Adapted from CAAT, Annual Report of the Aviation Industry in Thailand 2021).

2.2 During the pandemic and outlook through the international lens

The international perspective on air transport recovery (Gudmundsson et al., 2021; Dudukalov et al., 2020; Arkhipov & Ushakov, 2018) would take around late 2022 with optimistically best case would be in mid-2022, and worst case would take around 6 years that is in 2026. The Asia Pacific region is the fastest recover with 2.2 years. Whilst, North America and Europe would take 2.5 and 2.7 years respectively.

The recovery of air transport is differed in each country and region depending on government support, GDP, vaccinated population, and how well the countries handling the disease. Amaankwah-Amoah (2020) portrayed the responses of airlines around the world. The majority of air carriers have put the effort to reduce the deterioration of their accumulated knowledge, customer relationship, route networks and airports accessibility.

Then creating the framework with four quadrants including; “short-term operational and tactical responses to the unfold organizational crisis”, a set of actions imposed to negative effects, “long-term strategic and operational responses and preparing for the post-crisis context”, and long-term network development politically enhancing the competitive edges. It is suggested, the post-pandemic, to emphasize on learning organization, health awareness, and global integrated.

Samanci et al (2021) used Fuzzy Importance, Expected Performance, and Priority Analysis to define the post-pandemic improvement issues on service quality from customer needs and airline managers’ perspective. Three key dimensions were identified compose of social distance and hygiene during the flight, infection alert procedure, and information awareness and concern.

Added, the airlines and government should convey the message assuring passenger on safe flying experience, alike aircraft disinfectant procedures (Lamb et al., 2020; Henama, 2017).

In view of the fact that the primary action should be excel on adjusting and instructing the crisis communication strategies (Scheiwiller & Zizka, 2021).

3 Discussion and Conclusion

Apparently, the revitalizing of the air transport divided into three stages consisting of the short run which is during the pandemic attack. The air carriers have to stop its bleeding, cost cutting and finding revenue from other activities with its existing resources. What is more important the concern from the government and the airport operators’ policies to embrace the aviation business. However, it is also depended on how well the airlines cope with the crisis. Along the lines of sought for new sources of fortune by providing in-flight meal experiences to people, adapt their aircraft to accommodate more cargo (Chantarapanich, 2021).

The medium term is to prepare the employees by educating new skills like technology and up skills for customer services, employee engagement, and aircraft conversion training. Regarding the long run, it is a time for air carrier to rethinking its strategic position and transforming to learning organization (Amaankwah-Amoah, 2020).

This is consistent to Witayakornbundit & Ativetin (2022) revealed the practices of knowledge management in aviation industry would result to job satisfaction and job performance. It is, moreover, to promote the continuous development during the crisis that leads to organizational behavior and performance changes.

On top of that, airlines can benefit from the advancement of technology by adopting the robotic process automation (RPA), as Tailor & Khan (2022) suggested the RPA is high reliability and operational accuracy that could comfort and provide new customer experience of flying. The system is an automation reducing human activities especially in

repetitive work without assistance. The scholars cited that the RPA could deliver the aviation industry in various departments as “it can produce various packages of work, files can be retrieved from systems, data can be managed effectively, scheduling of crew can be done, travelers can get the update faster, lost revenue outflows can be identified.” As well as it facilitates the customers raise a trip request easily by requesting several origin and destinations through the aviation group booking facility. In this sense, the technology could help to mitigate or minimize the spread of the pandemic or other diseases may occur in the future.

This extent consistent to the study of Deb & Ahmed (2022) on the post COVID-19 in tourism and hospitality found people prefer to use contactless or online services, and travel to rural destinations, small cities for reducing health risk. As prior mentioned, the airlines shall implement health safety program and policies, then disclose to the public for assuring their safe journey. On the other hand, airlines should consider direct long-haul flight or operate to the uncapped market destinations.

To end up, the authors would like to accent the importance role of air transport to economic, global commerce, and tourism. The lack of efficient transport would be minimizing the opportunities on tourism development (Eboll et al., 2022).

Therefore, the government and all concern parties should bear in mind that the earlier revitalizing air transport means that more opportunities for the economic, trade, and tourism and related industry.

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