



## Hijacking Area Studies: Ethnographic Approaches to Southeast Asian Airlines\*

Jane M. Ferguson\*\*



### [ *Abstract* ]

Area Studies, by definition, conjure ideas of emplaced knowledge; in-depth interdisciplinary understanding of language, history, culture and politics of a nation or region. Where detractors might see this approach as overly empirical, therefore precluding theoretical sophistication, others argue that “places” are either artificially constructed, or that processes of globalisation have obliterated the cultural zone. But what if we turn an ethnographic eye to those very processes and technologies themselves? Can Area Studies take to the air, and if so, what are the attendant challenges and benefits? Based on insights from ethnography amongst airline customer service workers, ground and cabin crews in

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\*\* Senior Lecturer, Anthropology and Southeast Asian History, The Australian National University, [jane.ferguson@anu.edu.au](mailto:jane.ferguson@anu.edu.au)

Thailand and Myanmar, this research examines the airline cabin *as a field* for ethnographic study, and as an emplaced site for political and cultural processes. With participant observation-based knowledge of Southeast Asian cabin crews, this paper examines the 1990 hijack of Thai Airways TG 305 from an emplaced cultural perspective.

**Keywords:** area studies, aviation, hijack, Myanmar, Thai Airways

## I . Introduction

Taking seriously the title of historian John R. W. Smail's now-classic 1961 article, "On the Possibility of an Autonomous History of Modern Southeast Asia," students and scholars alike are challenged to debate whether an approach, a cultural notion, a paradigm is something which can truly be emplaced, or autonomous. Can there be a local phenomenon which is understood heuristically? With an Area Studies discipline like Southeast Asian studies carrying such a value-laden heritage of both colonialism and Cold War geopolitics, scholars continue to question what an autonomous history might even look like, or how it might be pursued today. Have technologies of transportation, communication, indeed, globalization itself, rendered this idea helplessly outdated?

Theoretical frisson regarding globalization and neo-liberal vectors aside, the notion of emplacement - "a place" - forms the backbone of Area Studies, and indeed, institutions were established along that very paradigm, though power dynamics inevitably frame how regions are conceptualized, what they include and what they marginalize or erase. Studies of transnationalism and globalization tend to posit that such notions of "societies and cultures" are mere artifice, and if not hopelessly outdated, certainly are no longer believed to be true today due to the massive scale of mobility and cultural interconnection facilitated by technologies of communication and transport. Amidst COVID and the grounding of aviation for many passengers, the social role of the Internet has become more pronounced. Even so, epidemiology statistics are calculated according

to regions and places.

On the other hand, as we have been reminded, globalization is hardly a new phenomenon (Mintz 1998). Geographers have challenged their own former paradigms with theories predicated on mobility. Taking this one step further, if technologies of communication and transportation are considered by some to signify the end of local, emplaced knowledge - the very nuance prized by scholars and practitioners of area studies - can we turn back on “global” transportation and challenge its hubristic paradigm with methodologies of the deeply locally-embedded area studies? And even more specifically, can we look at the airline cabin – an apparent juggernaut which obliterated the local - as an area, a place, to be studied using ethnographic field methods?

In this sense, this research will combine these problematics and explore ostensibly “global” transportation through using ethnographic methods. Following an overview discussion of ideas about area studies, mobility and social science of aviation work, this paper will examine the 1990 hijack of Thai Airways flight TG #305 as a specific ethnographic case study. The event is politically and culturally rich, and some of the issues it presents demand ethnographic scrutiny; as we will find, long-term participant observation that comes from what might be understood as “local” knowledge is essential to understanding the events which took place in their particular cultural and symbolic milieu. This includes familiarity with both the airline cabin as well as the local cultures of Thai Airways flight crews in particular, and airline cultures writ large.

## **II . Mapping Southeast Asian Studies**

With Southeast Asia as concept of region already in Japanese parlance by World War One (Hayami 2006: 66), in the United States, Southeast Asian studies as a scholarly discipline is rooted in the aftermath of World War Two. It came into full swing in universities outside the region at the height of the Cold War, and trends in support for the discipline have followed governmental directives as

well as broader social concerns about the region, not just in terms of the growth of programs, but even how they would grow (Chou and Houben 2006: 4-7; Mintz 1998: 129; Scott 1992:2). Debates within area studies among students and practitioners frequently revolve around the ways in which Southeast Asia is constructed, and reified; a dozen programs in the United States were established at the height of the Cold War, where such Area Studies knowledge was seen as part-and-parcel with expanding US (and NATO) strategic interests overseas, and often sold on the premise that such knowledge and understanding would promote global peace (Rafael 1994: 96). Political and regime changes, together with institutional structural changes repeatedly call the *raison d'être* of such programs into question; political pundits and university CEO-type figures alike will question the value of funding programs that teach so-called less commonly taught languages (again, this would be from the perspective of university administration in the United States, Europe, and Australia. That there are over a hundred million speakers of Javanese certainly makes it “taught”). Programs with few students are repeatedly forced to make their case; in this sense, practitioners of Southeast Asian Studies at universities tend to be more adept at defending their work; they lack the complacency and taken-for-granted-ness of political gravitas that other established and better-funded programs might have.

For area studies, regardless of discipline, it is strongly believed that fine-grained understanding of place, predicated on language fluency and interest in “general knowledge (the Burmese term *bahututha*)” outside of the theory and methods of one’s academic discipline make one an excellent area specialist. By staying within the theoretical and methodological confines of one’s own academic discipline, one fails to appreciate the ways in which other approaches enhance and even interrogate one’s own work, let alone see the “big picture”. The area studies foundation gives one the insight and methodologies to identify and study questions that are culturally specific (Mintz 1998: 131). They are defined as area specialists in terms of having “devoted their scholarly life to work on the region or nation” (Bates 1997: 166). Can one, therefore, be an area studies specialist on aviation, an industry predicated on global

mobility?

Just as geographic regions may very well be artifices (Mintz 1998: 130), the built, regulated and highly controlled airport and the aircraft cabin are obviously constructed as well. But, in spite of their ostensible status among some social-sciences as non-places (Augé 1995), these purpose-built locales are not bereft of organic culture (Ferguson 2014). Aside from studying those whose occupations and leisure make them temporary, but repeated denizens of these places (the “frequent flyer” as temporal native), there is an increasing amount of social science literature studying the occupational cultures of cabin crews, in terms of their performance of emotional labor (Hochschild 1983; Murphy 1998, 2002; Arratee 2015, 2016) and issues of social identity, especially nationality, gender, sexuality and race (Evans 2013; Tiemeyer 2011; Yano 2011; Ferguson 2013; Ferguson and Arratee 2019). There is ethnographic work on Thai flight attendants, taking seriously their understanding of their role as signifiers of Thainess (Ferguson 2013) as well as the ways in which Buddhist philosophy combines with corporate ethnos in forming their understanding of a flight attendant’s soul, or what they refer to as *winyann aer* (Arratee 2015).

Like the study of the cultural and psychological presence of US military bases overseas (Enloe 2014), there is a tendency to study the flight attendants as icons and stereotype, and their emotional work as individuals rather than the geopolitical implications of what they are part of; or to see these as separate topics entirely. At the same time, focusing on the crew themselves and the sociological conditions which constrain them should necessarily consider them as also embedded in broader hegemonic processes of neoliberal economies; while 40 per cent of global value is flown by plane, and the union movements have made important strides to provide airline crews with some of the most gender/sexuality-blind benefits in the industry, their living wages and benefits have been stripped away, especially for European, North American, and South Pacific flight attendants.

### III. Ethnography of People Who Fly

While scholarship of airline hijacks is dominated by international relations and policy analyses – setting aside, if we can, the popular books and spin-off Hollywood style exposés – what can we learn with an ethnographic eye to these kinds of situations? Taking into account workplace culture, role dynamics, relative power and subjective limitations, how might these change our understanding of the hijack as an event, and in turn, how we understand airline work? For the rest of this paper, I will think critically about flight attendants as agents of history, borrowing from Giddens’ notion of the “practical consciousness” not just for participating in historic events, but also in a savvy for talking about them and connecting them to the political (Giddens 1984).

First of all, cabin crews are hyper-aware of the ways in which they are expected to represent both the face of the company and the face of the nation. Thai Airways flight attendants, for example, have been described as “ambassadors of Thainess” (Ferguson 2013). While flight crew jobs are frequently presented in advertising and popular culture as glamorous icons, for the workers themselves, the act of maintaining that “face” means constantly confronting the general public’s impressions and stereotypes about the job. Wan, a 29-year veteran flight attendant, explains this dilemma succinctly,

When people ask me what I do, and I tell them I am a flight attendant, so many times, they start to complain about how the service on the airline was bad, or how their checked luggage got misconnected. It’s hard to have to apologise to people all the time, especially when off the job. If we give people good service thirty times, then just once when we mess up, they will only talk about the one time they got bad service.

In addition to the fact that bad experiences are indelible in ways that mediocre (or perhaps even good) experiences are not, the common experience of blaming the brand, the airline, for the bad experience, and projecting it onto an individual employee is reflective of a certain kind of tribalism, where the individual is expected to apologise regardless of her lack of any role contributing

to the situation. A Thai Airways flight attendant, Nu echoes this experience,

As soon as people – especially Thais - know you work for Thai Airways they immediately say something bad. They tell me the in-flight meal is not delicious. So what? What can I do? Especially when it is not during a flight, I don't want to apologise because someone didn't like the food. I just let them talk and hope to change the topic. ... In another example, I was in uniform, driving to the airport to work a flight and I got pulled over by the police for speeding. The policeman told me the fine was 200 Baht, so I tried to bargain him down to 100 Baht. Then he looked at my uniform and charged me 400 Baht, I was so mad, but what could I do? A lot of people resent you because being a Flight Attendant with Thai Airways is a good job with good pay. Wearing the uniform makes others <sup>มัน</sup> <sup>ใส่</sup> <sup>man</sup> <sup>sai</sup> – (aggravation/annoyance/ “bugs” them).

The *man sai* feeling undoubtedly connects to flight attendants' attendant stereotypes and iconography, as paragons of glamor and cosmopolitanism, and advertising icons. In job performance, sociologist Arlie Hochschild's now-classic study *The Managed Heart* aptly describes the process of emotional labor or “the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display” which creates an emotional response in the customer (Hochschild 1983: 7). In her ethnography of Thai flight attendants, Arratee Ayuttacorn challenges this notion of “emotional labor” arguing that it is predicated on Western conceptions of self and emotion. Instead, she argues, Thai flight attendants have a *winyann aer* “Flight Attendant soul” which is based on Buddhist notions of soul or spirit, connected to affective performance, suffering, and empathy, but also engaged as corporate ethos by the airline. Even so, both the managed heart and the *winyann aer* are intrinsically and almost exclusively empathic to their study groups. What about other studies of flight attendants?

Sociologist Drew Whitelegg noticed in his snowball technique for interviewing flight attendants, he felt that his interlocutors were often assessing him, deciding if he was genuine and trustworthy – would he get it wrong and misrepresent flight attendants?

Anthropologist Christine Yano in her book about retired Nisei Pan Am flight attendants, has encountered this issue, noting that the stories she received were overwhelmingly positive; no-one had bad things to say about Pan Am as a company. This could very well be a function of nostalgia. For cabin crews in the present, in my experience socializing with flight crews at happy hour, all sorts of negative opinions about management came to the fore. Were airlines simply wonderful employers back in the day, or nostalgia notwithstanding, is there an aspect of the story which is missing?

After having spent over a decade engaging in participant observation with flight crews on layover, going on hikes, playing tennis, going for meals and happy hour, I developed a very different impression about crews' relationships with each other and with the company. When "unloading" at happy hour together, flight crews complained about company management, gossiped about other crew members who were in trouble with the company, or shared stories about the latest spectacular incidents, such as flight diversions, passenger deaths in-flight or as they said, "killing them with kindness" and how some junior crew were engaging in unethical practices to circumvent the seniority-based bidding systems. Whereas layover happy hours were a space to unwind and enjoy the companionship of friends and fellow crew members, gossip frequently found its way to topics most unflattering to the company and colleagues not present at the table. Sharon, a Purser with a North American airline, once said, "We tell stories like cops. We see the worst of humanity, but unlike cops, we're always supposed to smile when someone gets irate. It's after work that we want to tell these stories, to get them off our chest, but it's often hard on our spouses."

A Thai flight attendant, Nam, said her husband once asked her to stop talking about work so much. She noticed that when she had other Thai Airways friends at her home for a meal, her husband became less interested in sitting with them. He would socialize a bit, say hello and be polite, but did not want to endure work gossip. Other flight attendants are often quick to tell each other if they are in the company of a non-flight attendant: the question is usually, "Do you fly?" but talking about someone in the third person is to



describe her as “she’s a regular person,” and often with terrific adroit, code switch and discuss topics of general interest. Similarly, in discussing her scholarship about flight attendants, Arratee later commented, “I was a flight attendant for twenty years, these people are my friends. I know how hard they work and how they suffer; people complain about the airline *all the time*. How could I write about poor service, or say bad things about these people, when the public is so eager to say bad things anyway?”

Because of the occupational requirement that crews be adept at performing emotional labor, this can transfer to the situation of ethnography and dealing with an ethnographic interview. A major taboo when talking with customers is to complain about the airline, as well as to bad-mouth other employees. To disparage the employer leads to dismissal; this has long been company policy at Thai Airways. I would like to underscore this point, employees caught complaining about Thai Airways can lose their jobs.

#### **IV. The Hijack as an Extreme Event**

In dealing with a hijack, I am looking at an extreme situation, an exceptional test to emotional labor – and later how that work is represented. Wan once described a situation where she saved a passenger’s life: the woman suffered a heart attack, and she attached the defibrillator electrodes to her chest and side, and successfully revived her. I asked her how she felt in the moment – wasn’t she nervous? And she responded, “my training kicked in,” to express that she did not panic or hesitate. Crew members describe this kind of detachment from emotional hang-ups as going into “flight attendant mode.” Can people consistently perform this well under extenuating circumstances? There is a surfeit of historical examples of cabin crew heroics.

The history of the Pan Am flight 73, is a prime example. In 1986, the plane was taken over on the ground in Karachi by a heavily-armed Libya-backed Palestinian terrorist group, Abu Nidal. Pan Am flight attendant Neerja Bhanot hid the passports of some passengers targeted by the hijackers, and after 17 hours of

unsuccessful negotiation, the gunmen lost patience and started a bloodbath – spraying the cabin with bullets while passengers flocked to exit. Bhanot frantically evacuated people, and according to legend, “died while shielding three children from a hail of bullets.” Posthumously, she received the Ashok Chakra Award, and her story was made into a movie.

In another case, in 1992, TWA flight 843 erupted into flames at take-off at Kennedy Airport in New York City due to a fire in the cargo bay or tail engine. All 291 passengers and crew evacuated safely within two minutes, attributed not just to the 9 working flight attendants, but also because there were five off-duty cabin crew flying standby; they helped evacuate the plane (McFadden 1992). But by doing the job under such extreme circumstances, does everyone respond like these heroes did, and switch into “flight attendant mode?”

In 2000, when SQ006 pilots mistakenly attempted take off from a Taipei runway under construction, the crash into equipment and resulting fire killed 81 of the 179 people on board. A variety of reports depict flight attendants as heroes. A *Weekend Australian* news report suggests that some flight crews did not offer adequate assistance – a few fled the plane before it was evacuated, others were so paralyzed by fear that they could not even instruct others to open the door (AFP 2000).

For this paper, I will turn my ethnographic attention to a specific incident: the 10 November 1990 hijack of Thai Airways flight #305. Originally the first segment of a “quick-turn” trip from Bangkok to Yangon, the A300 aircraft was hijacked by two Burmese student activists of the “88” generation, Soe Myint and Htin Kyaw. Rather than continue to Yangon, the flight was diverted to Calcutta. The goals of the hijack were political: the Burmese activists had become impatient with the pace of political change in their country. Some of their comrades had hijacked a Union of Burma Airways domestic flight the previous year, and diverted it to Bangkok’s U-Tapao field the year before. Rather than being extradited to Burma, the hijackers were tried in Thai courts and subsequently given light prison sentences in Bangkok for the crime.

Soe Myint and Htin Kyaw had hoped that hijacking an international flight would attract more attention to their cause. And it certainly did; following the diversion to Calcutta, and a ten-hour hostage situation, both hijackers were given asylum in India, and the press conference that was one of their demands. All ended peacefully; nobody was hurt and none of the passengers sued the airline. A few of the tourist passengers decided not to go to Myanmar for their holidays as planned.

Turning to ethnographic methods, now this paper will consider how an emplaced understanding of flight attendant cultures will challenge how an historical event has been written about. How can an ethnographic lens, with empathy towards cabin crew as complex cultural and political actors affect how we understand historical events in the past?

My partner in research, Arratee Ayuttacorn was essential in helping to arrange this interview. Herself a former Thai Airways flight attendant, as well as an ethnographer in her own right, it was through her connections that we were able to get in touch with Pornsuang Nalampoorn “P’Namtiao” who was duty crew on TG 305, and the primary contact with Htin Kyaw throughout the hijack. In the initial conversation with her I had over the phone from Canberra, she commented, “I know it happened a long time ago, but before I didn’t want to talk about it. It was an incident with implications for international relations. But now that I’m retired, I have less to worry about.” She was friendly, welcoming and charming.

When I was in Chiang Mai two years ago, Arratee and I drove an hour and a half to Pornsuang’s home; we visited over two weekends. At the first visit, following some niceties, snacks and chatting, we sat down to discuss the events of the flight. To aid her retelling of the story, Pornsuang drew a careful diagram of the aircraft, a seat map, with the locations of the doors, also showing where she was standing when the hijackers stood up, and where one moved toward the cockpit while the other showed the bomb to the passengers. She describes the plane and the personnel according to the company designations, and as she tells the story to Arratee,

they engage in a quick back-and-forth using Thai Airways industry speak, discussing who was the “IM” the “SO” and discussing according to zone, door number, and section. The shared argot was initially reassuring that we were getting a very precise rendition of what happened that day; the story would not be watered down for an outsider, even for a non-Thai Airways flight attendant.

Pornsuang was careful to describe where each person was stationed, and during the hijack how the male stewards were told to sit in the back. Another female flight attendant was too frightened to engage. In Pornsuang’s active role running back and forth, one of the other flight attendants teasingly called her “Florence Nightingale.” Within her arc of the story, she mentioned various incidents coming up, such as a passenger with an asthma attack, a passenger sharing his bottle of water, or details about how the cockpit crews were civilian hires, not recruits from the Thai Airforce, so they spoke better English. All sorts of details to describe how the ordeal was experienced by herself and the others.

She narrated various stressful incidents that came up, including once they were on the ground in Calcutta, having to negotiate to free some of the hostages. Htin Kyaw told her they would set 10 of the hostages free, and that she had to choose which ten. She said she was weeping, not knowing how to choose.

As time wore on, babies cried, passengers wanted to use the toilet. Pornsuang got permission from Htin Kyaw to let passengers use the lavatory, but they would only be allowed to get up from their seats one at a time. After a Thai man had been gone from his seat for a long time, Htin Kyaw told her to go check on him and report back about what was going on. As Pornsuang told the story,

One Thai male passenger went to use the toilet, but after that, rather than walk back to his seat, he sneaked and crawled to door 4R. He grabbed the door handle. I saw him doing that, and I asked him what he was doing. He said he was not ready to die, that he has a wife and children back in Thailand. I responded, “Do you think you’re the only one with a family? All of us have families too – and if you escape and something happens, they might set off the bomb and we all die.” He gradually was convinced and returned to his

seat.

After the hijacking was resolved, the crew were given hotel rooms at the local layover hotel in Calcutta; fortunately, the city is regularly served by Thai Airways anyway, so there was a KK, or spoke station manager there and an existing corporate agreement with a hotel.

Within the crew, it was only the captain and the IM, or in-flight manager who were called upon to testify at the police station in Calcutta – corporate structure dictated their responsibility for reporting what happened on flight. One of the other stewards who had hid in the back was quick to give interviews with the press after the event. Even Arratee knew him from having worked with him, and it was fun to watch Arratee and Pornsuang agree that he is *khi mo* <sup>ჭიშკა</sup> meaning overly talkative, even boastful. Incidentally, I attempted to contact him over social media, and he didn't respond.

After their return to Bangkok, Thai Airways arranged for the whole crew of TG 305 to meet with an occupational psychologist. At the meeting at the crew center in Rangsit, the group sat in a circle and talked about the event. According to Pornsuang, some who didn't do so much during the hijack wanted to talk a lot about what happened. After the group meeting, there were individual meetings with the psychologist, and Pornsuang said she talked more; she said it was easier to talk without the rest of the crew in the room. The occupational psychologist also needed to find out if the crew was fit to return to work. All of them would later be put on lines of flight that did not include Yangon; even though the flight is a quick turn, in the event of a return flight cancellation, they would have to stay in the country, and there was concern that the Thai crew would be treated by the Myanmar government as enemies of the state.

Later, Thai Airways hosted a ceremony to give awards to the cabin and cockpit crew for keeping the passengers safe through the hijack. The airline praised them for their crew unity in handling the situation. The airline wanted to demonstrate that the success came from the crew as a team. Pornsuang also received a phone call from the QV – airline marketing director – telling her to think of the airline when talking about the event. Although commemorative

events and articles about the incident emphasize crew unity and teamwork, mentioning the captain and the purser and others, for veteran Thai Airways flight attendants, Pornsuang Nalampon “P’Namtao” is known in company folklore as the person who managed the hijack.

The day after the first interview, I received a long message from Pornsuang on my phone:

.... Today I want to add a bit that I forgot to tell you yesterday. When the Thai passenger asked to use the toilet and then secretly crawled to try to open the door, I had to work to calm him down for a long time. But, I believe the paragraph that I told him that day, what made him give up his plan and come back and cooperate peacefully was this:

We all were born and we all must die, everyone. But if we have to die for the nation, it is a way of dying which has value and pride, right? There are soldiers, they are ready to fight, they are ready to die for the nation, right? As for me, even though I am a woman, I have a young child, I have an elderly mother that I need to look after, but I am ready to sacrifice my life for the people. Who do you think you are, huh? If you think you’re not ready to die for the people, then I am confident that even if we die for the nation bravely, as a sacrifice, our children, our family, will walk bravely on Thai soil with honour and recognition from others, for sure. We need to be patient and united to sacrifice for the Thai nation together.

The quotation might not be so articulate, or precisely what I said because it’s been a long time. But this is the idea. He listened to this and turned his face and said, “I believe you, what do you want me to do?” I told him to return to his seat and grab Sawasdee in-flight magazine and read it, and don’t look at the faces of the hijackers.

Talking with Arratee, who also had her notes from the interview, and in showing her Pornsuang’s updated version of what she “really” said to the man at door 4R, she was initially a bit confused by the update. I pointed out that it sounded way too patriotic, almost over the top. While I was incredulous, after talking about it for several minutes, Arratee added that she thought it was plausible.

When dealing with a difficult Thai passenger, she explained, you try saying all kinds of things to get them to co-operate. If a normal coax doesn't work, with a fellow Thai, you bring in the reinforcements of Buddha, King, and Country. The possibility that it could have happened in the moment is certainly there, that Pornsuang did say this to the man, but what is meaningful too, is that she wanted to make sure that I knew, so much that she would type and send such a detailed message to me over social media.

Pornsuang has not seen or heard from Htin Kyaw or Soe Myint since the hijack, but how she describes them is nothing but in the kindest of words. As she said, "I talked to Htin Kyaw for a long time. He was the same age as my younger brother. I wanted him to trust me, and he told me about the situation for him and his family in Burma, the refugee camps ... they also saw corruption in Thailand, they couldn't work, they were angry with the police". The more she talked about it, the more I could see that she identified with the political movement. During the 14 October 1973 uprisings in Bangkok against the military dictatorship of Thanom Kittikachorn, Pornsuang was then a student in Bang Saen Teachers college. She joined the protesters at Rachdamnoen Avenue, and during the army crackdown, ran all the way to Saphan Khwai – about ten kilometres - to escape.

"As for my opinion about Burma," she told me, "I still empathize with the students. I always wonder how Htin Kyaw is doing. After thinking about it, maybe it is Stockholm Syndrome. But the point is that I agreed with their ideals. In a hijack, maybe if it was a different political objective ... if it was for violent Muslim *jihad*, I would be angry at them". On a more personal note, in the decades since then, Pornsuang goes to a Mon Buddhist temple on the anniversary of the hijacking, and makes merit on behalf of Soe Myint and Htin Kyaw. "When I am reborn in a future life," she told me, "I would like to be a flight attendant again".

## V. Conclusion

In symbolically heavy, historically significant events, there are also

many incentives to present the “best” history possible, the motivations will be seen with good intentions, and the idea that one’s perspective will be immortalized, even if it is in the seldom – if ever - riffled pages of an obscure academic journal. Ideology plays a major role in what aspects of an event are remembered, what kinds of events become emotionally embedded in one’s personal historical narrative. There is the possibility they want to pre-empt positive feedback about their work and their employer. Knowing these aspects about the structure of historical production of the event offers key insight to critique how the event might be presented to us in the history books.

On top of all of this, there is the problem of a Cartesian notion of self, an idea that there would be a single, discrete personal experience – the “inside scoop” of what “really” happened. But in retrospect, the corporate ethos, the power dynamics of the job and the cultural configurations of Thai flight attendant work also factor into how flight attendant history can be told. Their technical role of cabin crews, the emotional labor, is directed towards nurturing and taking care – not so much about political agency or affiliation involved. To be a high-profile company representative is hard work, but at the same time, provides a different kind of fractal for studying history. Histories of flight attendants in the West have observed that they have manipulated their high profiles to fight for labor rights, particularly in the middle-to-later decades of the twentieth century (Barry 2007). In the hijack situation, we can also consider the ways in which Pornsuang’s past as a student activist against the Thanom dictatorship might not be included in some accounts of the hijack. It wasn’t mentioned in any of the news articles I had read about the event.

The ways in which image is maintained connects – albeit imperfectly – to the kinds of corporate ethos and job cultures that are created and constantly reinvented by the people themselves. Through examining this narrative, we find an intense pressure to present a certain kind of image of crew unity in the face of adversity. Recall also, that Thai Airways will fire employees that speak badly of the company. That corporate ethos is further tried by frequent interactions with passengers, and then off the job, the



general public.

Detractors of area studies have been noted to dismiss the discipline as tending to “foster ideological and theoretical particularism” (Chou and Houben 2006: 1). But, in studying the hijack of TG 305, we can see how nuanced understandings of Myanmar’s and Thailand’s political histories are necessary to appreciate the context and the circumstances for the hijack; it is an event in international relations. With an ethnographic eye to closer examination, we discover the cabin crew, as actors with agency, have been encultured in an occupational corporate ethos. Flight attendants gain their abilities to react to adversity via the emotional conditioning and affective economies which are part of the job itself (Arratee 2015). The emotional conditioning and affective economies can be studied ethnographically, though the space of the aircraft cabin (while not “grounded” in a region) is its emplacement. Importantly for the study of this hijack as an historical event, we can see how corporate structure not only dictated how the event would be archived in the police records (only the pilot and the in-flight manager filed the police reports at the station in Calcutta) but the airline’s marketing department sought to narrate a history that would not just present their cabin crews in a positive light, but also one which would be consistent with their corporate ethos which emphasizes crew unity.

Pornsuang’s remarkable stories and how they operated within the aircraft cabin are further connected to flight attendant culture, and finally the cockpit crew’s response as following ICAO protocol; although linguistic and cultural understanding of Thai culture and history are essential, so are the broader protocols and understandings of flight attendant culture, and Thai Airways cabin crew cultural dynamics within those. In addition to learning about the cultural aspects of the job, the “boundedness” of the behavior possibilities of flight crews, it is key to see beyond their technical role and respect the ways in which they are both creative as well as political. In this sense, area studies knowledge can tap into the nuance of a situation, but it is also imperative that such background training appreciates that more and more of these investigations will take place in strange new “emplacements.”

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