



# Saki Chen

## The Dream Trip of a Lifetime

BY JANICE PELLETTI, Southeast Section

**S**aki Chen, New Jersey Chapter member, captured her life-long dream when she became the first Chinese woman to launch a flight to circumnavigate the globe in a single-engine piston airplane. “I cannot hold back my ecstasy,” she exclaimed. “I fulfilled my longest dream of flying into China airspace as pilot in command of a small piston engine airplane.”

Saki’s journey began in 2012 when she came to New York City for her second law degree. “I realized the USA is the best place to learn to fly. The cost of flight training is three times as much in China. Not to mention the nuances of the approval and permit procedures required for every single take-off and landing,” she explains.

With the help of a 99s scholarship and

support from fellow New Jersey Chapter members, she earned her private pilot certificate in 2013. As a busy practicing attorney, Saki had to squeeze what little spare time she had into working on the dream. In addition to instrument training, she made trips to Alaska, the Grand Canyon, Iceland, Kenya, Canada and the Bahamas to work on her international flight skills.

Saki approached over 20 flight schools with her request to rent an airplane. All were denied. Finally, with the help of 99 student pilot Amanda Lincoln, she connected with Larry Rohl and his son Richard, who run a flight school and charter company in Cleveland, Ohio. Touched by Saki’s passion, they agreed to lease their A36 Bonanza to her. Larry, a CFI, Richard,

with maintenance expertise, and Amanda, also a 99, all agreed to accompany Saki and help share in the expenses.

Obtaining an aircraft was only one of many logistical nightmares she had to overcome in search of her dream. “As a Chinese citizen, I needed to get visas in advance for almost all the countries where we needed to land. I started work on this almost a year in advance. To complicate things, some countries, like India, Russia and Japan, only allow application within three months of entry and require a precise time window,” said Saki.

“Only very rare airports in the mid-east and Asia can supply 100LL fuel. It took me more than a year to flight plan the right airports within range of the aircraft. In most

Asian countries we pumped fuel from a barrel by hand into the plane. Because the fuel is so rare, it's three to eight times more expensive than in the U.S."

Gender discrimination in some countries alerted them to the fact that trying to land in some of these countries could raise serious issues. For example, in Saudi, unmarried females are not allowed to travel with male adults who are not their family or husbands.

Another huge planning issue was the restriction to overflight and landings in China, Russia and Vietnam. "We got a permit to enter and land in Russia from their CAA. However, the airport decided to require us to carry in our own 100LL." This was an impossible weight and balance problem, and they had to abort landing in Russian airspace.

All her efforts in dealing with restrictions were rewarded with a landing in China. This was the most difficult and expensive stop. The airspace is strictly

controlled by the military and is not open to general aviation. Piloting a U.S. registered aircraft for general aviation purposes is even more difficult.

On September 2, 2016, Saki's Bonanza became the very first single-engine piston airplane, and one piloted by a woman, to land in China for the purpose of circumnavigation.

"I worked for months getting the Chinese permit. There are no regulations or rules to follow because general aviation activities in China are so rare. U.S. registered aircraft are not allowed to land at Chinese airports unless they are a designated international airport. I also had to arrange for 100LL, as Jet-A is usually the only fuel at these airports."

"On the day I entered China airspace, all the effort was paid back. It was my first time to speak with air traffic control in Chinese, and as pilot in command."

"Our entire trip was highlighted by the fact that due to our tight budget, we asked

for help with lodging around the world. We were lucky enough to receive lots of warm hospitality from family and friends in different countries."

Saki's trip lasted 58 days, starting and ending in Cleveland, Ohio. Her route included overflights and landings in Canada, Greenland, Iceland, UK, France, Spain, Monaco, Italy, Greece, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, UAE, Oman, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Thailand, Myanmar, Vietnam, China, Japan and back to the U.S. through Anchorage.

It covered 21,119 nm. They arrived back at Cuyahoga County Airport in Cleveland on September 27, 2016.

"My next goal is to promote general aviation culture in China and encourage more females to look into and study flying. I have been contacted by some news organizations in China asking me to write a book about my journey. It would include my flight training in the USA and, of course, the support I got from The 99s."



*From left, Amanda Lincoln, Laurence Rohl, Saki Chen, and Richard Rohl.*