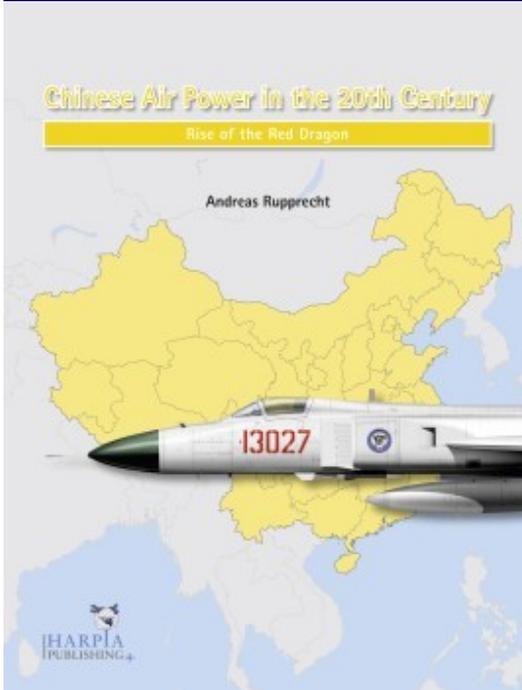




“Chinese Airpower in the 20th Century—The Rise of the Red Dragon” by Andreas Rupprecht

Reviewed by Mark Attrill



I will freely admit to experiencing some trepidation after Brian had approached me to review this latest book in the Harpia Publishing series of books on modern military aviation. In spite of living and working in relatively close proximity to the People's Republic of China for a number of years and maintaining a lifelong passion for military aviation, I had never shown much interest in the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) or any of the aircraft it had operated over the years. I suspect much of this was due to the lack of photographic reference material and the fact that much of what was available showed serried ranks of bland looking machines in natural metal with rather basic national markings giving no hint of individual unit or special markings. This latest title by Chinese military aviation expert (and Asian Air Arms member!) Andreas Rupprecht goes some way to changing this misconception and showing the PLAAF in a completely different light.

This masterful 250+ page tome starts with the origins of military aviation in China during the early years of the 20th Century, with the first two chapters chronicling the multitude of Air Forces and Air Arms that existed to support the various factions that thrived in China during the chaotic period between the early 1920s and 1949.

Chapter 2 provides a fascinating insight into many of these seemingly private Air Arms, each illustrated with the individual insignia, many of which have obviously provided the foundation

for the modern day national insignia that adorn aircraft operated by the air arms of the Republic of China (Taiwan).

Chapter 3 deals with the equally intriguing period between 1949 and 1953 when the modern day PLAAF was founded and faced the challenges of trying to operate western types, such as the P-51 Mustang and B-25 Mitchell, that it had 'inherited' from the Nationalist Forces while accepting new equipment from the Soviet Union, including Lavochkin La-9 fighters, Tupolev Tu-2 Bombers and Yakovlev Yak-11/18 trainers. This chapter also, inevitably, deals with the involvement of the PLAAF in China's first intervention in Tibet (1950) and the Korean War, and the entry into the jet age with the arrival of Mikoyan MiG-9 fighters.

Chapter 4 seeks to cover the tumultuous 12-year period between 1954 and 1966, as the People's Republic of China emerged from the Korean War, consolidating its position as a jet-equipped combat air arm before entering into a series of military ventures against Taiwan, India and Tibet, with mixed results. The significant deterioration in the relationship between China and the Soviet Union in 1960 also forced the former to accelerate the development of its own aviation industry and this is also detailed in this chapter.

The penultimate Chapter 5 covers the ten-year period from 1966 to 1976, and includes a deep analysis of the fallout, both politically and organisationally, for the PLAAF and the Chinese aviation industry following the extended Cultural Revolution that enveloped every aspect of Chinese life for most of the decade.

The final chapter deals with the extended period of modernisation, between late-1976 to the present day, starting with the regeneration of the Air Arm following the Cultural Revolution and the development of various industrial relationships to modernise the aviation industry, including ties with France, Israel, the United Kingdom and even the United States. The fall of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s also saw the rejuvenation of industrial ties with Russia and the newly independent Ukraine, with large scale collaboration between Chinese and former Soviet aerospace giants, all of which has had a clear influence on some of the aviation designs now serving with the contemporary PLAAF. Like the ones that precede it, this chapter is rich in delivering interesting insights into little-known topics such as the Sino-Vietnamese border conflict of 1979; the active development of an effective Airborne Force capability; and the major reform of the training organisation to meet the challenges of a truly modern, cutting-edge Air Arm.





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Each of the four main chapters that deal with the PLAAF since foundation includes comprehensive tables and maps outlining the units, bases and equipment of the period in question, together with detailed descriptions of the major aircraft types that were operated during the same period. To say that the text is lavishly illustrated with photographs would be an understatement. Apart from the early pre-PLAAF years, where photographic images are understandably rare, those chapters that deal with the embryonic PLAAF from 1949 onwards provide a wealth of photographic references to illustrate the main equipment of the PLAAF and belie the previously held notion that the vast majority of PLAAF types sported rather bland camouflage schemes or markings. The early chapters provide some real gems: the clarity of the image of the Ilyushin Il-10 (albeit in People's Volunteer Army markings during the Korean War) on page 47 is superb, while the Mikoyan MiG-15s sporting political slogans (on page 50), and several in an overall black colour scheme (page 52) are true rarities. My only reservation would be the small size of some of these wonderful images although I appreciate this could have much to do with the quality of the original photographs. However, as the reader works their way through the book so the quality of the photographic images increases and intensifies. Finally, the fact that many of the images have not been previously published lends further value to the volume.

If this was not enough, the three appendices provide even more information, covering the individual histories of the seven Military Region Air Forces, all fifty PLAAF Air Divisions and the highly complex PLAAF serial number system. If anything, the Appendix on the Air Divisions is even more lavishly illustrated than the rest of the book, with some extremely high quality photographic images of both contemporary and historical types all sporting the wide variety of colour schemes, national insignia and (in some cases) unit markings that have come to adorn PLAAF types over recent years.

Have no doubt, this is an extremely impressive book that has captured the birth, development and history of this powerful Air Force in words and pictures. As previously stated, a large proportion of the imagery has been sourced from personal collections and archives and have, therefore, not been seen or published before. My only real, and very minor, criticism of the book is the widespread use of the term 'rare image' in too many of the photographic captions; I suspect most readers will already appreciate that the majority of early images in particular are rare and unusual, so I am not sure this fact needs to be oft repeated throughout the book.

For the modeller, this book offers a wealth of new information on the colour schemes and markings sported by the PLAAF and its immediate forebears over its 70-year history and provides some great inspiration for unusual and attractive subjects. There are some superb, truly evocative, images spread throughout the book; the line-up of Chengdu JJ-5 trainers (page 66), Xian H-6A heavy bomber (page 109) and Shenyang JZ-6 tactical reconnaissance aircraft (page 118) instantly spring to mind and there are many, many others. It is therefore good to see that some of the aftermarket decal manufacturers, including BestFong and Frontpenny Decals—of Taiwan and the PRC respectively—have already started to tap into this rich vein of subjects to complement the high quality models now available on the market.

Mark Attrill



Yesterday's PLAAF

Some other photos from the past

Clockwise, from bottom left:
MiG-9; Lavochkin La-9; Tupolev Tu-4;
North American P-51; Tupolev Tu-2.

Now
341

members
from

44

countries!

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