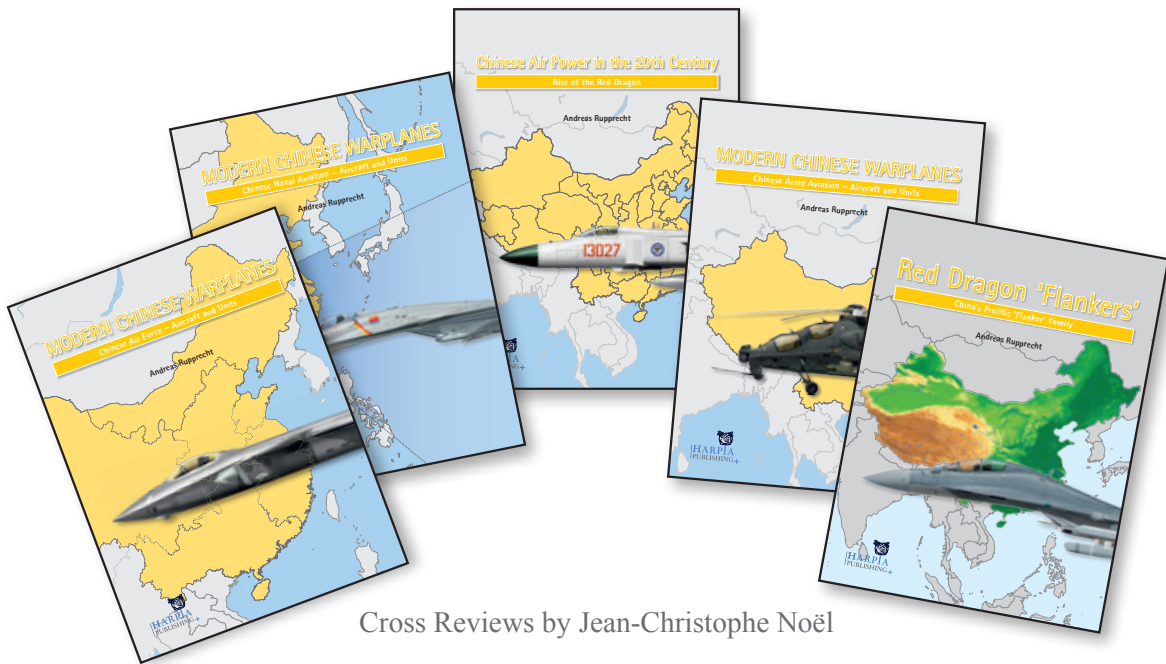


Chinese Air Power in the 20th Century, Modern Chinese Warplanes (Air Force / Naval Aviation / Army Aviation), Red Dragon 'Flankers'

Andreas Rupprecht



Cross Reviews by Jean-Christophe Noël

Andreas Rupprecht is an aviation journalist specialising in Chinese affairs. Passionate about Chinese culture, history, and aeronautics, he began writing on this latter topic in 2007. A recognised expert, he has published articles in *Air Forces Monthly*, *Air International*, *Combat Aircraft*, *Flug Revue*, Jamestown Foundation's *China Brief* and *Jane's*.

Nonetheless, it was his collaboration with Austrian publisher Harpia that caught our attention. This publisher has most notably published well informed and illustrated studies of modern aircraft or specific Air Forces. Famous authors such as Piotr Bukowski contribute to this fine and renowned collaboration.

We have thus selected five books written by Andreas Rupprecht for Harpia. First of all, we have chosen *Chinese Air Power in the 20th Century: Rise of the Red Dragon*. This 250 pages book traces the history of the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF), from 1911 to 2019 – the year the book was published –, in six chapters. In its appendices, this historical panel gives way to a description of the seven military air regions (replaced by so-called 'Theatre Commands'), the fifty air divisions and the Chinese aircraft registration system. Rupprecht's books will enable readers to deepen their knowledge of the events and conflicts already recounted by C. Bailleul and C. Garafola in this issue of *Vortex*. Above all, they will allow them to learn more about the erratic period spanning between 1911 and 1949 and gauge how changes within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) or fluctuations in Soviet and Russian aid have had a tangible influence on the PLAAF's fate. These analyses provide fascinating accounts on how Chinese pilots sought to improve their operational level from the 1980s until 2010 (137-142).

A. Rupprecht's approach is also capability-based, with a brief presentation in each chapter of the PLAAF's aircraft at a given period. From the unique *P-47D Thunderbolt* to the well-renowned *J-20 Mighty Dragon*, all of them are mentioned.

The organisational evolution of the PLAAF is also considered, providing a good appreciation of the latent quest for more modern structures. The historical developments are very pleasant to read, embellished with many maps or photographs of the described aircrafts. The book contains useful references for the reader seeking a better understanding of how the PLAAF works. It is recommended for those who wish to better appreciate the PLAAF's path.

Three other books will undoubtedly be of interest to our readers. They make up a trilogy that describes the Chinese air forces' equipment in greater detail. The most extensive one (256 p.) is dedicated to the PLAAF itself (*Modern Chinese Warplane: Chinese Air Force – Aircraft and Units*). A shorter one (80 p.) focuses on naval aircraft (*Modern Chinese Warplane: Chinese Naval Aviation – Aircraft and Units*), while the last one (*Modern Chinese Warplane: Chinese Army Aviation – Aircraft and Units*) concentrates on army aircraft in a similar format (96 p.).

Every time, the structure of these three books, published between 2018 and 2019, follows the same pattern. Each of them starts with a brief history of the air force that serves as a prelude to a description of the aircraft identification system. It goes without saying, aircraft are discussed in a third dedicated chapter. In the two following chapters, readers will find very useful information on the weapons carried by these aircraft and a description of pilot training. The sixth chapter provides an order of battle by Theatre Commands. The final chapter deals with the special corps of each of these air forces (Airborne, Marine Corps or Paramilitary corps).

The first two works are an update of a book published in 2012. As the author points out, the volume of information available has not really increased under Xi. But A. Rupprecht has done a real effort of compilation. He does not just line up known technical performances or approximate equipment commissioning dates. The author offers readers actual comments on aircraft performance. He also assesses training processes, which have become shorter while becoming progressively sharper. The goal here is for the pilots to become more autonomous in the long run, just like their Western counterparts. A. Rupprecht believes that naval aviation training must be revised if China intends to reach American standards. Eventually, he acknowledges his lack of information on how to assess the training quality of pilots in the land forces. Yet, the author puts forward all the available elements in this book once again.

These works are recommended for anyone wishing to better envision the PLAAF's capacities.

Published in 2022, the last book is the most recent one. As its name recalls, *Red Dragon 'Flankers': China's Prolific 'Flanker' Family*, is about the Chinese *Flanker* and its "successors" in the PLAAF. This work aims to present the genesis of each variant, describe their capabilities and observe how they are used in the PLAAF and the People's Liberation Army Naval Air Force. As the author underlines, these aircraft are increasingly employed in an "American way" rather than a "Russian way".

The first chapter is devoted to the single-seat versions, from the *Su-27SK* to *J-11D*. Differences between given models are described in detail. This is for example the case with the *J-11A* – a licenced version of the *Su-27SK* built in China – and the *J-11B*, a modified version locally improved by the Chinese industry.

The second chapter focuses on two-seaters and covers several variants, from the *Su-30MKK* to the *J-16D*. The *J-16* entered service in May 2015, with very different avionics than its Russian counterpart. Alongside the *J-20*, this aircraft is said to be the most modern model of the Chinese fleet.

The third chapter concentrates on naval aircraft, namely the *J-15* and its subsequent models. If the latter is reportedly a failure, the author seems to have a less stated opinion. He notably remarks that the *J-15* has flown a lot, allowing the Chinese to develop and work on tactics for the future. The *J-15* may not be the best on-board fighter, yet, according to the writer, it certainly has decent capabilities. Moreover, unlike the Russian *Su-33* on which it is based, its operational life could keep going, thanks to the evolution of its avionics.

The book follows with an exhaustive description of the armaments carried off and an order of battle of the various units. A profile view of the different *Flanker* rounds off the book, with a summary of each aircraft's main characteristics.

Everything is clearly explained, and connoisseurs of exotic aircraft will certainly keep up with the Chinese *Flanker's* saga as if they were following a family epic in a historical novel. The reader is taken behind the scenes of Sino-Russian industrial relations. Interviews with Chinese pilots are extensively studied, highlighting how the *J-10* or the Thai *Gripen* for instance have given a lot of trouble to the *Su-27 SK* or to the first versions of the *J-11* in Beyond Visual Range (BVR) combat a few years ago.

Overall, the amount of information provided in this 256-page book is quite impressive. You can tell the author has put a great deal of effort into his subject and that he synthesised all the open information he could get, whether from the press or from informal exchanges. This is our personal favourite.

Depending on their preferences or taste, readers will prefer to buy a book rather than another. The wealthiest – or the more passionate – will probably not hesitate, and rightly so, to buy several. As one would recall, all those books are remarkably illustrated by many photographs and illustrations. Full colours maps enhance the reading experience and whet the appetite for more. The collection is set to expand, with the publication of *Red Dragon Bombers: China's Long-Range Bomber Force Since 1956* in the second half of 2023. This book shall not be missed by bomber enthusiasts or strategists wishing to know more about China's power projection capabilities.

In any case, these five books are a welcome addition to the many articles in this issue of *Vortex*.

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People's Liberation Army Air Force

