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Sun Tzu in the West: The Anglo-American Art of War

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sketches of major explorationist players such as Jeremiah Reynolds, Charles Wilkes, and William Francis Lynch help to place their expeditions in context; their motivations for exploration are just as important to Verney's work as the expeditions themselves. America's early explorers frequently were tempted to match European examples. In unsuccessfully advocating for an early ExEx in the 1820s and then striking out on private expeditions, Reynolds sought to emulate Prussia's Alexander von Humboldt. Similarly, when Lady Franklin agitated multiple governments to search for the missing HMS *Erebus* and *Terror*, the Arctic expeditions funded by Henry Grinnell helped to demonstrate that American virtue equaled that of Britain.

As the nineteenth century progressed, expedition journals became increasingly popular reading among middle-class American families, as they allowed tantalizing glimpses of a wider world. In many cases, including the five-volume ExEx narrative, they reinforced contemporary notions of white superiority and American values. Pacific Islanders frequently were likened to Native American tribes in terms of their perceived savagery and lack of societal development. When the National Gallery opened above the U.S. Patent Office, curiosities that the ExEx had gathered formed the bulk of the collection. Bones of Fijian natives were displayed alongside weapons allegedly used to kill U.S. sailors; these and references to nineteenth-century craniology offered pseudoscientific proof of white racial superiority. Likewise, proslavery expeditions to South America scouted potential colony sites, where enslaved Africans would require the superior reasoning, industriousness, and leadership of whites to perform the hard labor in tropical climates for which they

were believed to be suited biologically. In 1848, Lieutenant William Lynch worked to champion American religious beliefs and scientific thought alike by searching for physical evidence of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah while conducting a meticulous survey of the river Jordan and Dead Sea. Finally, *Arctic Explorations*, published by Elisha Kent Kane, showed American men surviving one of nature's most punishing environments.

The naval expeditions examined by *A Great and Rising Nation* took place during a time of sweeping change. Amid the uncertainty of the antebellum period, white Americans could look to naval exploration for reassurance as their fellow citizens gained new knowledge that benefited commerce, demonstrated perceived racial superiority over peoples encountered abroad, proved their manliness and strength in direct competition with nature, and earned the respect of European nations.

Verney's book ends with the United States being recognized as a potential great power pursuing imperial ambitions. That status came not from applying raw military strength but by judiciously applying scientific inquiry, engaging in diplomacy, seizing commercial opportunities, and practicing humanitarianism.

MICHAEL ROMERO



Sun Tzu in the West: The Anglo-American Art of War, by Peter Lorge. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2022. 237 pages. \$29.99.

Sinologists long have been concerned that our understanding of China's military culture begins and ends with *The Art of War*. They suggest that more attention be paid to how this ancient

treatise has been interpreted and put into practice (or not) in the 2,300-some years since it was compiled and attributed to Sun-tzu, or Master Sun—a legendary figure who may never have existed. With his latest book, *Sun Tzu in the West: The Anglo-American Art of War*, Peter Lorge, associate professor of premodern Chinese and military history at Vanderbilt University, in Nashville, Tennessee, traces the impact of *The Art of War* in the West since its translation into French by Father Jean-Joseph-Marie Amiot in 1772.

In fascinating detail, Lorge describes how *The Art of War* became reduced in the popular imagination to an overly simplistic notion of indirect warfare, misconstrued as an argument against war fighting, treated as evidence of a kind of “less expansive” Chinese warfare, and ultimately transformed into “a stand-in for thinking strategically without particular or even accurate reference to its actual contents” (p. 7). For those who seek to “get China right,” Lorge’s book offers a welcome reminder that the contextual dynamics of strategic interpretation have important ramifications for how we understand Chinese military thought and strategic culture.

Famously, *The Art of War* was translated into English by Brigadier General Samuel B. Griffith, USMC, recipient of the Navy Cross and later a member of the Naval War College faculty. Griffith was preceded in this undertaking by Lieutenant Colonel Everard Ferguson Calthrop of the Royal Artillery in 1905 and five years later by Lionel Giles, a noted sinologist and translator working for the British Museum. But it was Griffith’s translation, published in 1963 while he was pursuing a doctorate at the University of Oxford in Britain,

that captured the public’s imagination. Perhaps this was because of Griffith’s status as a decorated veteran of World War II and as the translator, twenty years earlier, of Mao Zedong’s *On Guerrilla Warfare*. Lorge suggests it also owed something to Griffith’s friendship with Basil Liddell Hart, then considered one of the world’s preeminent strategists, who commented on the draft translation and later wrote a foreword for the book.

Griffith’s translation established in the public’s mind a strong connection between *The Art of War* and both the guerrilla warfare championed by Mao and the indirect strategy propounded by Liddell Hart. From a marketing point of view, publication of Griffith’s translation was well timed. Following the “loss” of China, the rise of small war, and the expansion of America’s involvement in Vietnam, strategists of all kinds—Lorge mentions former Director of Central Intelligence Allen W. Dulles and President Richard M. Nixon, among many others—were eager to learn more about Chinese and other non-Western approaches to war.

To be clear, *The Art of War* does not call explicitly for guerrilla warfare; in fact, it argues against protracted war on any scale. Nevertheless, a straight line was drawn between *The Art of War*, which had been produced by many hands in the fourth century BCE, and the kinds of wars that China was fighting under Mao two millennia later. Lorge attributes this particular reading of *The Art of War* in part to the American military experience in China and the Pacific during the 1930s and 1940s. Specifically, he recounts how Chinese guerrilla warfare came to be connected to the U.S. Marines in two ways: “the association of China marines with Chinese military

methods through Evans Carlson and Samuel Griffith, and the use of lightly armed, but highly motivated, marine units fighting in 'guerrilla' style" (p. 108).

Lorge briefly pauses his survey to discuss a seminal work, 1974's *Chinese Ways in Warfare*. Its editors, Frank A. Kierman Jr. and John King Fairbank, reinforced the questionable proposition that China had a "distinct method of war." In the book's introduction, Fairbank, a leading American sinologist, observed that "in the aftermath of the age of Western expansion that seems to have reached one kind of climax in Vietnam, we may well view the Chinese style of warfare as somewhat less expansive than our own" (p. 1). As Lorge notes, this was "historical nonsense," yet it represented a common and persistent belief "that Chinese military culture is fundamentally less aggressive than Western military culture" (p. 187).

Here, perhaps, Lorge might be understating the degree to which views of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) have changed in recent years. Now that Xi Jinping has jettisoned the "hide and bide" policy, developed a formidable blue-water navy, militarized the South China Sea, and continued to engage in a reckless campaign of intimidation

against Taiwan, few observers see the PLA as a docile lamb or paper tiger. What still merits consideration, however, is Lorge's larger point: that contemporary historical contexts influence how canonical texts such as *The Art of War* are interpreted and reinterpreted. Since the publication of Griffith's groundbreaking version in 1963, many other English-language translations of *The Art of War* have appeared. Two of them—by Roger Ames (1993) and Victor H. Mair (2007)—are quite good. But supposing that an even more exquisite translation becomes available, it inevitably will arrive in a particular time and place and be read differently—or misread—within that geopolitical context.

In recent years, our knowledge of Chinese military history has advanced rapidly, thanks to the groundbreaking work of scholars such as David A. Graff, Mark Edward Lewis, Kenneth M. Swope, and Peter Lorge himself. In the West, our understanding of China's military culture no longer need begin and end with *The Art of War*. That said, it would behoove us to question how the Chinese military itself reads *The Art of War* today and might apply it tomorrow—because the answers might surprise us.

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