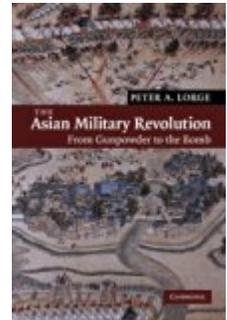


**Peter A. Lorge.** *The Asian Military Revolution: From Gunpowder to the Bomb.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 188 + xi S. \$24.99, paper, ISBN 978-0-521-60954-8.



**Reviewed by** Dietmar Rothermund

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This book has a message. Peter Lorge controverts the idea that Asia's military revolution was due only to the encounter with the West. He highlights the invention and early use of gunpowder in China and shows that the Chinese also invented the true gun and used artillery in many battles in the course of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Naval battles in Chinese rivers were of particular importance. The founder of the Ming dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang, was a pioneer in this kind of warfare. Perhaps one could call China under the Ming the first „gunpowder empire“. But the firm control of China by the Ming ushered in a long period of peace which made artillery warfare redundant. Moreover, artillery was of no use in the fight against the swift horsemen of the Northern steppe who were the main adversaries of Ming rule. Only the Qing dynasty which replaced the Ming could overcome these horsemen as the Qing themselves had emerged from the steppe. But the Kangxi emperor who consolidated Qing rule also used artillery very well in his efforts to subdue internal rebels and in fighting the Russians against whom he deployed Dutch cannons. Once Western imports were available, they

quickly replaced indigenous weapons in this field. Kangxi showed great interest in Western technology and extracted information from the European Jesuits who visited his court.

Naval artillery battles were also an important feature of the warfare of Koreans and Japanese. Lorge's thesis of an Asian military revolution prior to the contact with the West can be substantiated in East Asia. South Asia is a more difficult terrain in this respect. The Delhi Sultanate established by horsemen from Central Asia did adopt heavy guns for siege warfare and the defence of fortresses. The sultans of Delhi managed to defend South Asia against Mongol invasions. There is a debate on the origins of the artillery of these sultans. Their artillery was heavy and immobile. The true military revolution was introduced in India only by the Mughals who used field artillery to great effect. Lorge has discussed the „gunpowder empires“ of the Ottomans, the Safavid and the Mughals. They all used field artillery which they had come to know through the Ottoman encounter with European powers. After its adoption by Selim I who conquered Syria and Egypt with

his field artillery, it proliferated rapidly to the East. Babur, the first Great Mughal, vanquished the last Sultan of Delhi by a combination of field artillery with the swift movements of horse-archers. This was a unique marriage of Western strategy with that of the Asian steppe which was truly „revolutionary“.

Southeast Asia is the most difficult terrain for Lorge as it is composed of so many states with different traditions. Vietnam had been subdued by Ming artillery in the early fifteenth century long before the Europeans appeared on the scene. Northern continental Southeast Asia was thus familiar with artillery warfare at an early stage while maritime Southeast Asia lagged behind in this respect. When guns finally were available the rulers of maritime South Asia, they just added them to their arsenal. The new weapons did not revolutionize warfare in this region. In dealing with Southeast Asia Lorge has to contend with two contrasting theories expounded by Anthony Reid and Victor Lieberman. Reid has argued that the „age of commerce“ (sixteenth century) enriched Southeast Asian rulers who acquired Western weapons and consolidated their states. The crisis of the seventeenth century then stopped this process. Lieberman on the other hand has emphasized a continuous evolution of Southeast Asian states from c. 800 to 1830. This evolution paralleled more or less that of the rest of the world. Lorge points out that Reid may be right in interpreting the course of maritime Southeast Asian history whereas Lieberman's theory applies to continental Southeast Asia.

Lorge highlights the cultural specificities of the adoption of particular weapons and warns against putting the technological cart before the political horse. He stresses the primacy of statecraft and disagrees with those who attribute too much to the adoption of guns etc. However, his own text provides many examples for the pivotal effect of the adoption of certain strategies and armaments. His reference to the atom bomb at the

end of the book appears to be a kind of after-thought. It is rather short and superficial and does not serve as a coping stone of his work. In his final remarks he asserts that „seen in the light of pre-modern history, the rise of the West is an aberration“. This is a counterblast to the idea that all progress emanated from the West. Even if one may agree with the thrust of this argument one may object to the term „aberration“. It implies that the author knows about the „normal“ course of history and is thus able to identify deviations from this path.

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