Review Article

The History of the Korean War and the History of China’s Present

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One morning in late August 2008, I was in Beijing, sitting in a taxi, nervous and irritated. I had an appointment with Professor Shen Zhihua, but my taxi was caught in a traffic jam and it did not look like I would be on time. On first sending an email to Professor Shen a few days earlier, asking whether I could meet him to talk about my research in China, I did not expect a reply; he was a world-renowned scholar, and I was just a graduate student, after all. Surprisingly, however, he promptly wrote back, suggesting that we meet at his home in Beijing. On that morning, as it turned out, I was late by half an hour, but Professor Shen and Professor Li Danhui, his wife and a leading scholar of the Cold War, welcomed me with big smiles. In his study, he gave me advice about several regional and municipal archives, with practical caution about what I should talk about and what I should not in archives in China. In the end, he wrote reference letters for me that opened the way to conduct archival research in China. Leaving his home, I was greatly impressed, promising myself that I would be a scholar like him.

Such an experience does not appear to be exceptional. I have heard of similar encounters with Shen Zhihua from many people. Indeed, he has been not only a prominent scholar of Sino-Soviet relations, himself, but also at the center of creating and developing a scholarly community in...
China since the 1990s, through helping scholars at home and abroad, organizing numerous conferences and publications, and making newly acquired Russian and Chinese documents available to other scholars and the general public. Originally published in China in 2003, Shen Zhihua's *Mao, Stalin and the Korean War: Trilateral Communist Relations in the 1950s* is the fruit of such wide-ranging academic activity and painstaking research conducted in China and the Soviet Union in the 1990s. With his characteristically meticulous reading and analysis of massive quantities of documents from Chinese and Russian archives, Shen explicates how the Korean War tested, reshaped, and fortified the Sino-Soviet relationship, while simultaneously sowing the seeds of rupture within it in the early 1950s. Although the feelings of surprise these new documents brought about nine years ago may have faded by now, Shen's argument remains thought provoking. Not only that, but the book can be read as the attempt of a Chinese intellectual to rewrite post-World War II history in search of a new identity for contemporary, post-Communist China.

The book consists of nine chapters. Chapters 1 to 3 outline international relations in postwar Asia, and Moscow’s perceptions and policies toward the region, particularly toward China and Korea. Chapters 4 and 5 look into the complex processes of the reshaping of the Sino-Soviet relationship, with particular attention to the conclusion of the Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance in 1950, and include detailed discussions on hard bargaining between Moscow and Beijing. Chapter 6 concentrates on the shift in Moscow’s policy toward Korea, exploring how Joseph Stalin changed his attitude in January 1950, and why. Chapters 7 and 8 trace the outbreak and development of the Korean War in the summer and fall of 1950, carefully delineating behind-door diplomacy among Stalin, Mao Zedong, and Kim Il-sung during the war, and investigate China’s entry into the Korean War. Finally, Chapter 9 describes the “honeymoon” period between China and the Soviet Union during the latter half of the Korean War, illustrating the massive military and economic assistance Moscow provided to China. While the original book in Chinese has five chapters, divided as described above, I agree with the translator’s decision to make it nine, with the addition of many subheadings, which makes it easier for readers to follow each topic.

Among the numerous analyses of Moscow and Beijing’s policymaking processes, two moments of decision deserve particular attention: Stalin's