

Closed archives still hinder quest for truth of Korean War

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Illustration: Liu Rui

By Chen Ping

Today marks the 60th anniversary of the outbreak of the Korean War (1950- 53). However, the reaction from Chinese scholars has been strangely indifferent. Described as the "forgotten war" in the West, the Korean conflict is barely more remembered in China.

My Wednesday trip to a newly opened bookstore, which claims to be the second largest in the capital, turned out to be very disappointing. There was no special section marked out for the upcoming anniversary of the conflict. All I could find on the war was revised editions of decade-old books dotting the shelves here and there. No new books on the Korean War were available.

For a long time after the end of the war, Chinese scholars' efforts to study it remained obscured. Over the last several decades, although many accounts of the war have been published, most of them were written by

novelists, and therefore were more literary than academic. Very few, if any, serious academic studies on the Korean War were publicly published in China before 1990.

Currently, all major important academic publications on the war that have been officially authorized are the work of military historians affiliated with the PLA Academy of Military Sciences.

For instance, in 2000, to mark the 50th anniversary of the start of the war, the Military Sciences Press published *History of the War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea*, a thousand page behemoth split into three volumes that was a revised version of an earlier text.

As an important player in the Korean War, China needs more in-depth and diversified academic researches on the conflict. The study of the war shouldn't just be restricted to military history. Chinese academia needs scholars like Bruce Cummings (*The Origins of the Korean War*, Princeton University Press, 1981) and Chen Jian (*China's Road to the Korean War*, Columbia University Press, 1994).

For example, after the three-year war on the Korean Peninsula, the Cold War in Asia entered a new stage, characterized by a total confrontation between China and the US that would last nearly 20 years. Until then US President Richard Nixon's China visit in 1971, the US adopted a containment policy toward "Red China."

Did this hostile policy result from the war or was it the inevitable outcome of ideological contention between the Eastern and Western blocs? This is meaningful not only in understanding the decades-old Sino-US confrontation, but also in assessing today's Sino-US relations.

Even the study of the war itself by Chinese researchers has left remarkable room for scholarly debate.

Take the name of the war. The term officially used in the Chinese mainland is the "War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea," as shown by the book mentioned above. The connotation of this phrase is much narrower than the "Korean War," the name popularly accepted worldwide. Such narrowness leaves Chinese scholars outside the academic mainstream.

And the majority of Chinese scholars have always been evasive when talking about the sudden eruption of the war. The official version is that "on June 25, 1950, the Korean civil war finally broke out."

For a civil war that began in 1948 after two separate but hostile governments were established on the Korean Peninsula, and which escalated into an international war on June 25, 1950, who fired the first shot was not a decisive factor in determining the nature, process and outcome of the war. But in academic study, truth and facts should always be the key elements.

To facilitate academic study on this topic, the relevant archival literature should be declassified and made accessible and available to interested researchers, not just to a handful of "official" scholars.

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For instance, the US has been accused by both Chinese and international investigators of waging bacteriological warfare in Korea and Northeast China in early 1952. Yet some Western scholars still argue that this was a product of wartime propaganda. Since China refuses to declassify some key documents on the issue, such attacks continue to tarnish China's international image.

If forgotten in the West, the war needs to be remembered in China. It is high time to renew and strengthen efforts by Chinese scholars to discover the truth about the Korean War.

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