Text C

Historical figures merit objective biographies. Yet the challenge of writing such biographies is daunting even under the best of circumstances. The biographer must pursue a seemingly endless trail of published and unpublished sources, often in a variety of languages, exhaust the contents of numerous archives, winnow truth and fact from rumor and falsehood, strike the right balance between the public persona and the private person, and judge the wisdom and folly of the subject over the span of a lifetime. Such difficulties are multiplied when the subject of the biography is the leader of a closed society that jealously guards its secrets. This is certainly the case with Mao Zedong, the founder of modern China.

Mao has been the subject of numerous biographies in Western languages since the American journalist Edgar Snow first wrote down Mao's life story just past its midpoint, in July 1936. A year later Snow published that story as the centerpiece of *Red Star Over China,* an influential book that helped shape history and remains in print to this day. For what it tells about the lineage of Western-language Mao biographies, it is worth relating why that encounter between the guerrilla commander cum leader of the Chinese Communist Party and the young American reporter took place.

Already a well-known journalist by the mid-1930s, Snow was extremely sympathetic to the Chinese communist movement, although he was not a Marxist. Among the mainstream media for which he wrote, including the *New York Herald Tribune, Foreign Affairs,* and the *Saturday Evening Post,* he enjoyed a reputation for being independent-minded, unlike many other leftist reporters in China, who openly paraded their pro-communist views.

It was precisely this reputation that attracted the attention of the leaders of the Chinese Communist Party, including Mao Zedong. They intended to make use of the thirty-one-year-old American to improve their public image and expand their political influence. Snow had his own reasons for seeking out Mao. An ambitious journalist with an instinct for the big story, he jumped at the opportunity for a sensational scoop. Each man intended to use the other for his own purposes. Snow arrived in Baoan, in northern Shaanxi province, on July 13, 1936, just two days after Mao Zedong himself set up camp in that remote and desolate town. Mao was fleeing from Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, head of the National Government and the leader of the Nationalist Party (the Kuomintang, or KMT), whose forces had inflicted a serious defeat on the Chinese Red Army.

Mao granted Snow's request for a series of interviews, in which he first spoke at length about his childhood and youth before outlining his career as a communist revolutionary. The communists had made a shrewd choice picking Snow. The impressionable American came to view Mao as a wise philosopher-king, Lincolnesque in appearance, perspicacious, easygoing, and self-confident. "He certainly believed in his own star and destiny to rule," Snow recalled. Transcribing Mao's monologue into his notebook during long nights in the candlelit cave where they met, Snow was sooner Mao's amanuensis than a critical journalist. Once his mission was accomplished, Snow returned to Beijing with his precious notes and began working on the manuscript that became *Red Star Over China.*

Just as Mao and Snow had hoped, *Red Star Over China* created a sensation, particularly among liberal intellectuals and leftists in the West. Its intimate portrayal of Mao as a romantic revolutionary struck a sympathetic chord with Western readers disillusioned with the austere figure of an increasingly authoritarian Chiang Kai-shek. Snow's pioneering work set the tone for many subsequent books by authors who were equally or even more sympathetic in their depictions of Mao. There was only one major point on which these later works differed from Snow's. While Snow

viewed Mao as a faithful follower of Soviet Marxism, other writers asserted that as early as the late 1930s, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) under Mao's leadership had become autonomous and self-reliant. According to this view, Mao, an independent thinker and actor, had basically distanced himself from Moscow, unlike the dogmatic Chinese Stalinists whom he had bested in intraparty struggles. Mao stood tall; he was his own man, an authentic Chinese revolutionary, not Stalin's stooge. This was Mao's main attraction for authors trying to explain the Chinese revolution to American readers.

As early as the late 1940s and early 1950s, leading American China scholars including John King Fairbank, Benjamin I. Schwartz, Conrad Brandt, and Robert North propounded what became the classical formulation about Mao's "independence," both with respect to his relations with Stalin and his views of China. They wrote that Stalin mistrusted Mao and considered him a "peasant nationalist" rather than a communist. Furthermore, the upsurge of the Chinese revolution in the countryside under the leadership of Mao seemed to disprove the orthodox Marxist view regarding the "historic role" of the working class. China's "peasant revolution" was the opening act in what promised to be a dramatic era of peasant revolutions throughout the postcolonial world. After the split between the Soviet and Chinese communist parties in the early 1960s, Russian and Chinese authors followed a similar line.