



Tales of the Emperor

Jack Winter

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Tales of the Emperor is based on the life of Qin Shi Huang (circa 260–210 BCE), the “First Emperor” – he who unified China, gave it his name, built the Great Wall, entombed an army of terra cotta soldiers, authored legalism, erased history, insinuated governance, and established paranoia as a national characteristic. His dynasty did not outlive him but his influence permeates the present and, there is ample indication, will dominate the future.

The literary method of *Tales of the Emperor* is derived from the first Chinese attempt at “writing history” – the famous Historical Records of Ssu-Ma Ch’ien. Like that Chinese classic, *Tales of the Emperor* is motivated by the desire to understand the past by entering it, mixing testimony with anecdote, interpretation with invention, biography with characterization, objective analysis with passionate self-interest.

Birth to death, *Tales of the Emperor* tells the story of its central figure in a thematic rather than a chronologic narrative. In a mosaic of separate tales – some no more than fragments, others chapter-length – intersecting characters are presented, entwined, relinquished, among them a failed assassin, a wily adviser, an ironic architect, a castrated historian, an entire tribe of grave builders, and, of course, the wry, conflicted, everyday tyrant himself. The Emperor’s accomplishments are documented, his strivings are examined, and intimate tittle-tattle about him is indulged.

There’s only one principal theme: you find the antiquity you look for, or, in the language of the book: “history is the study of the paintings of great events.”

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