

## Activity 2. The Grand Historian of China (c.145 – 86 BC)

**Source:** <http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/core9/phalsall/texts/ssuma1.html> (Accessed April 11, 2010).

Sima Qian was the Grand Historian of the Han court about 100 BC. His responsibilities included maintaining the royal library, establishing and maintaining the royal calendar, and recording the principal events of the reign. He described his work as a historian in this way: “I have gathered up and brought together the old traditions of the world which were scattered and lost. I have examined the deeds and events of the past and investigated the principles behind their success and failure, their rise and decay, in one hundred and thirty chapters. I wished to examine into all that concerns heaven and man, to penetrate the changes of the past and present.”

In *Records of the Grand Historian of China* (109 – 91 BC), Sima wrote biographies of important figures in earlier Chinese dynasties. In the story of Pu Shih, Sima presented the wisdom of an ordinary man who advised an emperor of China.

Pu Shih was a native of Honan where his family made a living farming and animal raising. The first quote is a response by Pu Shih to an imperial envoy who asked him if he wanted a position in the government. The second quote is Pu Shih’s explanation of governing based on his experience caring for sheep.

A. “From the time I was a child, I have been an animal raiser. I have had no experience at government service and would certainly not want such a position. I have never in my life had a quarrel with anyone. If there are poor men in my village, I lend them what they need, and if there are men who do not behave properly, I guide and counsel them. Where I live, everyone does as I say.”

B. “Governing people is the same way. Get them up at the right time, let them rest at the right time, and if there are any bad ones, pull them out at once before they have a chance to spoil the flock.”

### Questions

1. According to Sima Qian, what is the role of the historian?
2. What is Pu Shih’s advice for maintaining peace in a village or nation?
3. According to Pu Shih, how is governing people like caring for sheep?
4. In your opinion, do Sima Qian’s views on history and government have validity today? Explain.