Excerpts describing the “barbarians” who lived outside the Chinese empire from *Records of the Grand Historian* (Shiji, 《史记》) by Sima Qian (司马迁), written between 105 and 90 B.C.E.

Sima Qian (145–90 B.C.E.) worked as court historian during the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.), and compiled *Records of the Historian*, the first official history of China. The work of 130 chapters was based on all the documents recording Chinese traditions and legends that were available to him at the time.

“Dayuan [Ferghana] is southwest of the Xiongnu, about ten thousand li directly west of the Han. Their customs are to stay in one place, cultivate land, and grow rice and wheat. They make wine from grapes. They have many fine horses. These horses sweat blood, perhaps being descended from Heavenly horses. They have city walls and houses. With some seventy or more cities of various sizes, their population is probably several hundred thousand. Their soldiers use bows and spears, shooting while on horseback.

The Xiongnu are descended from the rulers of the Xia dynasty (ca. 21st century–16th century B.C.E.). . . . They live among the northern barbarians, moving to follow their flocks. They primarily raise horses, oxen, and sheep, but also keep unusual animals like camels, asses, mules, and wild horses. They move about in search of water and grass, having no cities, permanent dwellings, or agriculture. Still, they divide their territory into regions. They have no written language, so make oral agreements. Little boys are able to ride sheep and shoot birds and mice with bows and arrows. When they are somewhat older they shoot foxes and rabbits for food. Thus all the men can shoot and serve as cavalry.

It is the custom of the Xiongnu to support themselves in ordinary times by following their flocks and hunting, but in times of hardship they take up arms to raid. This would appear to be their nature. Bows and arrows are the weapons they use for distant targets; swords and spears the ones they use at close range. When it is to their advantage, they advance; when not, they retreat, as they see no shame in retreat.”

*Source:* Reprinted in Ebrey, Patricia Buckley, editor, p. 55. Adapted with permission of The Free Press, a Division of Simon & Schuster Adult Publishing Group, from *Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook*, Second Edition, Revised & Expanded by Patricia Buckley Ebrey. Copyright © 1993 by Patricia Buckley Ebrey. All rights reserved.