V. China: Dynasties and Conquerors

Teaching Idea
Ask students to tell you about the Roman Empire and the reasons for its decline, which students in Core Knowledge schools should have studied in Grade 3. Compare that rise and fall with what students will be learning about Chinese dynasties. One dynasty displaced another; the second prospered and then began to have problems, sometimes from inside and sometimes from outside the empire. In the midst of these problems, a new group would displace it, as it had displaced the first group. The Chinese explained this through the concept of the Mandate of Heaven.

Explore the meaning of the word dynasty before introducing the Qin dynasty. Explain that a dynasty is a succession of rulers who are members of the same family. The ruler’s position is hereditary. Ask students how they know that the president (or anyone in public office in the United States) is not a member of a dynasty. Ask if they know of any modern rulers who belong to a dynasty. (While the term is not usually used in reference to the English monarch, the queen is a member of a dynasty—the House of Windsor.)

Cross-curricular Teaching Idea
To give students a feeling for Chinese culture, read them a few stories set in China, like “The Wonderful Chuang Brocade” (discussed in the Language Arts section on p. 51).

Heaven from this ruler and bestow it on another one.

While China prospered under the Zhou, the seeds of the Zhou’s destruction were sown by the introduction of feudalism. In exchange for military support, the Zhou kings gave land to their supporters, who established local states and ruled them for their own benefit. In time, the local lords, known as warlords, became more powerful than the Zhou kings and fought one another for power and wealth. The era between 402 BCE and 201 BCE is known as the Warring States Period.

Qin Dynasty

Shihuangdi
Zheng [JHENG] was a warlord who ruled the state, or province, of Qin [CHIN]. In 221 BCE he set out to unify China by subjugating the local warlords, abolishing feudalism, and proclaiming himself emperor. By his death in 210 BCE, he had succeeded for the most part in conquering the local warlords. Zheng took the title Shihuangdi [she-HWONG-dee], meaning “First Emperor,” and as Shihuangdi, imposed a strong centralized government on China. In an effort to ensure his control, he had his opponents murdered.

The emperor had a great interest in magic and alchemy. He summoned magicians from all over China to visit him. But his motive was beyond entertainment; the emperor desperately sought an elixir that would grant him immortality. When Confucian scholars criticized the emperor’s preoccupation with magic, he had 460 leading scholars executed.

Shihuangdi is also known for his establishment of a single system of coinage and a standardization of the Chinese ideographic writing system, which had developed during the Shang dynasty. After his death, Shihuangdi’s policies of torture and murder of enemies, heavy taxation, and forced labor (to build the Great Wall) resulted in a series of rebellions against the next Qin emperor and the end of the Qin dynasty.

In the 1970s, Shihuangdi’s tomb was excavated and a collection of over 6,000 life-sized soldiers made of terra-cotta was discovered, along with terra-cotta horses and chariots made of bronze. The figures are arranged in precise military formation, and the soldiers hold weapons that are still sharp. Today, visitors can see the figures in a museum constructed above the tomb, and archaeologists are still working to uncover the rest of the tomb.

Great Wall of China

The Great Wall of China was built over many centuries. The wall was begun during the Qin dynasty in the 3rd century BCE, and additions were made during subsequent dynasties. The last work was completed during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). The wall, which was built to keep out invaders, stretches 2,150 miles (3,460 km) across North China. Made of earth, stones, and brick, the wall is 25 feet (7.6 m) high and 12 feet (3.7 m) wide. It is the world’s longest fortification and, in fact, the longest structure ever built and the only human-made structure that can be seen from outer space.