The Dynasties of Ancient China

A brief overview and lesson on mapping.
General Information:

- Ancient China was one of the oldest and longest lasting civilizations in the history of the world. The history of Ancient China can be traced back over 4,000 years. Located on the eastern part of the continent of Asia, today China is the largest country in the world.

- Throughout most of China's history it was ruled by powerful families called dynasties. The first dynasty was the Shang and the last was the Qing.

- Empire Ancient China also boasts the longest lasting empire in history. It began with the Qin dynasty and the first emperor Qin who united all of China under one rule in 221 BC.
Dynastic Cycle

- Dynastic cycle lasted from 1700 BCE until the early part of the 20th century.

- Dynasty = family of kings.

- 3 Dynasties of classical China: Zhou, Qin, and Han.
Shang (1700 - 1027 BCE)

- First recorded Dynasty
- Ruled by a belligerent aristocracy
- First Chinese cities, center of court life
- Villages organized by clans, not nuclear families.
- Cast bronze, created silk
- Developed writing. Ideas through pictographs. Thousands of characters.
- Honored ancestors, used oracle bones
- Shang tyrant emperor overthrown by Zhou, who ushered in the 2nd dynasty.
Zhou (Chou) (1027 - 250 BCE)

- Longest lasting Chinese Dynasty.
- First classical era dynasty.
- First period of territorial expansion (complicated problems of central rule).
- Featured decentralized politics but important cultural innovations included- Confucianism, Mandate of Heaven, and Chinese language.
- Established system of currency
- China’s feudal period (rulers gave land to their supporters in exchange for defense).
Zhou Coins - bronze
Zhou (Chou) (1027 - 250 BCE)

- Zhou rulers claimed direct links to the Shang rulers.
- Also asserted that heaven had transferred its mandate to rule China to the Zhou emperors- Mandate of Heaven.
- Mandate of Heaven remained a key justification for Chinese imperial rule in all subsequent dynasties (think Divine Right).
- Promoted linguistic unity via a standard spoken language (Mandarin Chinese). Largest single group of people speaking the same language in the world at this time.
Zhou (Chou) (1027 - 250 BCE)

- The breakdown of the Zhou dynasty’s ability to control its vassals in the 8th c B.C.E. led to a long period of political conflict.
- Internal conflicts left China vulnerable to outside invaders between 8th-3rd c B.C.E.
Qin (221 - 207 BCE)

- By 221 BCE, warrior Shi Huangdi brought an end to the years of civil strife and disunity, ushering in the Qin Dynasty.
- But Shi Huangdi proved to be a tyrant, so the Qin Dynasty ended shortly after his death in 210 BCE.
- Organized China into large provinces ruled by bureaucrats.
- For defense, built first Great Wall (Ming built other part later), extending 3000+ miles. Largest construction project in human history.
Han (202 BCE - 221 CE)

- Lasted for 400+ years. Most effective, & most enduring bureaucracy in the preindustrial world.
- Introduced civil service examination (process of selecting government officials based on merit rather than noble birth). Limited. power of emperor (checks & balances)
- Expanded Chinese territory into Korea, Indochina, and central Asia.
  - Silk Roads developed, opened trade
- Peace brought great prosperity.
- Great increase in population
Sui Dynasty (581–618)

- The Sui Dynasty was a dynastic clan that ruled for 37 years over much of the region.

- One of the two dynasties of shortest duration that ruled big empires in the region.

- The Sui Dynasty used the people to carry out huge construction projects and fight large-scale wars to invade other countries.

- Their Great Wall and Grand Canal ranked among the world's greatest feats of engineering at the time.

- Their rule was harsh, and their dynasty ended in big rebellions also
Song/Sung Dynasty (960–1279)

• Considered the third Chinese golden age, this complex dynasty was divided almost evenly into Northern (960 - 1126) and Southern (1127 - 1279) halves.

• The former was a tranquil time characterized by philosophical and artistic development, political centralization, and economic growth.

• The latter, however, was quite the opposite; brutal invaders drove the Chinese from their northern territory, forcing them to migrate south and establish a new capital city.

• The psychological effects of this devastating upheaval are apparent in Sung paintings; misty, ethereal landscapes reflect conflicting emotions of regret, acceptance, and longing.