LESSON 3: Life in Ancient China

Introduction (5 minutes)
Free-write Prompt: “Imagine you are the leader of a country. What would you want to accomplish? How will you know if your people are happy? What will you do if people do not obey you?”

Ask for a couple students to share their ideas, then introduce the day’s lesson by stating that today students will be learning about a very powerful man in China, Ying Zheng, who became a leader when he was only 13 years old!

Vocabulary Extension
Feudal system = a system of government in which nobles serve a king and are rewarded with land which is worked by peasants
Noble = someone of royal or privileged status
Peasant = a farmer or laborer who serves a noble

Class Activity (25+ mins)
Role Play

Explain that students will be learning what life was like in ancient China through a role play activity. Divide students into groups of 5-6 each and assign each a region in the Qin dynasty. Refer to map to allow students to see geographic features of their region. (Save 1-2 students to play the role of Emperor Qin and his prime minister, Li Si).

Each group should accomplish the following tasks:
- Design a system of money*
- Create units of measurement (distance and volume)
- Invent an alphabet (or, if short on time, invent at minimum some basic words such as “hello,” “good-bye,” “thank you,” “that’s not fair,” “how much?” etc.)
- Preferred method of transportation (provide maps to assist student decisions, drawing awareness to features like rivers, mountains, etc.)

*Inform groups that their currency will be a candy or bean (provide each group with a different candy/bean), so their monetary system should be planned accordingly.

While groups are working, pass out role cards (see Appendix IV) so that 1 member of each group receives the “Noble” card, and all others receive “Peasant.” Instruct students to remember their roles but not to share them with each other at this time. Also distribute various candies/beans (in Ziploc bags or small paper cups) to each student. Each student should receive approximately the same amount of candies.

Inform students that today, the classroom represents different parts of China before Emperor Qin came to power. The goal in this role play is to understand what challenges
Emperor Qin would have to overcome. One of the first things to understand about pre-Qin China is that it operated under a feudal system. This means that everybody in the district reported to one noble (who subsequently reported to the king by serving in the military and other duties). Everybody else was a peasant, with very limited rights, who served the noble. I have already assigned one member in each of your groups to be the noble. So, as your first task, peasants, please pay 3 candies to your noble, to thank him/her for protecting you and your land.

Next, ask the nobles in each group to have their peasants trade with another group. Establish how much the noble hopes to get (using the group's currency or units of measurement), and review the trading language that peasants should use. Nobles should also create some incentives for their peasants:

- If peasants return from a successful trade within 30 seconds, they will be rewarded x number of candies as a reward
- If peasants are slow in returning from a trade, or are unsuccessful and do not come back with the requested amount of candy, they must pay the noble a penalty tax of y number of candies from their own personal stash.

Have students attempt to trade candy with each other, reminding them to stay in character using only their region's established language. Let play continue 1-2 minutes, depending on student engagement. Encourage escalating situations as they evolve.

*Teacher could even re-arrange desks to make navigating for trade physically challenging to simulate the poor roadways that existed pre-Qin.

3. After 2-4 minutes, send all students back to their nobles to pay relevant taxes.

4. Discussion

- Peasants, how was your quality of life? Did you like reporting to your noble? What were the advantages and disadvantages?
- Nobles, how was your quality of life? What challenges did you face?
- Peasants, what was difficult about trading with peasants from another land?
- Ask the student(s) who were selected to be Emperor Qin and Li Si for their observations: What would have made the trading session go more smoothly?

The scenes that we just acted out are very similar to life before the Qin dynasty in China – there were lots of small kingdoms using the feudal system that each had their own systems of money, measurement, language, and rules. You might say that things were frustrating and not much was accomplished. This is what Emperor Qin inherited when he came into power. Many of the problems that we identified in our discussion are problems that Emperor Qin set out to solve right away: he made everybody use the same language, the same currency, the same units of measurement, and he even made everyone use a standard axle length on their wagons so that the roads could be improved throughout China.
LESSON 3, Day 2

Introduction (5 mins)
Free-write Prompt: List as many facts as they can remember about life in Qin China.

Class Activity (20 mins)
Role Play, continued

Inform students that Ying Zheng became the ruler of his state when he was thirteen. As we saw yesterday, we know that life in China was unstable. Using a strong military and by advancing technology, Ying Zheng eventually took over 35 additional states and declared himself China’s first emperor! From here on, we will refer to Ying Zheng as Emperor Qin Shi Huang (chin shih hwong), or Emperor Qin. Today we will find out how Emperor Qin unified these warring states and created the empire of China.

Ask the students who were selected to be Emperor Qin (and/or Li Si) yesterday to select which currency they would like to use, and redistribute candy/beans to each group accordingly (may need additional candy). Emperor Qin should also select the language everyone will use (English is a good choice for purposes of the simulation) and unit of measurement.

Distribute new role cards to students so there is 1 civilian leader, 1 military leader, and 1 spy in each group. The rest remain peasants.

Secret Councils: Emperor should host 3 secret councils:
- Spies. Have the emperor establish an arbitrary rule what s/he wants the spies to look for in his/her group (e.g., people with brown eyes, people eating their candy, people wearing blue jeans, people with glasses, etc.). The spies should not let on to their group that that is what they are looking for, but simply “blend in” with the other peasants. Emperor should tell spies: “Your job is to look for peasants with ____. Report names back to me and I will tax them.”
- Civilian leaders. Instruct each civilian leader that they will escort their peasants to “trade” with another group. Emperor should tell civilian leaders: “Your job is to send your peasants to trade with another region so that both sides are happy.”
- Military leaders. Military leaders will be in charge of overseeing the construction of a great wall to protect the newly united country. Emperor instructs military leaders: “Your job is to send 1 peasant to help build my wall.”

Play should continue for 1-2 more rounds, and in each round the Emperor gives a new directive to spies, civilian leaders, and military leaders (see example below), or until peasants have been redistributed enough to provoke discussion.
Round 2 example:

- Spies seek a different characteristic/behavior to report to Emperor
- Civilian leaders: Assign peasants choice in profession: farmer or silk-maker. If a peasant doesn't want either profession, or waits too long in making a decision, send them to the wall.
- Military leaders: “Force” all wall-builders to maintain a physical task (e.g., one pushup every 30 seconds, hold a stack of textbooks for the duration of the exercise, etc.)

Thank students for their participation in this role play activity. Have them call out words or short phrases that characterize the type of person and ruler they understand Emperor Qin to have been based on the activity. Generate a list of these words on the board and save for tomorrow’s lesson.

**Individual Activity** (10 minutes)
Checkpoint may be done as individual writing assignment or class discussion. Distribute Role Play Exit Tickets (see Appendix V) to each student to gauge comprehension during role play activity. Be sure to review student answers before the next lesson to target any misconceptions.