Fall of the Classical Empires:

Directions:

1. Place students in groups of 3 or 4,

2. Divide the Empire readings among the members of each group (Rome, Han and Gupta). You may want to split Rome between 2 students it is a longer read.

3. Then using the butcher paper supplied students will construct a mind map comparing and contrasting the 3 Classical Empires.

4. Have students use 3 different marker colors to distinguish each empire. For Example:
   a. Rome – Red
   b. Han – Green
   c. Gupta - Blue
Fall of the Roman Empire

The Roman Empire was established in 31 B.C.E. by Augustus. There are many theories as to what lead to the final demise of the empire. The most common are the possibility that the empire was started on a weak idea, the government failed to fulfill its duties, and that foreign invaders seized and wiped out most of the land in Roman control. In addition, during the history of the Roman Empire, there were many sudden and dramatic changes internally. Many diseases, environmental problems, and lead poisoning affected the people of the empire. These led to many people dying of causes not obvious to the citizens. The military forces of the empire were also degrading fast. Historians today have discovered that because of the severity of these problems, the fall of the Roman Empire was inevitable. The problems started at the very beginning of the empire at its establishment.

When the Roman Empire was started, the government structure was not yet established. The government wasn’t sure how to pick leaders and how this new government should be set up. After many years of uncertainty, Diocletian became emperor. During his reign, he imposed many political and economic changes. Many were successful and helped out the empire significantly. Despite this success, many of the changes he proposed failed. Diocletian somewhat improved the government structure for the people, but they were still vulnerable.

After the death of Diocletian, Constantine I took power. The empire seemed to be looking better. He established the capital of the empire in Constantinople. While he was in Constantinople, he decided to change the accepted religion to Christianity. The people were not all in favor of this change, and it created some problems in the general population. After the initial problem with legalizing and supporting Christianity, all was mostly quiet for about 3 decades.

But suddenly in 376 C.E., the Visigoths attacked the first time. The Visigoths were descendants of the Huns. They were given permission to live within the borders of the empire. They were revolted when they realized that the Roman officials were making them pay higher taxes and the officials were often very cruel to them. The Roman Army lost at the Battle of Adrianople, but still managed to protect the Roman capital. They survived the first major threat to Constantinople. In the years that followed, Rome would fall twice and all the military operations would fail to regain ground on their foreign invaders.

During these trying times, the government failed to maintain control of their people. Instructing the armies and protecting the empire took precedence. The taxes on the people continued to rise in an effort to fund the protection of the empire. The people revolted throughout the empire. By the time the government became aware of what was happening, the situation was already seriously out of control. Throughout the remainder of the Roman Empire, the citizens would continue to be a problem.

Agriculture was a significant part of life in the rural Roman Empire. Trees were cut down for structures in the cities and livestock often overused certain parts of the farmland for food. Another struggle is that the Romans used irrigation, but there was not place for the excess water to run off. The previously farmable land slowly became desert. After the downfall of
agriculture, farmers set out opportunities in the cities.

Throughout the history of the Romans, the people lived in small places with many other people. These living conditions facilitated the spread of fatal diseases like smallpox and measles. Half the people in the empire died within a single twenty-year period. It cost quite a bit of money to run the Roman government and army, and because many people died in a small span of time, the government and army lost the tax money they provided. In addition, the people cooked in lead pans. Every time they used the pans, they were exposing themselves to lead. The lead would build up in their system and ultimately poison them. Not only did diseases and lead poisoning affect the general well being of the people, it also contributed to higher taxes and the loss of money.

Largely due to a lack of funding, the Roman Army began to decline. Many German mercenaries joined the army and rose to positions of power. They were not truly loyal to Romans and only joined for personal gain. They didn’t obey orders from the Roman authorities. Basically the military officers began to make all the decisions regarding their forces. With this lack of leadership, came a decline in the effectiveness of the army.

After years of various struggles to sustain the empire, the Roman Empire finally fell in 476 C.E. not long after the second fall of Rome. The issues of the empire from the start had culminated. All of the problems and consequences fell into the hands of the Roman Army. The army fought valiantly, but they were outnumbered, there was a lack of resources and it was poorly organized. After a short battle, the Ostrogoths gained control of the area that was once the Roman Empire.
Fall of the Han Dynasty

The Han Dynasty was founded in 202 B.C.E. by Liu Bang. The Han Dynasty found much success, as it was the longest enduring dynasty in Chinese history. Government within the dynasty was kept in select families. These families controlled almost every aspect of life and business in the dynasty.

In the later years of the Han Dynasty, there were many severe natural disasters. From two consecutive summers of extreme drought to the devastating flooding from the Yellow River, the rural areas of China were the hardest hit. The peasants who relied on the land for food and to make their living, revolted after these disasters. Their crop was wiped out for three years straight. In addition, the ruling families ordered military force against other nomadic invaders. The missions failed horribly, the taxes rose for the peasants. This was the last thing that they could take.

The largest rebellion in Chinese history was the Yellow Turban Rebellion. One particular leader, Zhang Jiao, made plans to establish a new “religious” group. He taught people about his plans that he disguised as a religious philosophy. He was really rallying support to establish a regime led by the peasants. When the rebellion started, rebels throughout China started burning government properties and ransacking villages. The highest families launched military forces to end the uprising. It took the military nine months of battle to finally kill the leaders behind this new government. Although the rebellion was stopped, it left the Han government in a very precarious position.

During this time, some lower court officials kept collecting taxes and keeping the money for themselves. The peasants didn’t have much money and they were further infuriated when they saw how rich these people were getting. Many lives were lost in the battles leaving the number of men in the Han army seriously low. If they had to fight any invaders, they would never manage to win. Fearing for their own lives during the rebellion, many of the ruling families went into hiding. During that time, those not involved in the rebellion were ungoverned. Before the start of the Yellow Turban Rebellion, the government was not very strong. After the end of the rebellion, the power in the government was nonexistent. The Han Dynasty fell in 9 C.E. after a long internal struggle between the rich ruling classes and the increasingly poor peasant farmers.
Fall of the Gupta Dynasty

The Gupta Dynasty was founded by Chandra Gupta in 320 C.E. The land for the dynasty was acquired by alliances, tributes, and military conquests. It was a government coalition formed of regional kingdoms. Local rulers governed each of these kingdoms. There were approximately 21 kingdoms. All the lawmaking and administrative responsibilities were to be handled in each of the kingdoms individually. However, there was always one supreme ruler. Most of these rulers were pretty strong and still had some decent control. At the start of the Gupta, there were eight great leaders. A large part of the fall of the empire is due to the fact that the last eight leaders were not very strong. During this time, they were frequently attacked but always managed to find a way to control their enemies. The luck and the military resources could only last for so long.

There was very little communication between each of kingdoms. Because of the vast expanse of the territory, communication was slow. When one kingdom was overwhelmed, they were not easily able to get help from neighboring kingdoms. When the Huns attacked the Gupta Dynasty for the last time, the military resources were overwhelmed, they couldn’t get the word out that they needed help. In the end, the Huns ended up taking over kingdom by kingdom and the people couldn’t do anything to help themselves in such a precarious situation. It was a domino effect.

The fall occurred because the governments could not protect all of their land, communication was insufficient, and after years of war, the people of the Gupta Dynasty simply ran out of military resources needed to defend themselves. Just by seizing the land and pressuring the people, the white Huns gradually gained control and ultimately overthrew the Gupta Dynasty. Although the Gupta Dynasty was in a tough spot for many years, it finally ended in 565 C.E.