The Silk Road
Module 1: Descriptive Essays

Report Prompt:
The Silk Road was the most historically important trade route. Describe its development, uses, and reasons for its decline.

Figure 1. The Silk road map (Lennane, 2015).
Text 1: The Silk Road

The Silk Road was an extensive network of overland trade routes across the Asian continent. They connected East, South, and Western Asia with the Mediterranean world, including North Africa and Europe extending over 8,000 km (5,000 miles). In reality, there was not one Silk Road but many small routes, or Silk Routes that connected with each other to form what we know today as the Silk Road.

These so-called "Silk Routes" transported not only silk but also many other products. They were also very important routes for the exchange of culture and religion between countries. They linked traders, merchants, pilgrims, soldiers, and urban dwellers from China to the faraway Mediterranean Sea for thousands of years.

The importance of the Silk Road can be seen in many different areas. The routes enabled people to transport trade goods, especially luxuries such as silk, satins, musk, rubies, diamonds, and pearls. At the same time, these routes also spread knowledge and technology to and from different parts of the world including China, India, Asia Minor and the Mediterranean. Trade on the Silk Road was a significant factor in the development of the great civilizations of China, India, Egypt, Persia, Arabia, Rome, Byzantium, and in several ways helped to lay the foundations of the modern world.

Although the name the Silk Road suggests a continuous journey, very few travelers traveled the route from start to finish. For the most part, a merchant or trader would transport goods only along part of the route and not all the way along it. Goods were bought and sold many times by different traders, in the busy markets of the oasis towns that were situated along the route.

The Central Asian part of the trade route began over 2,000 years ago as a response to the increased demand for silk. The Persians and Romans were fond of Chinese silk, and were prepared to pay good prices for it. The development of the route was carried out during the Chinese Han Dynasty, largely through the work and journeys of the diplomat Zhang Qian. In the late Middle Ages – around the 15th century – transcontinental trade on the Silk Road declined as sea trade increased.


Text 2: The Silk Road
The Silk Road was first traveled by a Chinese diplomat, Zhang Qian, when he was sent on a diplomatic mission to Central Asia during the Han dynasty in the 2nd century BCE*. In this way, knowledge of China spread to Central Asia, and vice versa. When Zhang Qian returned to China he was able to convey information about Central Asia to the Chinese people.

The Silk Road became a historically important international trade route between China and the Mediterranean Sea, from which trade goods could then be transported to Western Europe. Because a large part of the trade along this road consisted of silk, it was named ‘the Silk Road' by Ferdinand von Richthofen, an eminent German geographer, in 1877.

The Silk Road lasted about 1,600 years. It was not only an ancient international trade route, but also a splendid ‘cultural bridge’ connecting the cultures of China, India, Persia, Arabia, Greek and Rome. In particular, various religions were introduced to the many countries that this route passed through. Also, different styles of art moved along the Silk Road. The influence of Persian and Indian art can be found in Chinese paintings of this time.

One of the consequences of connecting different parts of the world was that it made people in each area desire goods produced in the other areas. Persians and Romans were fond of Chinese silk and this created greater trade along the Silk Road. The Roman love of silk became so great that they even exchanged silk for the same weight in gold. During the Chinese Tang dynasty thirty percent of the trade on the Silk Road consisted of silk.

By the mid-8th century, under the Tang dynasty, the Silk Road had reached its peak. This was in fact due to the peace, internal stability and economic development these rulers brought to their country. The Chinese government carried out many favorable policies that encouraged trade between the East and the West, and this helped in the development of the Silk Road. And, as a result, the most prosperous period of the Silk Road occurred during the Tang dynasty.

At this same time, knowledge and technology also spread from East to West and from West to East. As a result, historians have called the Silk Road the “information superhighway”. In particular, knowledge of Chinese inventions such as the compass and gunpowder moved into other parts of the world along the Silk Road.
The discovery of a sea route from Europe to Asia in the late 15th century was damaging to the Silk Road trade route. With less cost, trouble and danger, it became easier to transport many goods by sea instead of by land. A consequence of this was a significant decline in the Silk Road. The bustling streets, wealthy cities and solid walls of its magnificent cities became covered by the vast sands of the desert, and today, people can only see the splendid history of The Silk Road in the endless ruins that still lie along it.

*BCE: Abbreviation for 'Before Common Era', an alternative to the use of B.C. in designating the first period of the Gregorian Calendar, the era of prehistory and much of antiquity.


Text 3: The Decline of the Route

The ultimate decline of the Silk Road in the 14th and 15th centuries was largely due to the development of the silk route by sea, since it was becoming easier and safer to transport goods by water instead of overland. Vasco de Gama, the Portuguese explorer, opened up sea routes from Europe to the East in the 1490s, and in 1513 the first European trading ships arrived in China.

A disadvantage of the land route was there were many stops along the Silk Road, as goods made their long journey from the East to the West. With each stop merchants would
sell their goods to other merchants, who, in turn, would transport them further along the route to the next major city and sell them again. This process naturally resulted in an increase in the price of the products while they slowly made their way along the route.

In addition, the problem of ‘tribal politics’ between the different peoples who inhabited the areas that the route passed through was another drawback. The success of the Silk Route depended on the countries it passed through being at peace with each other because war made it more difficult to transport goods along the Road. Notably, the end of the Mongol empire in the 14th century led to political instability and war across central Asia.

In contrast to the problems of the land route, the sea route had fewer stops, and so goods travelling by sea could be sold at lower prices than goods transported on the land route. Ships had become stronger, and the sea route opened new markets and commercial opportunities in Southern Asia, which had previously been closed off. However, trade through the sea route sometimes suffered disruption caused by bad weather and piracy. The attitude of later rulers of China in the 16th and 17th centuries also damaged the trade route. The Ming dynasty preferred a foreign policy of isolation instead of contact with other countries. As a result, trade with the West decreased, as did the traffic of ideas along the Road and, consequently, contact between East and West declined.


Text 4: Out of China

The Han dynasty Silk Road began at the magnificent capital city of Xian. The route took traders westwards into Gansu Province through Lanzhou, and on to Jiayuguan. Along the way, it passed through Dunhuang, one of the well-known Chinese historical and cultural cities, and the bright pearl of the ancient Silk Road.

The Silk Road then divided into three main routes. The southern route ran west along the northern foot of Kunlun Mountains to Kashgar – a key point on the Silk Road, and eventually
reached India or instead passed through Afghanistan to reach the coast of the Mediterranean or Arabia. The central route went west along the southern foot of the Tianshan Mountains by Aksu, and then led to Russia. The northern route was along the northern foot of the Tianshan Mountains passing through Urumqi to Almaty, today’s Kazakhstan.

The ancient Silk Road passed through desolate desert areas and over snow-capped peaks. It was full of difficulties and obstacles, but it was the only way for China to connect with the West between the second century B.C.E. and the 10th century. One problem associated with this difficult environment was the drift of deserts into some of the towns situated along the route of the Silk Road. If people had to leave a town or village during times of war, then the sands of the desert in a very short time would cover it. This made it very difficult to return and settle there as soon as peace returned. Living in such places involved a continual battle against the desert, and maintaining good water supplies was always difficult. This was one of the reasons the Silk Road declined. Various ancient cultures, including some lost cultures, have left remnants of themselves along the route. Even though sections of the Silk Road have been buried by sand, the local dry climate has amazingly preserved several sites, which are thousands of years old. These preserved towns and villages contain ancient documents, which tell us a great deal about life on the Silk Road.