GRADE 11
SBA REVIEW

SILK: THE CATERPILLAR THREAD
(GOES WITH JOURNEY ON THE SILK ROAD)

SUMMARIZE INFORMATIONAL TEXT*
AUTHOR’S PURPOSE
Directions: Read the selection and answer the questions. Goes with JOURNEY ON THE SILK ROAD.

Silk: The Caterpillar Thread
by Laurel Kendall

1. Thousands of tiny jaws crunch mulberry leaves, hour after hour and day after day, all day and all night, with a pause now and again to shed an outgrown skin. This is the lifelong banquet of the Bombyx mori, the tiny caterpillar we call “silkworm.” In twenty-five days or more, the feast is done, and the silkworm spins its thick cocoon, a continuous strand of liquid silk that hardens when it touches the air. If left undisturbed in its waterproof sleeping bag, the well-fed caterpillar will become a moth in about two weeks. It will emerge from its wrapping and fly away to lay eggs that will become more hungry silkworms. Cocoons for silk, however, are steamed or boiled before the full-grown moth can destroy the silk thread.

The cocoons must be washed in very hot water to remove the sticky coating from the silken strand. Nimble fingers, usually women’s fingers, gather thin threads from several cocoons and reel them into a single long and lustrous thread, strong enough for sewing or weaving. One hundred ten cocoons yield enough thread to weave a silk...
necktie, six hundred thirty make a blouse, and three thousand make a Japanese woman’s fine kimono.

3 Silk is perhaps the world’s most wondrous fabric. We say “silky” or “silken” to describe lovely skin and hair and often use the expression “as soft as silk.” But silk is also strong, stronger than a steel wire the same size as a thin silken thread. Japanese samurai used silk cords to bind together the pieces of their armor. Surgeons use silk thread to stitch wounds and incisions. Pilots trust their lives to the sturdy silk of their parachutes. And silk is beautiful. Sometimes we say “silken” when we mean luxurious. Silk robes embroidered with dragons of silk thread were clothing fit for a Chinese emperor. Today, even a simple dress or shirt made of silk is a very special piece of clothing.

4 Nearly four thousand years ago, Chinese farmers living along the Yellow River in north-central China unraveled the caterpillar’s threads and began to spin and weave silk. From at least the second century B.C., Chinese silk was traded over great distances to the world outside China. Silk reached the Roman Empire nearly two thousand years ago, and the luxury-loving Romans paid great sums of gold to clothe themselves in silk. For many centuries, Chinese silk was worn in Persia, in Indian kingdoms, in the Middle East, and around the Mediterranean Sea.

5 Brave traders traveled the Silk Road, a network of difficult, often dangerous roads over mountains and across deserts. Some silk traveled a distance of nearly forty-five hundred miles from western China, over the high Pamir Mountains, and through what is now Iran. Silk for the European and North African market was carried to ports in the eastern Mediterranean and shipped by sea.

Brought to You by the Silk Road
Silk was only one of many items traded along the routes of the Silk Road.
Listed below are just a few of the precious goods that these trade routes introduced and spread to the rest of the world.

Glass
Ivory
Apples
Carrots
Pomegranates
Pearls

Paper

Jade
No single merchant caravan traveled the entire length of the Silk Road. Silk and other valuable goods changed hands many times as they were traded and retraded along the way. If merchants survived attacks by bandits, hunger, thirst, and exhaustion, they would grow rich. States along the Silk Road encouraged trade by protecting caravans, and through trade, their cities prospered.

As a link between East and West, the Silk Road influenced world history. Buddhist monks followed the Silk Road and brought Buddhism to China. Many splendid Buddhist shrines still remain in central Asia. Other travelers began to venture further along the trade routes and to write about the peoples they encountered. The most famous Western traveler was Marco Polo, who left Venice as a boy in 1271 and followed the Silk Road to China. He returned twenty-four years later and wrote about his adventures in the land of Kublai Khan. The wonders he described were so fantastic that many refused to believe him. Others, such as Christopher Columbus, wanted nothing more than to follow in Marco Polo’s footsteps. Columbus, seeking a route to China by sea, bumped into the New World before he ever reached the Orient.

Even though silk cloth traveled thousands of miles, the marvel of the silk-producing caterpillar was, for a long time, China’s secret. Romans thought that the shimmering cloth came from “the hair of a sea shrimp.” Eventually, the secret reached other lands—Japan and Korea in the third century, central Asia in the fourth, Byzantium, in the eastern Mediterranean, in the sixth. According to one legend, monks arrived in Byzantium with the silkworm hidden in their hollow walking sticks. Even though silk could be manufactured outside China, Chinese silk remained a very special commodity. Today, although the secret is out, China is still the world’s foremost producer of silk.
QUESTIONS

1. What is the purpose of the text box *Brought to You by the Silk Road*?

   1 A. To identify some items traded on the Silk Road
   1 B. To describe the trade routes on the Silk Road
   1 C. To explain how silk was traded for jade
   1 D. To list some products made from silk

2. Each of these words could describe the Silk Road in the selection. Choose the word you think best describes the Silk Road.

   Risky  Profitable  Influential

   Provide two details from the selection to support your choice.

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3. Which opinion can be supported with information from the selection?

1 A. The Silk Road was a safe route for travelers.
1 B. Silk is the world’s most wondrous fabric.
1 C. Well-fed caterpillars make the best silk.
1 D. Korea produces the finest silk.
ANSWERS

1. A
2. SA
3. B