Sample Comparison Essay Prompt:

Compare Han China and Imperial Rome in terms of trade systems and social structures between 200 BCE and 500 CE.

Essay:

Between 200 BCE and 500 CE, two classical civilizations developed large, centralized empires. Han China and Imperial Rome share features in their social hierarchy in that government involvement meant greater respect in society. However, they differed in that Confucianism provided a basis for China’s social structure, whereas in Rome, it did not. In terms of trade systems, both Han China and Imperial Rome shared a common trade connection along the Great Silk Road. However, Han China’s international economic power was much greater than that of Imperial Rome.

In Han China and Imperial Rome, government involvement by its citizens resulted in greater degrees of respect for them. Civic participation was among the highest honors possible in both classical societies. However, not everyone had the potential to become government officials. For example, due to their low standing and limited economic resources, farmers would have had little chance to become government officials in either of these societies. Most government jobs in both societies were left to the aristocracy. The aristocracy had access to wealth for education and perhaps bribes to pay off officials for positions. Rome’s imperial government was led by the emperor. In turn, he directly appointed bureaucrats to carry out his orders. Senators, though by this point in Rome’s history had little true power, still had the respect of the plebeian (commoner) class. With these titles came access to wealth and land. Likewise, in Han China, the government was overseen by the emperor who inherited his title as “Son of Heaven”. A unique feature of Han China’s government was the civil service system, in which bureaucrats were often selected based upon their passing of Confucian civil service exams. Rome, however, did not use this method of selecting bureaucrats. Instead, Rome’s emperors directly selected whom they wanted to hold bureaucratic positions. Nonetheless, in both societies, the holding of government positions resulted in holding the highest ranks in society and winning the greatest prestige. In contrast to Rome’s social hierarchy, in China, the social class system during the Han was determined by the Confucian philosophy. Confucianism emphasizes respect for society’s elders and people in positions of authority. It also glorifies good leaders, including the emperor, who acts like a father-figure to his citizens. Acting in a way that benefits others in society is expected. As a result, merchants in China are ranked as mean people – among the lowest in society. This is due to their selfish behavior of seeking profit. On the other hand, farmers and artisans are ranked higher because they work to produce tangible objects that benefit others. All citizens are expected to honor and respect the emperor, no matter what.

In terms of international trade, both Han China and Imperial Rome participated in the trade of the Great Silk Road. Both civilizations participated in this network because they each wanted products that the other could not produce. For example, from China, Rome demanded silks, spices, and art. In exchange, China demanded few imports. Among these few items were horses. China and Rome were dependent upon middlemen along the Great Silk Road to pass along these items until they reached their final destinations. In addition to goods traveling the Great Silk Road, religions, inventions, diseases were also transferred. For example, Christianity was introduced throughout the Roman Middle East and Buddhism was introduced to China from India during the Han. A plague that helped bring an end to Han China and Imperial Rome at the end of the classical era was transmitted along the Great Silk Road, as well. A critical economic difference between the two empires was that Han China had a much more favorable balance of trade than Imperial Rome. The reason for this difference was that the value and numbers of unique Chinese luxury goods far exceeded those produced by Rome. Rome had few luxury goods to offer other civilizations. Because of this, in exchange for China’s silk, spices, paper, and jewelry, Rome was forced to give up their valuable silver and gold resources. China was in a much better economic situation than Imperial Rome as a result.

In both Han China and Imperial Rome, between 200 BCE and 500 CE, citizens who held government positions were the most respected in society. A key difference in their social structures is that the Confucian philosophy guided China’s, whereas Rome’s did not. In terms of trade, both civilizations participated in the Great Silk Road, but China developed more wealth from international trade than Rome.