CITIES

The word for “city” in Chinese literally means “walls and markets,” an adequate if somewhat minimal definition of a traditional urban settlement. All cities in Tang China theoretically had ramparts and bazaars. Officially, according to the census of 754, there were 1,859 cities—321 prefectures and 1,538 counties—throughout the empire. The actual figure was somewhat smaller since prefectures were also the seats for some counties. A number of the prefectures and counties were located in poor backwaters that had neither the resources to afford nor the strategic value to justify the construction of outer walls. They also had populations too small to warrant labeling them “cities.” Those settlements had bamboo fences or palisades instead of walls.

All cities—capitals, prefectures, and counties—were seats of government administration. Commerce, industry, transportation, and communication were important but secondary facets of their character. Cities never enjoyed any significant autonomy from the central government. Nor were they independent from the countryside that surrounded them. The figures for populations of county seats included both the citizens within their walls and the inhabitants of the villages within their jurisdictions. Unlike cities in classical and medieval Europe, they had only a hazy identity of their own. Most Chinese in ancient times thought of themselves as residents of villages or urban wards where their families originated, and where their ancestral graveyards were situated in the
adjacent countryside. City walls were purely defensive; they did not serve as rigid boundaries between the rural and the urban. Cities did, however, drain wealth from rural sectors in the form of taxes and profits from trade. Rural riches provided the luxurious lifestyles that the urban upper classes enjoyed. The accumulated wealth also made cities the primary targets for pillaging rebels and marauding foreign invaders.

The greatest of the cities were the capitals, Changan in the west and Luoyang in the east. They housed imperial palaces as well as compounds—the August Enceintes—for the bureaus of the central government. Changan had been the main seat of the Tang since its founding in 618, and was probably the largest city in the world at the time, with a population of perhaps 2 million souls. Its prestige was so great that the Japanese adopted its layout for their imperial metropolis at Nara in the eighth century. At the beginning of the Tang, Luoyang, which had suffered greatly from destruction wrought by warfare, was the seat of a military governor and a prefecture. In 657 the emperor raised it to the status of capital because frequent famines in Changan, which suffered from a supply problem, forced the imperial court to move there. Luoyang, however, remained underpopulated until 691, when Empress Wu, who favored it over its western counterpart, had more than 100,000 families, half a million people, transplanted there from the region around Changan. Thereafter, it became the second largest city in China with a population of about 1 million souls. Luoyang sat astride the Luo River close to the end of the Grand Canal, so foodstuffs from the fertile south easily made their way into the city. Except during her reign it was the secondary capital of the Tang. Furthermore, the court never visited it after 743, when Changan's supply problem was solved. The dynasty also designated Taiyuan as its northern capital, but the city never became the seat of government.

Some cities were more than seats of government. They were also centers of economic activity. The greatest of them in the Tang was Yangzhou, located on the Grand Canal close to the Yangtze River, where commodities from the interior of China and overseas were transshipped and sent to northern metropolises. It was also the headquarters for the national salt monopoly as well as the greatest industrial town in the period. It produced admirable bronze mirrors; fine felt hats that citizens of Changan esteemed; sugar refined from cane; boats that sold for 5 million coppers; elegant, expensive furniture; and beautiful silk textiles. Canton was the greatest entrepôt of foreign trade. There ships from Persia, Arabia, and southeast Asia off-loaded rare perfumes, woods, jewels, plants, drugs, dyes, and other goods that Chinese merchants sent north to satisfy the tastes of the rich and powerful in the capitals. Chengdu in the southwest was the greatest center for the production of paper and printed books, both of which were Chinese inven-
tions. It also served as a haven for emperors fleeing rebels who attacked and seized Changan.

Most Tang cities lay on flatlands next to rivers that served as the cheapest routes for transportation. That meant that spring floods periodically devastated towns as winter snows melted in the mountains to the west and raised the levels of rivers above the levees built to prevent inundations. Luoyang, which sat astride a river, was particularly vulnerable to such disasters. Floods on occasion destroyed as much as 18 percent of the city. The most readily available and cheapest building material in the lowlands where towns were erected was dirt. Consequently, engineers and laborers built walls by ramming thin layers of loose earth in wood frames to form the core of the ramparts. They then faced them with brick or stone to prevent erosion by rain and constructed battlements on top to provide for their defense.

The outer walls of Changan, the city about which we have the most information, were about eighteen feet high. They encompassed an area some five miles by six, about thirty square miles. The purpose of the ramparts was to provide security for the residents within. They were barriers for preventing intrusions by assassins and bandits, but not insurmountable obstacles, as Tang law recognized. Climbing over city walls was an offense punishable by ninety blows with a thick rod for walls of the counties and one year of penal servitude for walls of the prefectures and capitals. As defensive bulwarks for impeding attacks by foreign invaders and indigenous rebels, the ramparts were less than satisfactory. They rarely withstood prolonged sieges, and emperors usually abandoned their capitals at the first signs of imminent military attack. Furthermore, the efficacy of walls as impediments was somewhat dubious, for wild animals sauntered into cities from time to time. In 769 a tiger settled in the ancestral shrine of a chief minister in Changan, and a general dispatched by the throne slew it with a crossbow. Another tiger entered a ward of the city in 782 and wounded two men before it was captured. In 830 a bear lumbered into a Buddhist monastery in Changan. Deer were also frequent intruders at the capital.

Gates in the walls provided access to city interiors. Smaller metropolises probably had at least one gate for each direction, but in Changan there were three each in the east, south, and west walls, as well as a dozen or so in the north that opened onto imperial parks and palaces. Each gate had three portals, and since traffic traveled to the right in Tang times, men, horses, and carriages entered Changan through the right portal (as one faced the gate from outside) and departed through the left. The middle opening was no doubt reserved for imperial or ritual processions. Gates were weak points in city defenses and therefore were heavily reinforced. Their keepers shut them at dusk, when the curfew began, and secured them with cylinder locks. No one, except for couriers
with imperial decrees of an urgent nature, could enter or leave the city during the night. Failure to fasten the bolts of the locks or destruction of them while opening the gates was an offense punishable by eighty blows with a thick rod. In the capitals, gates were also prominent urban monuments and often were topped with pillared halls. Emperors made progresses (journeys) to them to see officials off when they were traveling to new posts in the provinces or retiring from office, as well as to pay their respects to deceased ministers or other eminent persons when their funeral corteges were leaving the cities to make their way to tombs outside the city.

Inside city walls, thoroughfares divided the urban landscape into a grid. In Changan there were eleven avenues running from north to south and fourteen streets running from east to west. The roads were constructed of rammed earth and, being unpaved, turned to muddy bogs when it rained. The narrowest were 82 feet wide, those terminating in the gates of the outer ramparts were 328 feet wide, and the imperial way located in the exact center of the city, running from north to south, was 492 feet wide. The width of roads in the capitals, enormous even by modern standards, no doubt created excellent firebreaks in an age when water pumps for extinguishing conflagrations were unknown. Although terrible fires broke out in some sectors of the city—a fire consumed 4,000 homes, warehouses, and other buildings in the eastern market during 843—Changan suffered none of the citywide holocausts like the one that destroyed 17,000 homes in a southern city during 807. Roads in that town were unquestionably narrower.

The Tang law code established regulations for the control of traffic along urban thoroughfares. Fifty blows of the thin rod was the penalty for speeders, that is, riders or coachmen who raced their horses or carriages down a street or lane of a city into a crowd of three or more people. If they injured or killed a person, the punishments were sixty blows with the thick rod and execution by strangulation, respectively. If they injured or killed a domestic animal, they had to pay restitution to the owner of the animal. However, if the coachman or rider had just cause for speeding, such as summoning a physician to treat an illness or delivering an imperial decree, he was free from punishment unless he maimed or killed.

Precisely who maintained law and order in the streets of most cities during the Tang is unclear except for the capitals. There the responsibility fell to the Gold Bird Guards, who patrolled the thoroughfares day and night. Every intersection had a police post with thirty guards at major crossroads and five at minor ones. All gates had such posts with 100 men at the most important and 20 at the least important. The Gold Bird Guards were not always effective in carrying out their duties. In 838 some highwaymen shot at Chief Minister Li as he was making his
way to an audience with the emperor in the predawn hours. Li suffered a slight wound, his retainers fled in all directions, and his startled horse raced back to his mansion. The thugs intercepted Li at the gate of his ward, assaulted him, and cut the tail off his horse. He barely escaped with his life. The emperor commanded army troops to take over guarding the streets of the capital. It was several days before calm returned to Changan.

Drainage ditches eleven feet wide and seven feet deep flanked both verges of the avenues and streets in Changan. The installation of the drains naturally entailed the construction of bridges, four at all intersections. The ditches were not sewers. Human waste was a commodity carted to the countryside and sold to farmers, who used it as fertilizer for their crops. There was a family in Changan that for generations had engaged in collecting night soil from dwellings in the city and had become wealthy from the trade. They had a beautiful mansion replete with fine furniture, a staff of slaves to do their bidding, elegant clothes for their women to wear, and herds of domestic animals to supply meat for their table.

From the founding of Changan in 582 emperors had trees planted—elms and junipers and pagodas—alongside the ditches to provide shade and elegance for the metropolis. Citizens were probably most pleased when the throne ordered the planting of fruit trees along the avenues in 740, an act that enriched their diets as well as their surroundings. Emperors periodically had to order the replanting of trees. Gales occasionally uprooted them. In 835 a great wind blew down 10,000. Heavy snow and rainfall in 820 toppled many. In addition, citizens chopped them down for fuel and building materials in times of unrest when the authorities governing towns were unable to enforce the laws.

Canals were essential fixtures of cities, more so in the south, which had more watercourses than the north. The great metropolis of Yangzhou, which was crisscrossed with canals, had more boats than carriages. Changan had five canals, all but one of which delivered water to parks in the outer city, lakes in the gardens of patricians, and the grounds of imperial palaces. The fifth, designed to transport lumber and completed in 742, flowed into the western market, where the wood was stored in a pool. In 766 the mayor of the capital extended one of the canals eastward across the city to furnish citizens with firewood and charcoal, which were in short supply. The channel was eight feet wide and ten feet deep. Canals were weak points in city walls, as Tang law acknowledged. Entering a city through a canal was an offense punishable by ninety blows with a thick rod and eighty blows if the trespasser was caught in the water but had not yet entered the town.

The area around Changan was overpopulated and suffered from a lack of grain from the early seventh century to the early eighth century. That
was partly due to the difficult and expensive carting of the cereals that had to travel roads on the last leg of their journey. In 743 the Commissioner of Land and River Transport constructed a canal from the junction of the Yellow and Wei rivers to the capital, and dug a lake just outside the city to receive boats. The following year 1,750,000 bushels of grain arrived from the east and south. Changan rarely suffered a shortage thereafter. A canal also supplied Luoyang with its needs. It terminated at a lake inside the city where transport boats anchored.

WARDS

Avenues and streets divided cities into square or rectangular wards—Changan had 110 of them and Luoyang 113—similar to blocks in modern American towns. Unlike their modern counterparts, however, they were far larger and walled. In Changan the size of the smallest was 68 acres and that of the largest, 233 acres. The wards encompassed houses, mansions, government offices, monasteries, temples, parks, workshops, and inns. In Changan, newly rebuilt in the late sixth century, the southernmost wards, four to the east and west of the main north-south avenue, had no great dwellings, at least in the early eighth century. Farmers raised crops there. In both capitals there were also gardens for cultivating medicinal herbs used in the palace; growing vegetables served at imperial feasts and sacrifices; and raising bamboo to supply the Department of Agriculture. The southern portion of one ward in Changan had no dwellings at all, only graves. Ironically, though the region surrounding Changan was overpopulated, the capital itself was underpopulated.

Walls of rammed earth, nine or ten feet high in Chang an, enclosed the wards. Sometimes the walls were inadvertently erected in perilous locations. On July 30, 720, the walls of one ward in Changan collapsed during the night and a large pool formed. The disaster, probably caused by a sinkhole created when ground water eroded the limestone bedrock, destroyed more than 500 homes.

Each of the wards was crisscrossed by north-south and east-west roads that terminated in gates. Maintaining the integrity of the arteries was a difficult task for the government. Citizens encroached on the roads to plant crops, to excavate earth to build kilns for baking bricks or roof tiles, and to build walls and dwellings. The penalty for infringing on the streets was seventy blows of the thick rod, but only fifty blows with the thin rod if the infraction was committed to grow food. Enforcement of that regulation was not particularly effective in the late eighth century, however. In 776 the throne ordered all structures built in the roads of the wards and markets destroyed. The lanes of the wards were unpaved. In the late ninth century rain mired a road in one of them, and a jackass carrying firewood got stuck in the mud, blocking the way for a ruffian.
Infuriated, he picked up the beast by all four of its legs and threw it several paces into a drainage ditch.

Roads divided wards into quarters. The quarters had alleys that were crooked or serpentine, so the grid pattern favored by Chinese city planners since antiquity broke down at that point. A few names of the alleys—Felt Alley and the Alley of the Jingling Harness—survive in Tang sources.

The function of ward walls was to provide internal security by preventing the movement of people. The law clearly asserted the principle. Ninety blows with a thick rod was the punishment for climbing over ward walls. Each of a ward’s roads terminated in gates that a headman, who was in charge of affairs within the ward, barred at dusk. As the sun went down in Changan, a tattoo of 400 beats on a drum signaled the closing of palace gates and a second, of 600 beats, the closing of ward and city gates. The length of the tattoos gave people ample time to return to their dwellings before the ward gates closed. In the predawn hours drummers beat another tattoo of 3,000 beats that was the signal for opening the gates. Each of the avenues also had drums that sounded at curfew. The law forbade citizens to travel on the main thoroughfares of the cities outside the wards during curfew, but it did not restrict their nocturnal movements within the wards. The statute, however, permitted public commissioners bearing official documents, as well as marriage processions, to use the avenues and streets after curfew. In both cases they had to obtain a permit from the county government first. It also allowed private citizens who needed to find a doctor or procure medicine for the treatment of the ill to travel, as well as those who needed to leave their ward to announce a death. However, they had to have a certificate issued by the ward headman. Anyone else found wandering outside the wards during the night by the Gold Bird Guard was subject to twenty blows of the thin rod. In 808, however, the throne had a eunuch who got drunk and violated the curfew beaten to death. The emperor also demoted the officer in charge of the Gold Bird Guard and banished him from the capital.

Woe betide the reveler or criminal who tried to ignore the hail of the night patrol. According to the law, if a guard encountered a traveler on the main streets outside his ward and the traveler failed to respond to his queries, the guard was to twang his bowstring. If the wretch refused to answer his second call, the sentry was to loose a warning arrow to one side of him. If the fool still did not reply, the watchman was to shoot him down.

Aristocrats and high-ranking officials preferred living in the wards of Changan’s eastern half. One particular ward along the northeast wall of the city attracted their attention because during the Sui dynasty a clairvoyant declared that the place had the aura of nobility. No doubt the
upper classes believed that a mansion there would perpetuate their good fortune and elite status. The western half of the city was far more populous than the eastern, and full of drifters and transients. It also appears to have been the district where foreigners lived. A Turkish prince and his wife had a mansion there, and most of the foreign churches were located in the northwest.

The lowest inhabitants of cities were the impoverished, who lived wherever they could find shelter and sought sustenance by begging from those better off than themselves. In the early eighth century a man led a cow that had a human hand more than a foot in length hanging between its forelegs through the wards of a city. He exhibited the mutant in the expectation that passersby would give him food. An impoverished woman and her father sang songs in the streets of wards to eke out a living. A general was so smitten with her voice that he took her as one of his private entertainers. Not all panhandlers were human. A clever artisan who was in charge of the imperial factories once carved a Buddhist monk from wood and placed it in the market of a provincial city. The automaton carried a bowl in its hand, was able to move on its own, and begged for money. When its bowl was full of coppers, a mechanized bolt abruptly shot out, locking the coins in the dish so that no one could filch them. The wooden monk could speak on its own and say “Alms.” The market folk flocked to see the spectacle. Because they wanted the automaton to speak, the donations made to watch it perform filled the bowl several thousand times each day.

Emperors were not happy to have derelicts roaming the streets of the capitals. They considered the cities to be their own special domiciles. In 734 the throne banned beggars from the streets of the metropolises and consigned them to the Wards for the Sick, Buddhist foundations that cared for the ill, aged, orphaned, and poor. The government oversaw the wards and capital officials provided the money for their maintenance from their own funds. In 738 the emperor also assigned revenues from newly opened fields near Changan for the relief of the poor and of commoners who had returned to their lands after fleeing. Those welfare measures did not survive the rebellion of An Lushan in 756.

After the rebellion the structure of the wards broke down along with the political order. Previously only nobles and high-ranking ministers could legally construct gates for their mansions that opened directly onto the main avenues of Changan outside the wards. Afterward other citizens who had not enjoyed such privileges before followed suit. They began knocking down ward walls and encroaching on the roads to build their dwellings. In 831 the Commissioner for Patrolling the Streets reported that people having gates opening onto the avenues did not observe curfew carefully, opening them before dawn and closing them after nightfall. As a result it was easy for thieves to flee and hide on their
property. So the official proposed that all private gates, except for those of the nobles and ministers, be barricaded.

MARKETS

In theory every city had a market, but small and impoverished counties probably did not. Those that did, were official markets ruled by Market Commandants appointed by the central government. In 707 the throne issued a decree forbidding the establishment of markets outside cities. There were, however, exceptions. The state operated periodic markets along the northern frontier, mainly to purchase horses from nomadic, pastoral peoples. There were also unofficial rural markets, called "markets in the grass" (northern China) or "markets in the wilds" (south China). They arose spontaneously in the countryside to serve the needs of peasants living more than a day's ride from a city. The farmers traded their produce for goods—the most important of which was salt, which was not available in many places—supplied by traveling merchants. At first they had no stores, shops, or warehouses, but toward the end of the dynasty some of them acquired such facilities.

The government controlled all urban markets through the agency of Market Commandants and their small staffs. The duties of the commandants were to register merchants and their establishments; to inspect weights and measures to ensure that they met government standards; to weed out counterfeit coins; and to prevent the sale of inferior goods that did not meet official requirements for size, weight, and quality of materials or workmanship. The statutes required market officials to send all weights and measures to the imperial treasuries in the capitals or the offices of prefectures and counties in the eighth moon of every year so they could be tested to ensure their accuracy, and stamped with a seal. It was the responsibility of market officials to issue certificates of purchase for slaves, horses, cattle, camels, mules, and donkeys within three days after the transactions. In addition it was their duty to prevent price-fixing, monopolies, and other unfair market practices by merchants. According to regulations, they had to set the prevailing prices for all commodities every ten days. If they fraudulently acquired goods by setting the prices higher or lower than their real value at the time, the government ordered them to resign, stripped them of all their bureaucratic and aristocratic titles for a period of six years, and forced them to pay double the value of the property involved.

The greatest markets in the Tang were those in Changan. The capital had two of them, each of which was somewhat bigger than two of the largest wards (i.e., over 466 acres). There were two roads running east to west and two running north to south that were 100 paces wide each. The streets divided the markets into nine sectors. The office of the
Market Commandant was in the central block, as were those of two bureaus charged with stabilizing prices. The first of them was responsible for disbursing cereals during famines, when grain prices soared. It released reserves amassed from taxes and held in government granaries. Its duty was to flood the market with cereals at prices below market value so that the price of food dropped and people who were starving had enough to survive. Prefectures also had such offices as well as granaries. The second bureau, abolished in the 730s, was responsible for stabilizing prices of other commodities. It dumped surplus goods that government agencies had not used and property that the state had confiscated from nobles, officials, and others who had committed high crimes. The government was about the business of curbing inflation.

The nine sectors of Changan's markets, as well as other urban bazaars, were subdivided into lanes (hang), each of which was devoted to a single commodity and was required by law to erect at its entrance a sign with a title that designated its specialty. All retail shops or stalls that sold a given product were located in the lane with the appropriate sign. Warehouses and wholesale outlets lined the outer walls of the market. Only a dozen or so of the names for the hang in the capitals and other cities have survived in Tang literature: Meat (where a man once purchased the head of white cow to concoct a nostrum for curing some ailment); Iron (where one could find a clever fortune-teller); Apothecary (where an emperor once ordered ingredients for a Taoist elixir that would ensure his immortality); Ready-Made Clothes; Pongee (low-grade silk); Axes; Steamed Buns; Bridles and Saddles (that had a tavern); Weights and Measures; Gold- and Silversmiths; Fishmongers; and Greengrocers. Since the eastern market of Changan alone had 220 lanes, these titles represent a minute fraction of the goods and services offered in the lanes.

There were also businesses in the markets whose hang names are unknown. Some sold horses, mules, cows, pigs, and slaves that were kept in pens. The western market in Changan had a pig sty where a sow gave birth to a piglet with one head, three ears, two bodies, and eight legs in the summer of 813. A firm in the eastern market, the Jackass Express, rented donkeys to travelers who did not wish to walk to their destinations in the city. At another firm a patron could purchase foreign musical instruments. Brewers produced an ale called Melody of the Western Market, no doubt because that was the location of their establishment. A man in that bazaar sold porridge for a profit and made a fortune from his enterprise. In contrast, the wife of a wealthy merchant, who was a devout Buddhist and donated his mansion to the church for conversion into a monastery, sold excellent cooked cereals at a cheap price. There was an establishment that sold fried pastries and steamed dumplings in the western market, and also a restaurant or delicatessen.

By the beginning of the ninth century, a large increase in trade led to
new developments in urban markets. Protobanks—there was one in the western market of Changan—emerged that offered a safe-deposit service. For a fee they took custody of gold, silver, and coins to protect them from theft. The firms issued checks to their customers, who could use them to draw funds from their stored valuables. The checks were the ancestors of the world’s first paper currency, which a provincial government in China issued during 1024. Gold- and silversmiths also issued such promissory notes.

The hours for trading at markets throughout the empire were more restrictive than the curfew. According to a Tang statute they opened at noon with a tattoo of 300 beats on a drum and closed an hour and three quarters before dusk with 300 beats on a gong. However, night markets must have flourished in residential wards because the gates of the central markets closed before nightfall. There is little information about them, but no doubt they served the needs of customers who had neglected to purchase essential items during the day at central markets. The throne banned the night markets in Changan in 841, but, like many such edicts, that decree was probably ineffective because the bazaars were critical to the lives of urban dwellers.

Because the mansions of nobles, mandarins, and other eminent people were mostly located in the eastern half of Changan, the shops of the eastern market catered to the rich and famous by selling costly and exotic wares. Its warehouses held rare goods imported from all over the world. Although commodities sold in the western market were of a more utilitarian and pragmatic sort, it was not without its own exotic wares. It had a Persian bazaar. The Persians, whose empire fell to the Arabs in the early seventh century, specialized in stones, precious metals, gems, elephant tusks, sacred relics, and above all pearls. After the rebellion of An Lushan the western market also had a thousand or more “Uighur” moneylenders who adopted Chinese dress, apparently to conceal their ethnic identities. Several Central Asian peoples assumed Uighur names—no doubt to avail themselves of the extraordinary protection that the Turks enjoyed—to pursue the lucrative business. The moneylenders advanced cash to the sons and younger brothers of nobles, military officers, merchants, and commoners. The young men squandered the money on amusing themselves. The usurers made enormous profits from their transactions. In 831 a “Uighur” sued the son of a grand general who had failed to repay a debt of nearly 11 million coppers. Upset over the scandal, the emperor not only banished the general but banned all commercial dealings between Chinese and foreigners except for trade in livestock.

Merchants were not the only proprietors of shops in the markets. Buddhist monasteries also established retail outlets and businesses that made loans against security. The income from those enterprises was sometimes
substantial, and found its way into the church’s treasuries. The throne banned Buddhists from participating in such commercial activities in 845.

The western market of Changan also had a pond for releasing the living. A Buddhist monk had it dug and filled with water in the early eighth century. The notion was that by purchasing fish and freeing them in the pool, one could accrue merit for one’s ancestors that would absolve them from sin, lead to liberation from purgatory, and assure their rebirth in a favorable existence, such as an official, in the next life. No doubt monks recaptured the creatures—as they have in modern times—to resell to the next supplicant seeking salvation. Buddhist monasteries had identical ponds in the Tang. Ironically, the government conducted most executions under the solitary willow tree near the pond in the western market.

Not all trading took place in the great urban markets. By the ninth century some retail establishments, such as shops that sold fine silk textiles, existed in residential quarters. Furthermore, throughout the Tang, peddlers roamed the wards of Changan. A hawker who acquired the nickname Camel because he was a hunchback, pushed a small cart from which he sold pastries in the streets. Once he crashed into an overturned wagon of bricks and spilled his snacks on the ground. When he removed the bricks with a mattock, he found a pot of gold. He became a very wealthy man and purchased a mansion in the capital. A fellow tradesman who was a westerner had a small shop by the gate of a ward. He lit his lamps and stove in the predawn hours to sell breakfast. A vendor peddled fish on the main north-south street of Changan. Villagers outside the capital brought firewood in from the country on the backs of donkeys to sell in Changan. Huineng, the founder of the southern school of Chan (Zen), sold firewood in a city near Canton because his father, a banished official, died when he was very young. While doing so, he was instantaneously enlightened after hearing the reading of a Buddhist sutra. There were also vendors of oil who carried their vats on their back and sometimes were as unwilling as the sellers of kindling to yield the road to an official.

Nor was manufacturing concentrated in the official markets. As previously noted, the makers of bricks and tiles were in the habit of digging up dirt from roads in the wards where their works were located. In the ninth century there was an iron forge in a ward just west of the eastern market whose blacksmith also dabbled in selling horses in the street. Some brewers also made fine ale at the Toad Tumulus, an ancient grave mound in a ward beside the eastern wall of Changan. A craftsman of fine musical instruments had a workshop in the northeastern section of Changan. Where water was plentiful, as in Luoyang, there were gristmills for grinding grain into flour inside the city. A Buddhist monastery in that city had one with four waterwheels.
Various shops in the roads of wards copied Buddhist sutras and cast statues that they sold to the faithful along with food and ale. The emperor forbade that commerce in 714, ordering the clergy in monasteries to transcribe scriptures for the laity who wanted them instead. Laws proscribing activities that had become popular were generally effective only in the short term, so the trade in such articles probably survived into later times. The throne had banned the manufacture of statues by craftsmen for public sale in the first half of the seventh century, without lasting success.

There was also a variety of services offered outside the main markets. The capitals had many inns, both private and public, to accommodate travelers. A ward along the west wall of Changan had a funeral parlor where one could hire square-faced (masked) exorcists who expelled demons at graves, as well as rent hearses and other equipment for funerals. Such establishments would, for a fee, provide professional wailers who keened during funeral processions. On occasion they held contests to determine which of their mourners was the greatest singer of dirges. According to a short story, such a match took place on a major thoroughfare of the capital and attracted tens of thousands of spectators. Two firms put up 50,000 coppers to pay for food and drink as a prize for the winner. The competition began at dawn with an exhibition of hearses and other funerary paraphernalia. At noon the singers entered the arena and sang their laments. The winner reduced the crowd to sobbing and weeping with his rendition of "Dew on the Shallots," a classic funeral elegy. An old madam in a bordello in the Gay Quarters was very wealthy and rented a large store of clothes and dishes to others of her profession who wished to entertain male guests. A physiognomist, who read people's faces to foretell their futures, had a place in one of Changan's southeastern wards. He was so good at his occult art that citizens flocked there in hordes.

Buddhist monasteries ran public bathhouses in cities. A monk erected such an establishment in Luoyang, and the citizens of the capital, clergy and laity, the wealthy and the destitute, thronged there. It was open only on the first five days of each moon, but it attracted a steady stream of patrons. Some 2,000 to 3,000 customers bathed in its waters yearly during the seventy or seventy-five days when it was in operation.

The markets had their complement of taverns, but there were also pubs scattered throughout cities. In Changan westerners operated taverns, favored by poets, in the wards along the southeast wall of the city. They employed white-skinned, green-eyed, blond women from Central Asia to sing and dance so that patrons would spend more money on ale. Aside from the taverns inside Changan's walls, there were pubs where villagers living along some nineteen miles of the eastern road outside the city sold ale to travelers. Sojourners called the drinks that those es-
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tablishments purveyed “goblets for dismounting the horse.” Since the Chinese rarely drank without eating, pubs were also restaurants or snack shops.

Taverns dispensed ale on credit, and their proprietors, sometimes women, entrusted the collection of debts to their waiters. In his youth the most renowned painter of horses in the Tang caught the attention of a great poet when he went to settle a bar tab at the versifier’s home. While waiting for the money, he passed the time drawing men and horses on the ground. The poet was so impressed with his work that he bestowed an annual stipend of 20,000 coppers on the lad for more than ten years, to sustain him while he studied painting.

OFFICES

Every city in Tang China had a government office. All of them were walled compounds. In the provinces they contained the local governor’s reception hall, where he conducted all of his official business, including criminal trials. Both prefectures and counties had residences at the offices for the governors and commandants, as well as for their families, if they accompanied them to their posts. They might have gardens with an abundance of white flowers. The compounds included offices for subordinate officials and prisons where wardens kept close watch over witnesses and criminals. They also housed local schools, with shrines for Confucius and his disciples, where teachers instructed their charges in the classics.

In the courtyard before the prefectural governor’s reception hall, officials, military officers, commoners, and clergy gathered and stood, in positions fixed by their ranks, on the east side to hear the reading of imperial amnesties. Couriers of the rapid relay system brought the decrees, written on yellow paper, from the capital. When everyone was settled, the governor emerged from his hall at the north end of the square with a military escort of twenty officers, and stood on a carpet facing west. Army officers brought a stand covered with purple cloth and placed it before him. A judicial official spread the imperial decrees on it. Two legal mandarins read parts of the edicts alternately in loud voices. The objective of this recital was to ensure that the emperor’s subjects understood his will. When the reading concluded, the governor dismissed all in attendance.

The largest concentrations of public buildings were in the two capitals. Each had compounds for its mayor and two county commandants. They also had huge, walled compounds—the August Enceintes—that contained the bureaus of the central government. Official agencies were also located in wards outside that compound. The Directorate of the Sons of State, which governed the most prestigious schools in the empire, was
just southeast of the August Enceinte in Changan. In the early eighth century the throne converted one entire ward of the capital, formerly a market, into a camp for training soldiers in the use of the crossbow. In the ninth century there were also military camps in the outer city of that capital. In the last years of the dynasty Changan’s wards also contained institutes for training musicians and entertainers.

By far the largest number of offices in Changan’s wards were the headquarters of prefectural officials who traveled to the capital and made reports to the throne on affairs in their districts once a year, in the autumn and winter. During 643 the emperor discovered that they had no quarters in the capital and were renting rooms where they lived together with merchants. He therefore ordered the agencies in charge of construction to build them mansions. In 691, 2,800 of the local officials arrived in Luoyang to attend court, so the number of their dwellings must have been substantial. After the rebellion of An Lushan, provincial mandarins no longer made annual trips to Changan. Military governors took over the mansions and turned them into transmission offices. They sent their dispatches there for forwarding to the throne. The bureaus also became credit institutions. Southern merchants who transported their goods north and sold them in the capital turned the money that they made from their transactions over to agents at the transmission offices of the districts from which they came. The officials then used the funds to pay the taxes that their provinces owed the central government and issued the merchants certificates, known as “flying money.” When the traders returned to their homes in the south, they presented the certificates to local authorities, who paid them the amount of money specified on the certificates. The system saved the merchants the risk and burden of carrying their profits with them as they traveled, and spared the government the expense of transporting taxes to Changan.

CHURCHES

All great cities in the Tang had religious establishments of one sort or another. In the early eighth century Changan had ninety-one Buddhist monasteries (sixty-four for monks and twenty-seven for nuns), sixteen Taoist temples (ten for priests and six for priestesses), two Nestorian Christian churches, and four Zoroastrian shrines. Those figures did not include small Buddhist chapels or the ancestral shrines of powerful families. Some of the monasteries and temples were immense, occupying entire wards in the capital. One of the Buddhist establishments there had more than ten courtyards with 1,897 bays (the space between pillars) where 300 officially ordained monks resided.

The size and magnificence of the churches in Changan were the result primarily of patronage from the throne, nobility, and eminent political
figures, who usually endowed them in order to earn merit toward salvation for themselves and their ancestors. In 631 the emperor established a Taoist abbey in gratitude to priests who had cured the heir apparent's illness. The Tang dynasty had a special affinity for Taoism because the family claimed descent from Lao Tzu. When the throne dubbed a prince heir apparent in 656, it converted his mansion into an abbey whose verandas, halls, murals, statuary, and priests' quarters were beyond compare. In the early eighth century, when the daughter of a princess took vows as a Taoist priestess, the court converted her mansion into an abbey. In 747, when the husband of a princess died, she requested permission to become a Taoist priestess, and the emperor established an abbey for her. The third emperor of the Tang established the most famous Buddhist monastery in the city—it occupied a whole ward—in the memory of his mother. The mother of an emperor in the mid-ninth century endowed a Buddhist monastery with 200,000 cash and three carts laden with embroidered cloth to accrue merit for her son's deceased wife. Even enslaved palace ladies collected money among themselves to erect a pagoda. One official donated his mansion as an act of repentance for executing a monk who had been falsely accused of having intercourse with a maidservant. The most powerful eunuch of the early eighth century donated his mansion in Changan for conversion into a Buddhist monastery. After the casting of a bell for the church, he convened a vegetarian feast for members of the imperial court. He demanded that his guests contribute 100,000 coppers each time they struck the bell. Someone who wished to curry the eunuch's favor struck the bell twenty times and forked over 2 million cash.

It was also the habit of the throne to have buildings in palaces dismantled and given to churches, which reassembled them to construct religious halls. Empress Wu donated one of her dressing rooms to a Buddhist monastery, and in 713 the emperor gave his bedchamber to a cloister. In the early eighth century the throne presented a stage for dancing to a Buddhist cloister. In 730 the emperor bestowed perhaps the largest of such gifts when he wanted a Taoist abbey erected with utmost speed. He ordered four palace halls dismantled to construct two halls for venerating the gods, a meditation chamber, and gates. In the early ninth century another emperor had 300 men restore the same abbey at a cost of 1 million coppers. At the cost of 1,000 lengths of silk and 171 pounds of tea, he also had an enclosed passageway built from the palace to the temple. Then he paid 5 million coppers and 207 bushels of grain to sponsor a great rite at the church.

Some emperors had halls for their own portraits established at monasteries in Changan. In 713 the monarch allocated 20 million coppers and assigned 1,000 craftsmen to the construction of such an edifice. Not only did his likeness adorn the walls, but paintings of ghosts and gods
that he had removed from the palace were installed there. A princess built a portrait hall that had landscape murals on its walls painted by a respected artist.

The wealth of Buddhist monasteries in Changan was enormous. In the early years of the dynasty, a monk set up an Inexhaustible Treasury—so named because its assets could earn interest indefinitely—in a monastery. Men and women of high standing brought cartloads of coppers and silk as acts of repentance. They left their riches on the premises and then departed without giving their names. By the middle of the seventh century the wealth derived from those donations was incalculable. Unfortunately, the prelates who governed the church placed a secular custodian, whom they judged to be of good character, in charge of guarding their treasury. The temptation was too much for him, and he made off with its gold. The monks were so trusting that they were unaware of the theft until he absconded, and never discovered how much he had stolen. Monks supervised the treasury thereafter. The monastery used the interest it earned from loaning the riches it accumulated to pay for the restoration of other monasteries throughout the empire, to feed the starving, and to sponsor religious rites. The monks did not require contracts from debtors, fully confident that they would repay them with interest. In 713 the emperor abolished the treasury on the grounds that its banking practices were fraudulent, and confiscated its treasury. He then disbursed the holdings to other Buddhist monasteries as well as Taoist abbeys in the capital for use in repairing statues, halls, and bridges.

All monasteries had at least one hall for worshipping Buddha: offering prayers, burning incense, and chanting scriptures. Some were enormous. A hall dedicated to the Buddha Who Is to Come was 150 feet high. Every hall had a statue of the Buddha, one of which was thirty feet tall. They were usually made of bronze, but also could be of precious metals and stones. One monastery in Changan had 600 small silver Buddhas, one figure of pure gold that was several feet high, and another of silver over six feet tall. A church in the capital had a statue carved from jade that came from Central Asia. Occasionally, emperors bestowed statuary from the palace collection on monasteries. In such cases they sent the images forth in corteges having 1,000 painted carriages escorted by troupes of palace musicians, singers, and dancers.

Emperors might also bestow paintings from the palace collection on churches. Most artworks in the cloisters served ideological and educational ends. Since the vast majority of Chinese were illiterate, Buddhist monasteries and Taoist abbeys commissioned artists to paint murals depicting aspects of their beliefs that the unlettered could grasp visually. The frescoes of purgatory that the greatest artist of the dynasty painted on the walls of a monastery in Changan were so horrific and monstrous that visitors felt their hair stand on end. He executed another mural of
the underworld that was so terrifying, butchers and fishmongers who saw it changed their professions. They feared that they would suffer the hellish tortures depicted in it for the sin of slaying living things. One artist's depictions of the underworld were particularly marvelous because he had died, visited the infernal regions, and returned to life to paint what he had seen. Murals of paradise were no less vivid and realistic, though less sensational.

The most prominent structures of Buddhist monasteries were pagodas, a unique form of architecture developed by the Chinese. Purportedly based on Indian stupas, they more closely resembled ancient towers that had been the vogue in architecture centuries before the Tang. Pagodas were artificial imitations of the sacred mountain, and were the only high-rise buildings in traditional times. Two, the Large Goose and the Small Goose, that rise to 210 feet and 149 feet, respectively, and are built of brick, are the only structures that survive from Tang Changan. The upper stories of pagodas provided excellent views of cities and became urban landmarks.

They also assumed an important role in the ancient Chinese art of *feng-shui*, or geomancy. The basis for geomancy was the belief that invisible forces (*qi*: breaths, vapors, energies) control nature and the destiny of people. They flow above and below. Human activities, such as digging and building, disrupt, obstruct, and injure the currents. As a result, natural disasters occur and, more important, one's luck takes a turn for the worse. In the early seventh century a Sui official observed that a large lake southwest of Changan was exerting an adverse effect on the capital, and suggested that the erection of a pagoda could counter its influence. In geomancy, water, the element of *yin* (the moon, dark, pliant, female) could exert either a benevolent or a malevolent force on the site of a city, dwelling, or grave, depending on its location and character. A river with a slow current that flowed south and turned to the east was a benign influence. In this case the lake was to the west and was not flowing at all. Therefore, it was stagnant and lifeless. To remedy such a situation, geomancers usually proposed interposing a tall object, often a tree for a home, that represented *yang* (the sun, light, rigid, fire, male) between the structure and the water. A pagoda was ideal for a city, given its height. So in 611 the emperor had a pagoda built of wood that was 330 feet tall and 120 paces in circumference at the southwest corner of Changan.

Monasteries had meditation halls where monks practiced their devotions, cells where they slept, baths where they bathed, as well as kitchens and dining halls. They had libraries where they stored their sutras (scriptures). One of them had a separate building that housed a revolving bookcase. The size of Buddhist libraries in Changan grew enormously when pilgrims returned from India with great loads of sutras. After they
arrived home, they translated the scriptures at the churches in the capital. Monastic collections often included Taoist scriptures as well as secular works. One wise poet of the ninth century deposited editions of his collected works in monasteries on three different occasions, probably because he believed that the cloisters provided better security and would preserve them longer. The broad range of books in the churches may account for the fact that candidates for civil service examinations took lodgings in the monasteries of Changan while preparing for their tests.

Some of Changan's monasteries were repositories for Buddha's relics; four of his teeth were preserved in four different cloisters. One of them, which a Chinese pilgrim brought from India, was three inches in length. Those monasteries put the purported artifacts on exhibit with offerings of food, flowers, and incense. Citizens donated cereals, coppers, and other things as pledges of their reverence. The most revered of the relics was part of Buddha's finger bone, preserved in a cloister 100 miles or so west of the capital. On three occasions in the late eighth and the ninth centuries the throne had it brought to Changan, escorted by a grand cortege with monks and nuns trailing behind. Villagers from the surrounding countryside flocked to the city to watch the spectacle as the parade entered through the northwest gate, where the emperor greeted it from a pillared hall above. The leading families of the metropolis decorated their coaches in rich adornments to honor the relic. In 873 a zealous believer, a soldier, lopped off an arm and carried it along the road, his blood dripping on the street, as the cavalcade made its way through the boulevards. Many citizens bit off their fingers to manifest their devotion. A monk burned herbs on his bald pate. He shook his head and cried out in pain, but lads from the market gripped him tightly so that he could not budge. Finally, he fell to the ground when he could no longer stand the agony. After the relic arrived in the palace, the emperor ordered some 10,000 posts of incense, ten to twenty feet tall, erected throughout the city. Gold and jade adorned the first nine feet of the posts, which were made of earth. The fragrance from the incense wafted throughout the capital. Wealthy families built halls from silk cloth where they installed trees of gold and jade and pools of mercury. They also built floats of fancy textiles that carried singers and dancers. The floats paraded through the streets of the metropolis for the amusement of Changan's citizens.

Self-mutilation was a facet of Buddhist asceticism. Buddhists had little regard for the body, which they called "a bag of stinking skin." They thought of it as the ultimate source of the temptations that prevented the devout from attaining enlightenment and salvation. It is therefore not surprising that monks or the laity willingly sacrificed all or part of their bodies to express their deep devotion to their faith. They might burn off fingers, gouge out eyes, or cut off ears to make offerings to the
Buddha. Buddhist scripture promised the clergy who made such sacrifices that they would qualify for rebirth in the paradise of Pure Land. The most extreme form of such practices was autocremation. One Tang monk at the age of seventy-four set out with a disciple for a peak on a holy mountain. At his order the disciple wrapped him in waxed cloth and hemp, and poured oil over him. Then he set fire to his master. The flames consumed the monk's body from the top of his head to the soles of his feet.

Convents were not always the abodes of the chaste that they were supposed to be. In the mid-ninth century an emperor made a tour of Changan in disguise. When he arrived at a Taoist nunnery, he discovered that the women were attired in elegant gowns and heavily made up. Shocked and angered, the monarch ordered one of his officials to expel the priestesses from the place, and appointed two men to take charge of the abbey. The ladies apparently were courtesans.

THE GAY QUARTERS

There was one special district, the North Hamlet, in Changan reserved for high-class courtesans who mainly served nobles, officials, graduates of the civil service examinations, and occasionally rich merchants. Prized more, or at least as much as, for their talents as entertainers at feasts than for their sexual services, they resembled Japanese geishas. They were superior to their counterparts in Luoyang and the barmaids who served drinks in the prefectures because they had excellent table manners and were extremely polite (or at least some were). They were official entertainers who had to register with the government and over whom the mayor of the capital exercised control. He regulated their sedan chairs and could stop them from leaving their quarters.

The North Hamlet was in the northeast quadrant of a ward that was adjacent to the eastern market, across from the August Enceinte and east of the national colleges. It had three winding alleys. The courtesans living in the North Alley were inferior in skills to the those residing in the Central and Southern alleys, who held them in contempt. The gates of the latter byways opened onto the north-south road of the ward. Newly appointed officials sauntered incognito there, looking for pleasure. The bordellos on those alleys were large and tranquil. They had three or more salons for receiving guests as well as smaller rooms hung with several layers of drapes. Flowers and shrubs grew in front of and behind the dwellings, where there were ponds with strangely shaped rocks. Not all of the courtesans there were well-to-do. The house of one who lived in the South Alley with her madam—who happened to be her biological mother—and two older, unskilled sisters was shabby. Since the women
attracted few pleasure seekers, the women sold herbs and fruit at a small stall on their property.

The madams were, for the most part, foster mothers because the girls and young women over whom they exercised control were usually not their biological daughters. Some of the foster mothers were former courtesans who were too old to pursue their profession. They supported men who attended to their bedchambers, but the women did not treat them as their husbands. Madams were popularly called “exploding charcoal,” perhaps because they often lost their tempers at their foster daughters. Foster mothers taught the courtesans the skills of their trade: singing and the rules of drinking games in particular. They flogged their trainees whenever they were negligent or lazy.

As for the courtesans, some had been raised as beggars in their youth, and others had been indentured to poor families in rural hamlets. Others came from good (i.e., wealthy or patrician) families that had betrothed them to obtain a bride price from unscrupulous men. Those scoundrels then sold the girls to madams in the North Hamlet, where they had no means of extricating themselves. When the girls entered the bordellos there, they took the surnames of their foster mothers. After training, at the age of eleven or twelve they received splendid gowns, a gift that signified they were fully fit to receive guests.

It was difficult for courtesans to leave their bordellos. The madams let them out only on the eighth, eighteenth, and twenty-eighth days of the moon to hear lectures on scriptures at a nearby Buddhist monastery, and then only after their daughter paid 1,000 coppers. On those three days young men of Changan gathered at the church to look over and meet the courtesans. If a woman went elsewhere, to attend a party at a park
or to have a rendezvous with a man, a maid had to accompany her. The maid took her earnings and handed them over to her madam.

An important role for the courtesans was to supervise feasts. They were at ease with nobles, high-ranking officials, and candidates for the civil service examinations, but were especially punctilious in following the rules of propriety when receiving court officials who carried gold insignia. Whatever the case, the best of them were skilled conversationists, poets, and singers who knew the rules of drinking games and kept a party convivial. They were also not above telling a guest that he talked too much when he was bragging about his accomplishments and spoiling the banquet for others. Some of them, however, had bad dispositions when offended. After a drunken guest made fun of one courtesan, she struck his cheek and inflicted a deep scratch. Some hostesses enjoyed great repute among their patrons even though they were homely. After hearing the fame of a courtesan, a graduate of the examinations named Liu became infatuated with her, sight unseen. He sent her gift after gift, but she refused to see him. Finally, he bribed an official with a gift of three and three-quarters pounds of gold flowers and silver goblets. The mandarin escorted the woman to the graduate’s feast even though she was sick at the time. When Liu lifted the curtain of her sedan chair, he found an ugly woman who was disheveled, in tears, and older than he. He sent her back.

The normal fee for a feast at a bordello in North Hamlet was 1,600 coppers, and double that for a guest who was a newcomer and for a party that went on after the first candles sputtered out. Musicians who lived near North Hamlet were ready to perform for a feast at a moment’s notice. The musicians charged 1,200 coppers for each round of drinks, but 2,400 if the revelry went on after the first candles died. When a guest came up short on the required fee to a madam, she might seize his carriage and clothes in lieu of payment.

In the early ninth century the North Hamlet could be a dangerous place to visit. A young member of the Gold Bird Guard named Wang encountered a drunk in one of the brothels and hid under the man’s bed. Another man suddenly burst into the room with sword drawn and beheaded the drunk, believing him to be Wang. The murderer then threw his victim’s head to the ground and lay down on the bed to sleep. Wang escaped with his life, presumably after spending an uncomfortable night on the floor, and never visited the quarter again. In the same period Linghu, a candidate for the civil service examinations sent to Changan from the provinces, spent much of his time in the Gay Quarters. One day the madam of a brothel asked him to leave because she was having a family gathering. Suspicious or curious, he went to the neighboring house to sneak a peek at the festivities. From its window he saw the
madam and her courtesan slay a drunk and bury him in their backyard. The next day, he went to spend the night at the brothel, and in the middle of the night asked the courtesan about the murder. Alarmed, she seized his throat in an attempt to strangle him and called out to her foster mother. When he was on the verge of dying, the madam advised her daughter to stop. The next morning Linghu reported the matter to the authorities, but when they went to investigate, the pair had fled.

Some courtesans were not happy with their lives in North Hamlet and yearned to leave it. If they were lucky, a rich man might marry them, present them with gold and silk as a bride price, and take them away from North Hamlet. Nobles might, with the approval of their wives, take them as concubines. In one case, while a duke was occupied with affairs of state, his nephew had an illicit affair with his uncle’s concubine and spent a month with her, neglecting his duties. When the matter came to light, the duke’s wife sent her away with several hundred pieces of gold. The woman married a minor clerk, and before a year had passed, they had squandered the gold. Since her husband could not support her, she returned to North Hamlet to become a courtesan again.

The local governments of prefectures and larger administrations also maintained courtesans, who had to register and entertain officials. Camp courtesans provided amusement for military officers at posts around the empire. The proud father of a successful graduate of the civil service examinations opened the gates of his home in southwest China for a party at which all of the camp courtesans in his district appeared to enliven the festivities.

Not all courtesans lived in the Gay Quarters of Changan. One named Night Corning lived in a ward along the southeast wall of the capital. As a young woman her skills at amusing men, singing, and dancing exceeded all others. The sons of the nobility squandered fortunes to pay for a visit to her. One of the greatest poets of the Tang, a Taoist priestess and a courtesan, entertained her gentleman clients in the abbey where she lived. Both of those women probably were official courtesans, for they appear to have entertained only aristocrats and mandarins.

As for commoners, when the economy boomed in the second half of the Tang, public houses of prostitution began to appear in markets and other heavily trafficked places to serve the needs of merchants and others who could afford the pleasure.

A promiscuous man could catch a venereal disease in the Gay Quarters or in lower-class bordellos. Syphilis did not exist in China until Europeans introduced it in the sixteenth century. Tang physicians recognized some form of gonorrhea, however, and they knew that it was spread by indiscriminate intercourse with prostitutes.
PARKS

The largest park in Changan was the Forbidden Park north of Changan. Though not the largest in the empire—that distinction belonged to its counterpart in Luoyang—it was forty miles in circumference and, as its name implies, off-limits to anyone but the emperor, his servitors, and his guests. Fed by rivers and canals that flowed from the mountains south of the city, it had lakes with fish and groves of peach, pear, and willow trees, as well as vineyards. The Department of Agriculture ran the vast complex that produced food for the emperor, his family, and his officials. The park was also an animal preserve where herds of animals roamed, and sometimes became prey during the throne’s hunts. There were palatial halls and ball fields where the emperor amused himself and those whom he chose to honor.

Several parks existed in the districts outside the Forbidden Park and the palaces. The greatest of them was the Serpentine River in the southeast corner of the city. In the early eighth century the throne had the river flowing through the area dredged to form a lake so deep that one could not see the bottom. It was joined to a much older park called the Lotus Garden. After 756 it became the most popular spot for feasts that emperors bestowed on their officials. An Arab who visited the capital in the ninth century reported that it was off-limits to commoners (i.e., citizens who were not aristocrats, mandarins, or examination graduates).

The park had a two-story hall called Purple Clouds as well as a number of pavilions where a successful contender for a palace examination might convene a feast to celebrate his victory. The Serpentine River and Lotus Garden had willows, poplars, lotus, chrysanthemums, marsh grasses, and reeds. Wildfowl visited it in the fall when they made their way south for the winter. Esthetes liked to visit, watch the birds fly by, and listen to their cries. There were also a Buddhist convent and a monastery, as well as two ancestral shrines for high-ranking officials, within its precincts. In 835 the throne undertook a restoration of the park, ordering 1,500 soldiers to dredge its lake and rebuild its edifices. At that time the emperor bestowed grants of vacant land on officials so that they could build their own pavilions in the park.

Patricians could visit the Serpentine River at any time of the year, but they were particularly fond of going there during the spring. It was the custom for citizens of Changan to climb into carriages or mount horses and ride to parks in the city or scenic areas in the suburbs during the second half of the first moon. There they erected oiled tents and feasted to enjoy the arrival of spring. The waterproof tents protected revelers and their victuals from being soaked by rain. The third day of the third moon was an occasion that had special relevance to Serpentine River. Since the fourth century the educated had held drinking parties along
winding rivers, and those festivities survived into the Tang (though then they took place on the banks of lakes). Patricians went to the Serpentine River, where they ate and drank under silk tents erected along the shores of the lake. High-ranking ministers could take their pleasure on painted boats that drifted on the surface of its water. The emperor, who sometimes attended such fêtes, might provide entertainment in the form of music, song, dance, and acrobatics by lending his own performers to the revelers. The ninth day of the ninth month was an occasion for visits to the park, where revelers spread out a picnic, roamed the banks of the lake half-drunk, and listened to the calls of ducks and geese.