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# Cities of Asia

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## Introduction

Cities in Asia have for millennia been engines of exchange, invention, and everyday improvisation. From the axial avenues of ancient Chang'an—today's Xi'an—to the traffic-choked thoroughfares of modern Jakarta, urban life in this vast region has unfolded at the intersection of commerce and community, empire and neighborhood. This book explores how those intersections formed and reformed across time, asking how cities grew, how they were governed, and how people made them livable. Rather than narrating a single rise and fall, the chapters that follow trace patterns of connection: the lifeways of streets and markets, the infrastructures of water and waste, and the social networks that knit distant quarters into workable wholes.

The approach is comparative and diachronic. By setting diverse cases side by side—oasis towns and riverine capitals, walled imperial centers and porous port cities—we can see how similar problems elicited different solutions. Trade and migration brought strangers into daily contact, creating both friction and opportunity. Municipal authorities experimented with charters, ward policing, sanitation works, and zoning long before the words became modern. Meanwhile, artisans, dockworkers, monks, merchant families, and hawkers built institutions of their own: guilds, temple funds, rotating credit associations, and neighborhood watches. These overlapping arrangements produced cities that were at once planned and improvised, formal and informal.

Infrastructure is a recurring protagonist. Drains and canals, causeways and bridges, post stations and rail depots—these are the veins and arteries of urban metabolism. In some places, like Angkor or the Indus towns, water management underwrote entire urban ecologies; in others, such as Bombay/Mumbai or Shanghai, new pipes and sewers became flashpoints for public health, taxation, and representation. Sanitation, often relegated to the margins of city histories, stands here at the center because it exposes the politics of the everyday: who pays, who benefits, who cleans, and who decides.

Markets and street life provide a second thread. Bazaars and night markets, alleyway workshops and sidewalk stalls are not merely colorful scenes; they are systems that distribute risk and reward, information and credit. The book follows how rules of the market—weights and measures, shopfront leases, seasonal fairs, credit instruments—were negotiated among officials, brokers, and the urban poor. We watch how religious festivals and civic rituals turned thoroughfares into civic theaters, and how police stations, checkpoints, and surveillance reshaped public space. Across these stories, gender, class, and ethnicity are not afterthoughts but structuring forces: they determine mobility, exposure to hazard, and access to opportunity.

Governance forms a third strand. Asian cities have been ruled by emperors, sultans, colonial companies, socialist parties, and elected councils; yet across these regimes we find shared challenges—managing migration, provisioning food and fuel, regulating land, and coping with shocks. The chapters examine municipal reforms from ward councils in early capitals to treaty-port corporations, from socialist planning bureaus to contemporary smart-city dashboards. Governance is treated not as a monologue from above but as a conversation among institutions, neighborhoods, and networks that compete and collaborate to make collective life possible.

Finally, the book looks forward. Today's Asian megacities are on the front lines of climate change, demographic transition, and technological transformation. Lessons from earlier epochs—on flood control and relocation, on mutual aid and remittance ties, on market flexibility and infrastructural redundancy—do not supply templates, but they do provide repertoires. By reading the old with the new, we can better grasp why some cities adapt while others falter, and how communities persist in the face of upheaval. The journey from ancient Xi'an to modern Jakarta is not a straight line; it is a braided river of experiments, failures, and durable practices.

Cities of Asia is written for students, urbanists, and general readers curious about how metropolitan centers work from the ground up. Each chapter offers a tightly framed case or comparison, inviting readers to carry insights across regions and periods. The goal is not to exhaust Asia's vastness but to illuminate the common problems and ingenious solutions that have made its cities distinctive. Above all, this is a book about people—about the ordinary strategies through which traders and travelers, families and officials, have turned dense, contested spaces into places of livelihood, memory, and possibility.

## **CHAPTER ONE: Mapping Asia's Urban Past: Chang'an (Xi'an) and the Silk Roads**

Chang'an, the city that would become known to the world as Xi'an, did not simply grow; it accumulated, layer upon layer, like silt in the hand of a patient river. Archaeologists have traced early settlements in the Wei River valley back to the Neolithic, but by the first millennium BCE the area had become a political and cultural heartland for the Zhou and later Qin. When the First Emperor of Qin consolidated power in the third century BCE, he stamped imperial authority onto the landscape with palaces, tombs, and a distinct preference for order. The city's street grid and monumental gates were not just practical; they were declarations, announcing that the world could be arranged, and that the arrangement could be made to stick.

The Han dynasty, which rose after the short-lived Qin, reshaped Chang'an into a capital that could hold the weight of an expanding empire. Archaeological surveys and Han records together describe a walled city of impressive dimensions, with a palace complex dominating the north and a grid of avenues cutting through wards that housed courtiers, artisans, and merchants. The urban plan borrowed and adapted earlier models, pairing symmetry with control. Gates were timed, processions choreographed, and streets deliberately broad—wide enough to host armies, imperial tours, and the dense choreography of daily life. City walls stood as both defense and symbol, promising protection while marking who belonged inside.

The city's layout was inseparable from the imperial project. The planning of Chang'an expressed cosmological ideals and practical politics in equal measure. The palace faced south, aligning with cardinal directions, while avenues ran straight and true, organizing space into measurable blocks. This rigidity was never absolute; people found ways to bend the plan to their needs, filling corners with workshops, pushing stalls into doorways, and using side lanes for gossip and trade. But the insistence on order was not merely aesthetic. It was a method of governance: a city that looked regular could be watched more easily, and a capital that imposed its grid could radiate order outward to provincial towns and frontiers.

From the very beginning, commerce threaded through the city's bones. Han Chang'an had markets sanctioned by the state, each within its own walled precinct, with overseers who inspected scales, set prices, and collected dues. The east market teemed with stalls selling grain, salt, iron tools, silk, and lacquerware; the west market handled foreign goods and livestock. Brokers acted as intermediaries, connecting buyers and sellers, arranging credit, and keeping the flow of goods steady. Even when the state tried to fix prices and regulate exchange, the market responded with its own

rhythms—seasonal gluts, sudden shortages, and the informal economies that grew in the gaps of official control.

Between these markets and the palace, a vast urban bureaucracy kept records, managed granaries, and organized labor. The city's wards, each enclosed by its own gate, were more than residential districts; they were administrative units with wardens, curfews, and duties. Inside these compartments lived court officials, eunuchs, guards, craftsmen, and servants. The streets carried more than people and goods: messages, reports, rumors, and decrees moved through the city like a nervous system, linking the imperial center to the neighborhoods. A capital's strength lay not only in its armies and walls but in this intricate machine of information and oversight.

The second great wave of urban transformation came under the Sui and Tang dynasties, when Chang'an was rebuilt on a scale that astounded contemporaries and still impresses today. The Sui founder, Emperor Wen, ordered a new capital south of the Han city in 582 CE, designed from scratch with a grand geometry that set a standard for East Asian urbanism. The Tang inherited and perfected this plan. The city was rectangular, enclosed by thick walls, and divided into two main sections: the palace and administrative precinct in the north, and the residential and commercial wards to the south. It was a capital built to be seen and to be remembered.

Tang Chang'an's avenues were famously wide, some stretching over a hundred meters, allowing processions, markets, and heavy traffic to coexist without grinding to a halt. The city's wards, numbering more than a hundred, were laid out in a regular pattern, each with gates that were closed at night. Movement was regulated; curfew drums signaled the closing of gates, and watchmen patrolled the streets. The sense of order was both real and symbolic, but it never fully contained the city's dynamism. Along the great avenues, life spilled out: festivals filled the streets with lanterns and dancers, and traders set up temporary stalls during market days, pushing at the boundaries of regulation.

Commerce in Tang Chang'an was intense and cosmopolitan. The Western Market was the heart of foreign trade, where Sogdian merchants, Persian traders, and Central Asian caravaneers sold spices, textiles, horses, glass, and exotic animals. The Eastern Market handled more local goods: rice, cloth, tools, and the daily necessities of a huge population. Shopfronts lined the streets within the markets, while artisans clustered by trade—goldsmiths, potters, dyers—forming dense pockets of expertise. The city's cuisine reflected this mix; noodles, dumplings, and pastries show the influence of steppe communities and wheat-growing regions, while southern rice and vegetables reminded diners of the agrarian breadth that fed the capital.

Migration into Chang'an was relentless. The city attracted scholars, monks, envoys, and entertainers from across the empire and beyond. Many came for opportunity, some for refuge, others because the state demanded their presence. The Korean

kingdoms sent students and diplomats, Japanese missions arrived in waves, and Central Asian communities settled near the markets where their kinship and commercial ties gave them an edge. Foreign languages echoed in the wards, and religious diversity grew: Buddhist monasteries flourished, Nestorian Christians built places of worship, Zoroastrians maintained shrines, and Manichaean communities found space in the city's interstices. Chang'an was not merely tolerant; its prosperity depended on the flows these groups carried.

The Silk Roads were not a single road but a shifting lattice of routes linking Chang'an to the oasis cities of Dunhuang, Kucha, and Turfan, and beyond to Samarkand, Bukhara, and the Iranian plateau. From there, goods and ideas reached the Mediterranean and the Indian subcontinent. The state built post stations, maintained garrisons, and negotiated with nomadic powers to keep the arteries open. Caravans moved with the seasons, taking advantage of pasture and water, and relied on brokers, guides, and local intermediaries. When the routes were secure, Chang'an's markets glowed with silks, spices, and jade; when they were disrupted, prices rose, and shortages reminded the capital how far its daily life extended.

Merchandise in Chang'an told the story of this network. Silk, produced in the empire's workshops and rural households, traveled west as currency and luxury. Horses from the steppe were prized for military use and urban display. Spices, dyes, glassware, and precious stones arrived from south and west, and exotic animals—peacocks, camels, leopards—turned processions into traveling zoos. Artisans in the city borrowed motifs from foreign styles, creating designs that blended Chinese patterns with Central Asian forms. The markets served not only as places of exchange but as sites of translation, where objects, words, and habits were converted from one culture to another.

The Silk Roads also ferried ideas and faiths. Buddhism, arriving via Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent, found a powerful foothold in Chang'an. Monasteries were major urban institutions, owning land, lending money, and hosting travelers. Monks translated sutras in translation bureaus, turning foreign concepts into Chinese words. The city's intellectual life was enriched by this exchange; mathematics, astronomy, and medicine all benefited from cross-pollination. The presence of diverse communities and beliefs meant that the urban landscape included not only palaces and markets but pagodas, temples, and shrines that layered the city with meaning. Chang'an's prosperity was inseparable from this cultural cosmopolitanism.

Keeping such a city alive required constant infrastructural labor. Grain and fuel arrived by river and canal, then moved by cart and porter from docks to granaries and markets. Water management was a central concern: canals were dug to improve transport, while drainage systems, though basic by later standards, kept the worst floods at bay. Urban sanitation was a mix of official regulation and neighborhood practice; waste was collected, composted, or dumped beyond the walls, and night soil

was a valuable commodity for farmers. Scent aside, these arrangements worked reasonably well, and they shaped how the city's space was used and maintained.

The state organized labor to build and maintain these systems. Mass conscription raised walls and carved canals; skilled craftsmen were registered and often attached to government workshops; merchants paid taxes in coin or kind, funding public works. The central treasury and local administration maintained granaries to stabilize food supplies, smoothing out shortages caused by drought or war. Military garrisons protected the routes that fed the city. Meanwhile, associations of artisans and merchants formed around shared trades and common origin, providing welfare, credit, and mediation. These networks were vital; the city's everyday functions depended on cooperation between officials and communities.

An urban day in Chang'an unfolded to the rhythm of drums and bells. Gates opened at dawn, markets stirred to life, and streets filled with porters, messengers, scholars, and servants. Curfew drums in the evening announced the closing of gates and the retreat into wards, but night was not a blank: taverns, teahouses, and certain entertainment quarters continued, watched by guards and regulated by curfews. Food vendors threaded the streets with baskets and carts, offering steamed buns, soups, and fried treats. Workshops kept to their own schedules, and festivals broke the routine with fireworks, processions, and theatrical performances, turning thoroughfares into stages.

Safety and surveillance were everyday concerns. Ward gates were locked at night, and a system of mutual responsibility linked households to their neighbors. Watchmen patrolled, and severe punishments deterred theft and disorder. Yet the city's size and complexity made complete control impossible. Bands of thieves operated in the outskirts; fraud in the markets was common enough to require regular inspections; and large crowds at festivals could turn unruly. The urban administration responded with patrols and edicts, but the limits of enforcement were well understood. For most citizens, safety was negotiated at the level of the street and the ward, not the palace.

The city's culture was shaped by access to information and the circulation of texts. Official notices were posted at gates and markets; scribes offered services to those who could not write; rumor traveled faster than decree. Education and patronage drew scholars to the capital, where success in examinations or service at court could transform a family's fortunes. Theaters, storytellers, and musicians added layers of entertainment, while poetry competitions and calligraphy gatherings created social prestige. Dining, dress, and etiquette all signaled status and origin, and the city's fashions often borrowed from foreign trends. Chang'an's social world was both competitive and porous.

Chang'an's fortunes waxed and waned with empire. Periods of centralization brought investment and order; fragmentation led to contraction, disruption, and damage. After

the Tang collapsed, the city lost its status as capital, though it remained an important regional center. The Song moved the political center east to Kaifeng and later Hangzhou, shifting the urban core southward. Yet the physical remains of Chang'an—its walls, canals, and grid—endured. Even after centuries, the ghost of the old plan haunted later cities, offering a model that would be copied, adapted, and reinvented elsewhere.

The Silk Roads, too, changed with political tides. As empires rose and fell, the routes shifted, and maritime trade grew alongside overland caravans. Coastal cities and ports in south and east China became crucial nodes, connecting inland waterways to oceanic networks. The rise of Islam reorganized caravan cities in Central Asia, while new powers in Iran and the Mediterranean reshaped long-distance exchange. The old overland networks never disappeared entirely, but the balance between land and sea tilted. Chang'an's role as the terminus of continental routes diminished, but its legacy as a hub of exchange persisted in the structures of later capitals and the habits of urban commerce.

Modern Xi'an, built atop and around the old Tang city, preserves traces of its ancestor's grandeur. Archaeologists have mapped the foundations of palaces, the outlines of wards, and the traces of major avenues. The city walls that stand today, formidable and tourist-friendly, echo the ancient enclosures, even if they are later constructions. Museums in Xi'an display the finds from the Tang markets—statues, pottery, foreign coins—and the famous multicultural figures of the Tang period remind visitors that the city once sat at the center of a connected world. The modern grid, too, faintly recalls the old layout, revealing how urban memory can be encoded in asphalt and brick.

For historians, Chang'an is both a concrete place and a methodological challenge. Written records—court chronicles, epitaphs, poems, travel accounts—provide rich detail but must be read against archaeology and landscape analysis. Mapping the city requires blending fragments: wall lengths, gate names, market locations, canal alignments. Each source carries bias and blind spots; together they build a partial picture that is always being revised. This process is less a puzzle with a single solution than a collage in which new pieces keep appearing. The result is a map that is provisional and alive, reflecting how cities themselves evolve.

What Chang'an offers, then, is a way to read the early urban past of Asia not as a succession of isolated capitals but as a network of practices that traveled. The techniques of grid planning and ward management, the organization of markets, the management of migration, and the choreography of street life were shared, adapted, and improved across regions. Later cities, from Kaifeng to Kyoto, borrowed aspects of this urban grammar. The Silk Roads amplified this circulation, carrying not only goods but city-making ideas. In tracing these patterns, we can see how the logic of Chang'an—order, exchange, and adaptation—became part of the broader toolkit of

Asian urbanism, shaping the way cities worked long after the great Tang avenues fell silent.

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