Imagine living in the capital of China—not Beijing, the capital today, but Chang’an, which means “Perpetual Peace.” At one time, it was the center of Chinese politics, culture, and trade.

Chang’an became China’s first real capital city in 221 B.C., at the beginning of the Qin dynasty. It was one of the greatest and largest of the world’s ancient cities. It was also the starting point for the Silk Road, the famous trade route between China and the markets of Central Asia and Europe.

You would probably feel safe living in Chang’an, since it was protected by walls that were 48 feet wide at the base! About 80,000 families lived within the city’s walls. A Chinese poet once wrote that the houses in Chang’an were packed together “as closely as the teeth of a comb.”
If you wanted to go shopping, you might go to one of the marketplaces located around the city. Here you would see travelers from all parts of Asia making deals or having their fortunes told.

Shops or stalls were laid out in rows, and vendors who sold the same types of goods competed with each other for customers. There were butcher shops, cooked-meat stalls, and sellers of syrup, pickled goods, dried fish, relishes, grains, and fruit. Hardware stores sold utensils and equipment made of brass, iron, and wood. Carriage makers proudly displayed their light two-wheeled vehicles and their heavier ox carts. Drapers sold rolls of fine silk and coarser fabrics of hemp, as well as furs.

Raw materials were also sold at the marketplaces, along with horses, cattle, sheep, and swine. Tax officials

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Chang’an was built to face south, the direction that marked the sun’s uppermost position in the heavens.
collected taxes on each day’s transactions from their offices at the entrances to the marketplaces. The market was also the place where traitors and fallen statesmen were executed. At nightfall, the markets were closed to the public.

The streets of Chang’an were laid out in a grid, which divided the city into separate districts. Some of these housed palaces, others quarters for visitors, Buddhist monasteries, or residential areas for the general population. The design of the city symbolized the people’s view of society as a series of interrelated groups, each placed in its own rightful position.

The city of Chang’an went through periods of growth and decline throughout China’s history. Today, Chang’an is known as Xi’an, and travelers still come from all over the world to see sites such as the enormous tomb of Shi-Huangdi, the first emperor of China.