

PUBLIC MARKETS AND FOOD MONOPOLIES

(1840s–1880s)

1.1 New Markets for a New Colony

The First Marketplace: Central Market (Government Market No. 1)

In January 1841, when the British troops took possession of Hong Kong Island, which only had a small population of 7,500, they settled on the largely unoccupied northern shore. In May, the British Royal Engineers began building Queen's Road, an east-west running thoroughfare along the coast. A month later, Captain Charles Elliot auctioned 50 land lots along Queen's Road to foreign merchants, although Hong Kong had not been officially ceded to Britain. Since then, the northern shore of Hong Kong was turned into a boom town, which attracted business interests not only from Westerners but also from the Chinese.¹ Looking for development and job opportunities, many people from South China had flocked to this new British colony named Victoria since June 1843. The territory of the City of Victoria covered Wan Chai, Admiralty, Central, Sheung Wan, and the Western District.

As the native Chinese population increased, Acting Governor Alexander Johnston leased out 150 lots (each 40 by 20 ft.) along a coastal strip of land

to Chinese inhabitants in September 1841. This area, named Sheung Wan by the Chinese, became the Lower Bazaar. When more and more Chinese poured into Hong Kong in early 1842, Johnston developed another Chinese settlement in Victoria. This area, named the Upper Bazaar (sometimes referred to as the Middle Bazaar), consisted of 118 lots, each 14 by 36 ft.² It ran from north to south uphill, perpendicular to Queen's Road. The Lower and Upper Bazars formed the two major Chinese settlements in Victoria.

In the Chinese settlements, the then colonial secretary Colonel George Malcolm recalled that hucksters who went around to hawk food on the principal roads and thoroughfares created considerable inconvenience to traffic.³ By March 1842, there were 600 Chinese hawkers in Victoria out of 8,181 members of the native population.⁴ To remove road encroachment, Malcolm felt the need to collect all hucksters into a marketplace.⁵ He built the first marketplace near the Upper Bazaar. Carl Smith suggested that Malcolm engaged a Chinese contractor, Wei Afoon 韋亞寬, to construct the market but Smith did not provide the source of this information.⁶ Opened on 16 May 1842, the marketplace was named "Government Market No. 1," "Central Market," "Middle Market" or simply the "Market Place."⁷

According to the record of the first land sale executed on 14 June 1841, Marine Lot No. 16 was reserved for "Government Market No. 1," and the adjacent Marine Lot No. 17 was reserved for the extension of the market.⁸ These two marine lots were located between Queen's Road and the shoreline.⁹ *The Friend of China and Hong Kong Gazette* described that the marketplace "fronts upon the Queen's Road, and faces also in a long line on the water."¹⁰

The *Plan of Hong Kong* produced in 1842 was the earliest map of Victoria. The map was commonly known as *Pottinger's Map*, attributed to the first governor of Hong Kong, Henry Pottinger. On this map, a "Fish, Meat & Poultry Bazaar" was drawn on the seaward side of Queen's Road, opposite Town Lot No. 23 and a narrow uphill street across the road (Fig. 1.01). Curiously, this bazaar was numbered Marine Lot No. 11, not Marine Lot No. 16 as suggested in the first land sale record.¹¹ In fact, many scholars have challenged the accuracy of *Pottinger's Map*. For instance, Hal Empson,

the author of *Mapping Hong Kong: A Historical Atlas*, remarks that *Pottinger's Map* has considerable distortion and scale variation, and only a few of the land parcels shown on the map recur on later plans.¹² Dung Kai-cheung believes that *Pottinger's Map* was not a survey record of the first land sale but was possibly a sketch showing how Pottinger envisaged the city of Victoria.¹³ As such, the “Fish, Meat & Poultry Bazaar” shown on *Pottinger's Map* was most likely Central Market.¹⁴

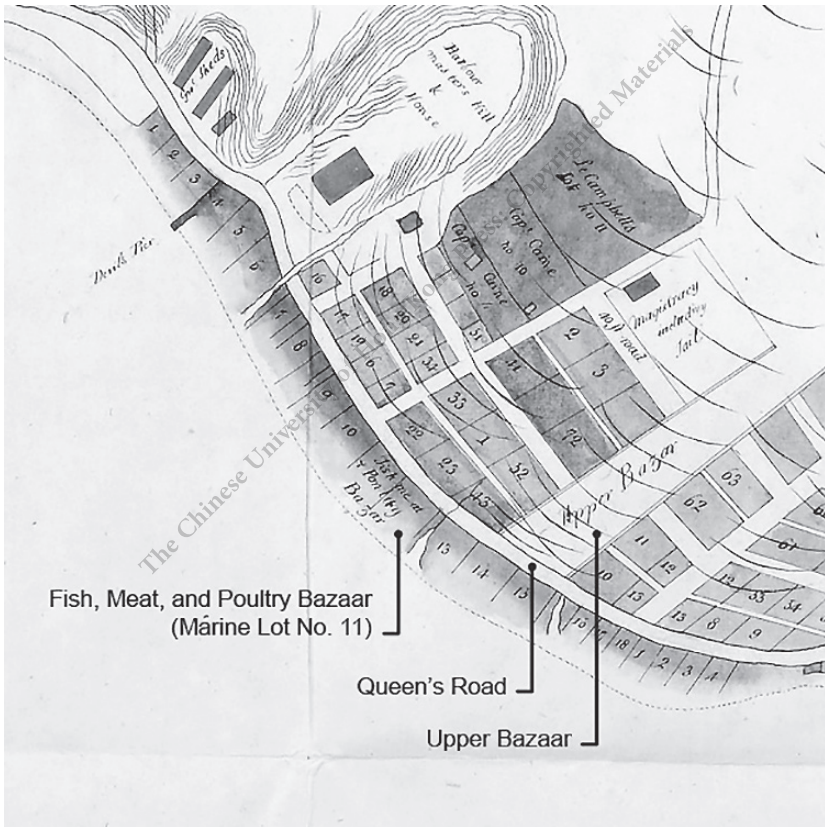


Fig. 1.01. A “Fish, Meat & Poultry Bazaar” was drawn on Marine Lot No. 11 on *Pottinger's Map* produced in 1842.

(Plan of Hong Kong, MS. In Sir H. Pottinger's “Superintendent” No. 8 of 1842, 1842, FO 925/2427, The National Archives, Kew.)

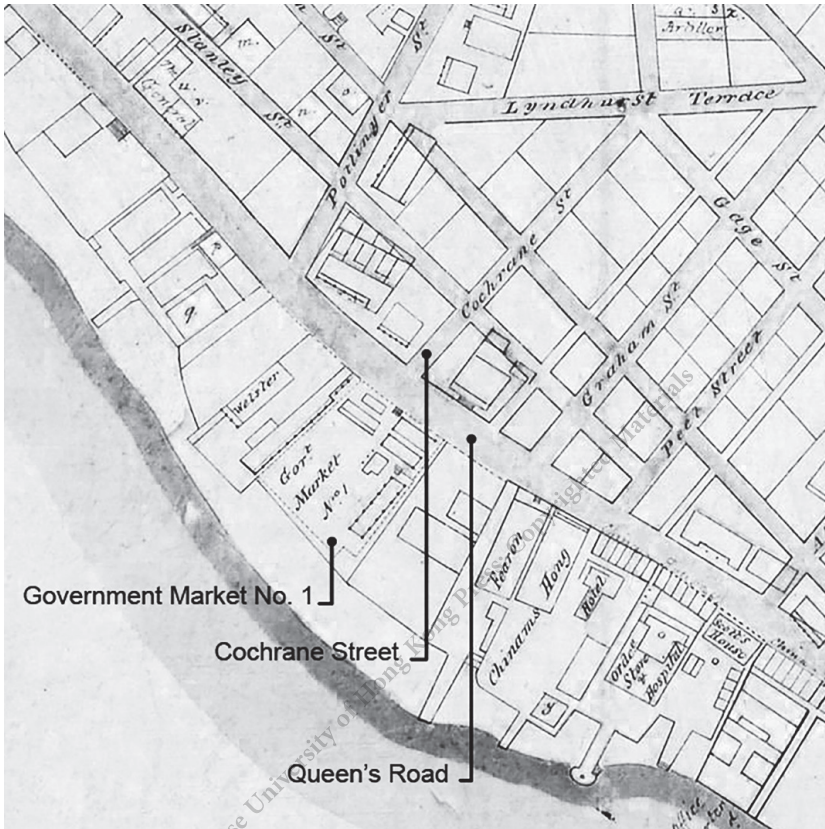


Fig. 1.02. “Government Market No. 1,” as shown in the *Plan of Victoria, Hong Kong* produced in 1845. The market faced Cochrane Street.

(*Plan of Victoria, Hong Kong, Copied from the Surveyor General's Dept., 1845, WO 78/479, The National Archives, Kew.*)

The information regarding the marketplace’s location on *Pottinger’s Map* does not match other maps produced around the same time, which shows the latter may be more accurate.¹⁵ On the maps surveyed in 1843 by Major Edward Aldrich (commonly known as *Aldrich’s Map*) and by the colony’s Land Officer, Alexander Thomas Gordon (commonly named *Gordon’s Map*), the land lot where the “Fish, Meat & Poultry Bazaar” stood was labelled as Marine Lot No. 16, thus matching the first land sale record.¹⁶

Furthermore, on the *Plan of Victoria, Hong Kong* produced in 1845, the name “Government Market No. 1” was added to this location (Fig. 1.02).¹⁷ The opposite narrow uphill street was named Cochrane Street on this map. This proves that the first marketplace was erected in the exact location of the current Central Market.

The *Plan of Victoria, Hong Kong* (1845) showed that Central Market was enclosed by walls. A small structure, which could be steps or an entrance gate, was erected on Queen’s Road. The buildings were constructed on the southern and western edges of the site, whereas an ample open space was reserved on the northeastern corner for future expansion of the market.¹⁸ The biggest building was surrounded by colonnade, which suggests that it could be an open shed without any enclosures. Two paintings produced in the 1850s provide some ideas of the appearance of Central Market. The watercolour painting by George Chinnery in 1851 depicts a view of Central from Victoria Harbour. On the right-hand side of the painting is the Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation (P&O) Headquarters. The painting shows that Central Market, which was adjacent to P&O Headquarters, consisted of several houses with gable roofs. The market was enclosed by walls with three entrance gates opening toward the seaside (Fig. 1.03). Another watercolour painting produced in 1855 by an unknown artist shows some Central Market buildings next to P&O Headquarters (Fig. 1.04). The looks of these market buildings are similar to those depicted by Chinnery.

In Malcolm’s original plan, these market buildings would be covered with tiled roofs. However, the marketplace’s construction cost exceeded the original budget of \$3,500 by approximately \$500 due to the difficulty of levelling the ground and the necessity of building a strong retaining wall to support the roads near the site. As a result, part of the ground was covered with only mat sheds. Nevertheless, Malcolm suggested that the government could use the revenue yielded from the market to gradually substitute the mat sheds with permanent buildings, which would render the marketplace “freer from the risk of being injured by fire, or the effects of gales and the weather.”¹⁹

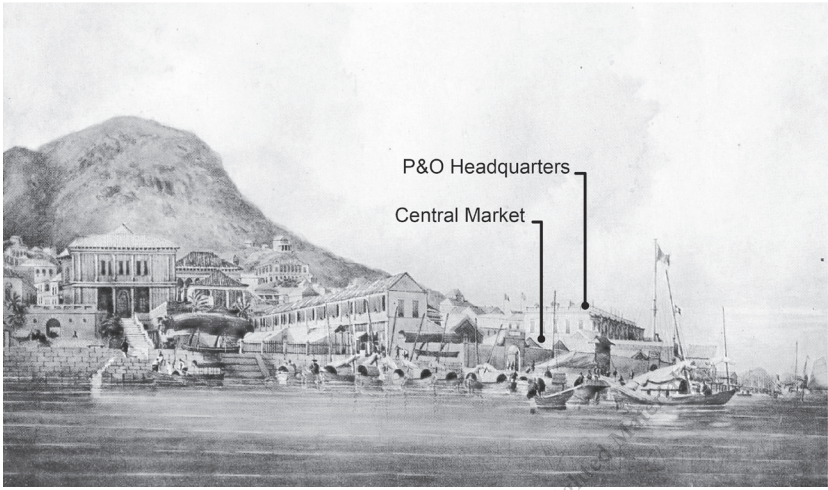


Fig. 1.03. The watercolour painting by Chinnery shows that Central Market was enclosed by walls.

(George Chinnery, *Victoria West and P. & O. Hong*, 1851, watercolour on paper.)

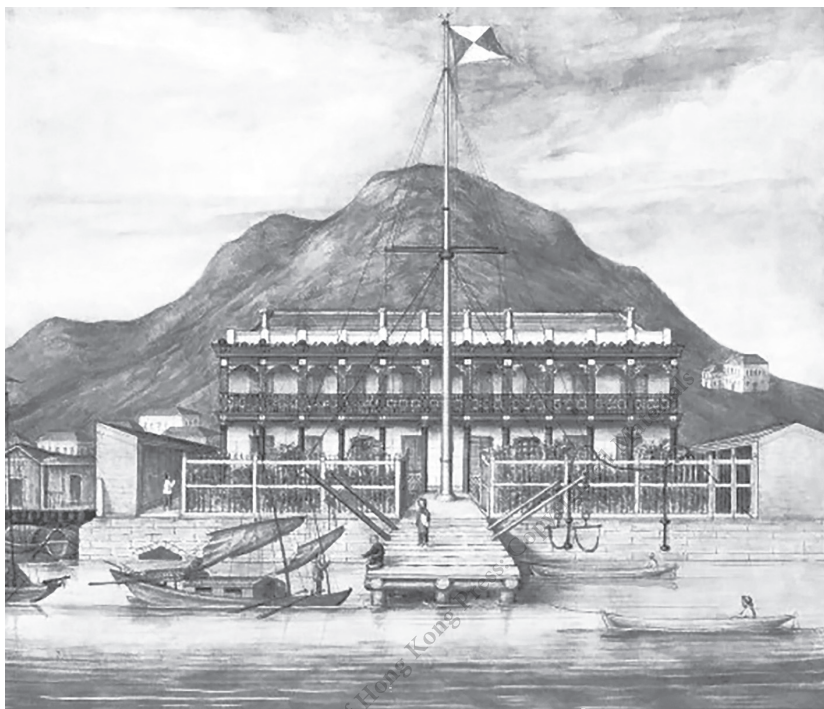


Fig. 1.04. The P&O Headquarters and the adjacent Central Market (on the left of painting).

(Anonymous, *The P&O Headquarters in Hong Kong*, 1855, watercolour on paper.)

Operation of Central Market from 1842 to 1844

In Central Market, stalls selling the same kind of food were organized into one department. Altogether, the market consisted of seven departments: (1) all kinds of meat, (2) fruit and vegetables, (3) poultry, (4) salted fish, (5) fresh fish, (6) weighing rooms, and (7) money changer houses.²⁰ *The Friend of China and Hong Kong Gazette* praised the abundant food provisions in the marketplace:

The crowd of buyers and sellers which thronged its spacious area afforded a convincing proof of the necessity for its erection. The exhibition of Fruit

and Vegetables was large and its effect was very pleasing. The singular variety of fish exposed, would afford many subjects of interest to the ichthyologist. From an attentive inspection of the plan and proposed arrangement, we are led to believe the successful opening of the market may be looked upon, as exclusive evidence of the ability of the projector, to render it every way adequate to meet the pressing requirements of our daily increasing population.²¹

The government let out the stalls in Central Market at fixed rates. The monthly rent for a pork stall was \$1, while for stalls selling fish, salted fish, poultry, cake and tea, and vegetables was only \$0.75. The rent for cook shops was the highest, costing \$2.5 a month (Table 1.1).²² The government charged only a moderate rent for the market stalls to barely cover the expenses of maintaining the marketplace operation. According to Malcolm, any person could come over from the mainland and rent a stall “for either one day or a month.”²³

Table 1.1. Charges of Renting Different Stalls at the Government Marketplace in 1842

Stall Type	Monthly Rent (Dollars)
Fish stalls	0.75
Salted fish stalls	0.75
Poultry stalls	0.75
Cake and tea stalls	0.75
Vegetables	0.75
Pork stalls	1
Cook shops	2.5

(Select Committee on Commercial Relations with China, *Report from the Select Committee on Commercial Relations with China* [London: HMSO, 1847], 348.)

Malcolm appointed Wei Afoon as the superintendent and built a house for him on the market ground. Since then, the Wei family was closely associated with Central Market. As the superintendent, Wei Afoon was responsible for the day-to-day management of the market and collecting rent from stallholders. He reported to the Chief Magistrate, who was in charge of the colony’s law and order. No one other than the superintendent