



COMMUNITY HERITAGE SERIES II:

# **WET MARKETS**

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# WET MARKETS

## COMMUNITY HERITAGE SERIES II

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National Archives of Singapore and  
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## FOREWORD

I am delighted that the National Heritage Board (NHB) has embarked on a series of imaginative projects to capture various aspects of Singapore's heartland heritage. I am equally delighted that their second project focuses on wet markets in Singapore. In several ways, wet markets are part and parcel of the Singaporean way of life.



▲  
Ms Yeoh Chee Yan  
Permanent Secretary for  
Ministry of Culture,  
Community and Youth

First, wet markets offer a wide range of fresh meats and vegetables at affordable and often "bargainable" prices. Shopping is a community experience - visitors know they can receive friendly and personalised services from stallholders they patronise regularly – often over many years.

Second, wet markets offer a unique sensory experience. The early morning hustle and bustle, scents of fish and raw meat intermingling with curry powder and fresh flowers, and shouts of stall owners attempting to attract more customers. These sights, sounds and smells are part of our shared Singapore experience.

Third, wet markets serve as a microcosm of Singapore's multi-cultural society. It is at our wet markets where visitors can find a Malay stall selling mutton next to a Chinese stall selling vegetables or fish, or an Indian stall selling spices and condiments.

Finally, wet markets are common spaces where all Singaporeans, irrespective of race, language or religion, can mingle while purchasing fresh produce and other household necessities. In fact, it is a common sight to see friends and neighbours visiting wet markets together.

It is for all the above reasons that I enjoy visiting the wet market on the weekend. They also remind me of trips to the wet market with my parents when I was growing up. I hope that you too will enjoy reading this e-book and re-visiting your own memories, as you learn more about the history of wet markets in Singapore.



▲ The wet market section at Chong Boon Market and Food Centre (2011).  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

# AN INTRODUCTION TO WET MARKETS

The term “wet markets” is derived from the markets’ wet floors which are caused by the melting of ice used to ensure the freshness of seafood sold and by stall holders who routinely clean their stalls by spraying them with water.

Wet markets are typically divided into a “wet” section where fresh produce, meat, fish and live animals are sold, and a “dry” section where stalls selling goods such as spices, rice, dried noodles, dried seafood and beans are located.

The term “wet markets” came into common usage in the early 1970s when the Singapore government used the term to distinguish these markets from air-conditioned “supermarkets” that had become popular with the opening of Fitzpatrick’s supermarket in Orchard Road in 1958.



◀ The dried goods section at Tiong Bahru Market (2011).  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

During the early 1990s, the live slaughter of poultry at wet markets was phased out and relocated to centralised abattoirs. The Cold Chain System was introduced in 1999 and required meat to be kept chilled throughout the entire preparation process.

Wet markets meet the basic needs of Singaporeans and are a source of livelihood for their stall holders. They have also become a common ground for Singapore’s ethnically diverse population to interact and bond, and contribute to Singapore’s vibrant community heritage.



▲ The interior of the Ellenborough Market (1953).  
*Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore*

# AN EARLY HISTORY OF WET MARKETS

## Wet Markets in the Pre-Colonial and Colonial Periods

There is little documentation on what markets were like in the pre-colonial era although evidence suggests that market places or bazaars emerged organically wherever there was trading. In the 1800s, markets tended to comprise loose clusters of vendors and peddlers with their wares laid out on the ground or in baskets, either on open ground or under a shed.

In 1822, Sir Stamford Raffles ordered the construction of a market near the north end of Market Street which would become the predecessor of the former Telok Ayer Market. Colonel Farquhar, the Resident of Singapore, subsequently recommended that the market be relocated to a site at the south end of the street.

When Telok Ayer Market first opened in 1825, it extended over the sea and allowed jetties to load and unload produce directly onto boats. The market was replaced by a new market designed by Singapore's first architect, George Drumgoole Coleman, but it was demolished in 1841 when it was unable to meet the marketing needs of the growing population in Chinatown.

Another market, now known as Lau Pa Sat, was completed in 1894. It featured a distinctive octagonal structure with 8 entrances surmounted by fan shaped patterns. This market was dismantled in 1986 and subsequently transformed into a food centre. Today, Lau Pa Sat is a food haunt popular with tourists and the working population in the Central Business District.



▲ A photograph of the Orchard Road Market which featured a six metre tall cast-iron fountain from Glasgow (1903).  
*Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore*

In addition to Telok Ayer Market, other markets were built in different parts of Singapore to serve the different villages and enclaves that had sprung up. These markets included Lau Pa Sat, Ellenborough Market, Clyde Terrace Market (Pasar Besi), Rochore Market (Pasar Rochore), Kandang Kerbau Market, Tanjong Pagar Market, and Orchard Road Market.

During this period, the Municipal Council monitored the business practices and codes of conduct within the markets, and kept a record of the goods sold at these markets. While all markets sold fish, beef, fowl and ducks, there were selected foodstuff that was available only at certain markets.



▲ A typical scene at the Tanjong Pagar Market (1960).  
K F Wong Collection,  
courtesy of National  
Archives of Singapore

## WET MARKETS IN POST-WAR SINGAPORE

The development of wet markets can be attributed to the relocation of street hawkers and the development of public housing in the 1950s and 1960s. After independence in 1965, street hawking became prevalent, and poor sanitation and hygiene concerns led the Singapore government to relocate street hawkers to purpose-built facilities which are known today as wet markets cum hawker centres.

One of the earliest wet markets to be built was Tiong Bahru Market in 1950. This was followed by more wet markets in Chinatown and Little India as well as in newly-developed housing estates of that period such as Queenstown and Toa Payoh. From the 1950s to the 1990s, wet markets were mostly standalone structures although they may be integrated as part of a neighbourhood centre.

By the 1990s, it became increasingly common to find wet markets as part of a mall, such as Punggol Market situated at the basement of Punggol Plaza, or the wet market at Elias Mall which opened in March 2011 and is also incidentally the first air-conditioned wet market in Singapore.

Since the 1990s, over 100 markets cum hawker centres had been built. To date, Singapore has 107 wet markets and hawker centres in total and they are located in different parts of Singapore, making them accessible to all Singaporeans.

A busy day at Chinatown Market (1962).  
K F Wong Collection, courtesy of  
National Archives of Singapore ▼



# WET MARKETS AND THEIR UNIQUE CHARACTERISTICS



▲ A vegetable stall at Chinatown Market (1962).  
*K F Wong Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore*

## Nature of Transactions

Wet markets offer personalised services because many stall holders are familiar with the preferences of their regular customers. In fact, some stall holders may give a better deal to their regular customers by rounding down the total price or adding in free goods such as an extra bunch of vegetables.

Till today, transactions in wet markets are mostly verbal and bargaining is still widely practiced. All transactions are in cash and once a price has been stated and accepted between the stall holder and his/her customer, goods and money will exchange hands without the issuance of a receipt.

## Prices of Goods

The prices of goods sold at wet markets tend to fluctuate due to variations in demand and supply. When supply is affected due to droughts or monsoon rains, prices are similarly affected. In addition, there are also seasonal price variations especially during the festive periods.

Due to the relatively short daytime operating hours of most wet markets (usually between 6am to 2pm), prices of fresh produce can also see variations within the course of a day. By late morning or mid-day, some stall holders will reduce prices so as to cut their losses and maximise sales before they close for the day.



▲ A fruit stall at the Chinatown Market (1983).  
*Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore*



▲ The façade of Kebun Baru Market and Food Centre (2012).  
 Courtesy of Lester Ledesma

# KEBUN BARU MARKET

– Block 226D, Ang Mo Kio, Avenue 1, Singapore 564226

Originally built in 1976, Kebun Baru Market and Food Centre serves the marketing and dining needs of residents living in the Kebun Baru area of Ang Mo Kio. On 8 February 2000, a fire broke out during the Chinese New Year period which caused extensive damage to the market and resulted in great inconvenience for stall holders and residents.

However, the incident proved to be a rallying point for the Kebun Baru Citizens' Consultative Committee, stall-holders and residents as they worked towards setting up a temporary market while repairs to the damaged market took place. Within 6 months, the market was re-built and re-opened.

In June 2009, the market and food centre underwent upgrading works. On Sunday, 28 March 2010, the Kebun Baru Market and Food Centre officially re-opened after a S\$1.89 million face-lift. With the upgrading, the food centre saw a 30% increase in seating capacity, the stalls were made bigger, and the passageways were widened to facilitate increased traffic flow.

▼ A vegetable stall in the foreground and a stall selling Chinese New Year decorations in the background (2012).  
 Courtesy of Lester Ledesma





▲ The façade of Geylang Serai Market (2012).  
Courtesy of Lester Ledesma

# GEYLANG SERAI MARKET

– 1 Geylang Serai, Singapore 402001

The original Geylang Serai Market was opened on 17 April 1975 by then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. The single storey market proved to be very popular with locals and tourists. During the Hari Raya period, a makeshift market place would be set up next to the market.

However, over the next two decades, the market became increasingly run down. In February 2006, the Geylang Serai Market underwent re-development works. After a S\$18.2 million upgrading, the market was officially re-opened in July 2009.

A stall selling headscarves at Geylang Serai Market (2012).

▼ Courtesy of Lester Ledesma

With 63 cooked food stalls and 302 market stalls, the present Geylang Serai Market is the third largest hawker centre in Singapore and one of the most popular, especially with the Malay community.

The market was designed in close consultation with grassroots groups and stallholders, and the building contains features of old Malay homes such as sloping roofs, intricate batik motifs as well as decorative details like louvers and timbre panels.

The new market also features bigger food stalls, wider passageways, higher ceilings and handicap-friendly facilities. Its ground floor houses a wet market while its second floor comprises a food centre as well as stalls selling household items and clothes.





▲ The façade of Chong Boon Market and Food Centre (2012).  
Courtesy of Lester Ledesma

# CHONG BOON MARKET

## AND FOOD CENTRE

– Block 453A, Ang Mo Kio, Avenue 10, Singapore 561453

Chong Boon Market and Food Centre, built in 1979, is one of the older market cum food centres in Ang Mo Kio. It has 28 cooked food stalls and 184 market stalls. Since its opening, it has been the preferred venue for walkabouts conducted by Members of Parliament and Cabinet Ministers.

The market has hosted anniversary celebrations such as the Chong Boon Market and Food Centre's 30th anniversary celebrations on 24 April 2011 which was attended by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and Members of Parliament for the constituency.

Despite the recent upgrade at the market and food centre to enhance facilities and improve the hygiene level, hawkers and stallholders lamented that there had not been any improvement in business.

This was because many customers, who visited other markets and food centres during the upgrade, had grown accustomed to the other markets and food centres and had not returned to the upgraded Chong Boon Market and Food Centre.

▼  
*A roast meat shop at Chong Boon Market (2012).  
Courtesy of Townsville Primary School*





▲ The façade of Tekka Market (2012).  
 Courtesy of Lester Ledesma

# TEKKA MARKET

– Block 665, Buffalo Road, Singapore 210665

Tekka Market, located at Block 665, Buffalo Road, started as the Kandang Kerbau (Malay term for “buffalo pens”) Market at the junction of Serangoon Road and Rochor Road. Its former site is currently occupied by Little India’s first air-conditioned mall The Verge which was built in 2003.

The Kandang Kerbau Market was built by the Municipal Commission in 1915 at the cost of S\$107,690. Back then, it was one of the more popular markets in Singapore because its stalls offered the best cuts of beef and mutton due to the market’s proximity to the cattle ranches in the area. However, by the early 1950s, the market became overcrowded and congested, and there was a pressing need for the market to undergo upgrading works.

In 1982, the market was torn down and rebuilt at its current site. It was re-named as Zhujiao Centre (竹脚中心) and built as a multi-use complex which comprises a wet market, a food centre and shops. However, it was difficult for the general public to read and pronounce “Zhujiao”. “Zhujiao” also did not bear any resemblance to Tekka. Hence, in 2000, it was renamed Tekka Centre and the market in the centre came to be known as Tekka Market.

Today, Tekka Market remains a landmark in Little India where different ethnic communities congregate and interact while marketing or enjoying a meal at the hawker centre.

A stall selling spices at Tekka Market (2012).

▼ Courtesy of Lester Ledesma





▲ The façade of Marine Terrace Market (2012).  
Courtesy of Lester Ledesma

# MARINE TERRACE MARKET

– 50A Marine Terrace, Singapore 441050

Marine Terrace Market is located in Marine Parade, Singapore's first residential estate built entirely on reclaimed land. The land reclamation project at Marine Parade began in 1966, cost S\$613 million and added 1,525 hectares of land to the coastline along the East Coast.

By the end of 1973, when the first phase of development for Marine Parade was completed, shops, offices and 6,000 units of public housing in Marine Parade were constructed. During the second phase of development, more commercial and community facilities including shops, schools, hawker centres, a post office, a

library and additional public housing were added. It was during this phase that Marine Terrace Market was constructed and it started operations in 1975.

Today, Marine Terrace Market has 24 cooked food stalls and 87 market stalls. It is strategically located next to the Marine Parade Town Council. As part of the estate's upgrading programme, improvements to the market were made. Although the cleanliness of the market has improved, business has declined because many of the market's regular customers have moved out of the estate.

A stall selling fishcakes and fishballs at Marine Terrace Market (2012).

▼ Courtesy of Lester Ledesma





▲ The façade of Holland Village Market and Food Centre (2012).  
 Courtesy of Lester Ledesma

# HOLLAND VILLAGE MARKET AND FOOD CENTRE

– 1 Lorong Mambong, Singapore 277700

From the 1930s to early 1940s, Holland Village was a military village established by the colonial government in Singapore. To meet the daily needs of its residents, the predecessor of today's Holland Village Market and Food Centre was constructed.

When Singapore became independent, Holland Village lost its British military population. However, this did not affect Holland Village adversely as they had by then, in the 1970s, a sizeable local population living in public housing within the vicinity. The Holland and nearby Tanglin areas had also become popular residential districts for Singapore's expatriate population.

Today, Holland Village is the heart of the Holland Road community and the Holland Village Market and Food Centre is situated right in the heart of Holland Village. The market and food centre has 21 cooked food stalls and 48 market stalls

and is popular for its affordable hawker fare. To cater to its diverse customers, the market carries an extensive range of exotic foodstuff and organic produce which tend to be found in premium supermarkets.

In recent times, the market has experienced a decline in business following an upgrading of the centre in 2005 during which many stall holders gave up their stalls to retire and customers switched to other wet markets in the vicinity.

To attract customers back to the market, more than 20 hawkers petitioned in August 2011 to extend the food centre into part of the wet market. The Holland Village Market and Food Centre Hawkers' Association believed that the food centre will draw a greater number of customers and thereby, improve the overall business for the wet market.

▼ A wide variety of fresh flowers is available at this flower stall in the market (2012).

▼ Courtesy of Lester Ledesma





▲ The façade of Tiong Bahru Market (2012).  
Courtesy of Lester Ledesma

# TIONG BAHRU MARKET

## AND FOOD CENTRE

– 30 Seng Poh Road, Singapore 168898

The original Tiong Bahru Market was built in 1950 as a single-storey market. Back then, it was also known as Seng Poh Market. The market was constructed by the Singapore Improvement Trust following a petition by street hawkers in the area who operated in fear of being chased away by the authorities.

From 2004 to 2006, the market underwent extensive upgrading works at the cost of S\$16.8 million. Despite its modern design and the addition of better facilities, the re-opened market blended well with its surroundings comprising mainly of two to five storey apartments built in the Art Deco architecture style.

With 83 hawker stalls and 250 wet market and retail stalls, the new Tiong Bahru Market now has an expanded seating

capacity of 1440 seats and a roof-top car park with 120 parking lots. Its high ceilings, alfresco dining facilities and wide variety of hawker stalls selling an array of delectable local cuisine, make it a favourite food haunt for locals and tourists.

Today, the Tiong Bahru estate retains its close-knit *kampung* (Malay for “small village”) spirit and has the feel of a bustling and lively little town where everyone knows and looks out for each other – a spirit that is also evident in the interactions between stall holders and residents at Tiong Bahru Market.

A traditional coffee powder stall at Tiong Bahru Market (2012).

▼ Courtesy of Lester Ledesma





▲ A colourful array of fresh vegetables at this stall in Holland Village Market and Food Centre (2011).  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

# CHALLENGES FOR WET MARKETS

## Competition from Supermarkets and Hypermarkets

The entry of supermarkets in the 1980s and hypermarkets in the 1990s to 2000s provided stiff competition to wet markets as they offer a cleaner air-conditioned environment and a wider variety of products at cheaper prices.

With their longer operating hours, supermarkets and hypermarkets are also more attractive to working professionals who find it more convenient to do their marketing in the evenings. Not surprisingly, the daily earnings of wet market stall holders have been adversely affected — more so if they are located in the vicinity of these supermarkets and hypermarkets.

## Issues of Succession and Staff

Most stalls in wet markets are operated as a family business and many of the elderly stall holders may have to shut down their stalls in the near future as their children, who tend to be better educated, are not willing to take over these stalls.

In addition, stall holders also find it difficult to hire reliable staff who are willing to bear with the physical labour and odd hours of the job. As such, many stall holders choose to sell off or close down their stalls when they find that they can no longer cope with the daily operations of the business.

▼ A fresh selection of fish on sale at Tekka Market (2011).  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board





▲ Housewives from different ethnic communities patronising a market stall (1962).  
*K F Wong Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore*

# SINGAPORE'S WET MARKETS: MEETING NEEDS AND BUILDING COMMUNITIES

In October 2011, the government announced that it would be building an additional 10 hawker centres with cooked food and wet market sections over the next decade. This indicates that, at least for now, wet markets are here to stay.

Wet markets are important social spaces where residents of diverse backgrounds can meet and interact while purchasing cheap and fresh produce as well as household groceries. More specifically, wet markets provide a setting where personal relationships and lasting friendships are forged, not just between residents and stall holders, but also among the residents in the neighbourhoods.

Wet markets are also meaningful places to residents because of their familiarity and the spontaneous social interactions that take place on a regular basis. They also represent shared experiences, emotional attachments and nostalgic memories for Singaporeans who associate wet markets with their growing up years and daily lives.

Wet markets therefore contribute to the building of community ties and the establishment of cohesive neighbourhood communities, especially in Singapore's modernised high-density HDB living.

# THANK YOU

The National Heritage Board would like to thank the following markets, organisations and schools for participating in this e-book project:

- Chong Boon Market and Food Centre
- Geylang Serai Market
- Holland Village Market and Food Centre
- Kebun Baru Market and Food Centre
- Marine Terrace Market
- Tekka Market
- Tiong Bahru Market
- Haig Girls' School
- Mayflower Primary School
- Stamford Primary School
- Teck Ghee Primary School
- Townsville Primary School
- Zhangde Primary School
- Ang Mo Kio-Yio Chu Kang Town Council
- Marine Parade Town Council
- Moulmein-Kallang Town Council
- Geylang Serai Community Centre
- National Environment Agency
- People's Association



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