The hinterland: gambier, pepper and the planter's credit

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A plantation economy on the island

The entrepôt did not live from transit trade alone. From its earliest years the island had a plantation economy, run almost entirely by Chinese planters, most of them Teochew. They were already cultivating gambier when Raffles arrived in 1819. Colonial records of 1822 mention a Chinese gambier plantation west of Government Hill.[1] Gambier leaves were boiled to produce an extract that was used at first in betel quids. Pepper grew well alongside it, because the refuse of the gambier boilers served as fertiliser for the pepper vines.

The crop's fortunes depended on distant markets. Restrictive Dutch duties caused a collapse after 1827, but the industry revived in the 1830s when gambier proved to be a good source of tannic acid for tanning leather and dyeing textiles. Demand from Britain and the Americas then drove a rapid expansion.[2] By 1849 gambier and pepper occupied some 27,000 acres, by far the largest area of any plantation crop on the island.[3]

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The Gambier King

The career of Seah Eu Chin shows how planting, trade and community leadership combined. Born in 1805 in Chenghai in Guangdong, he came to Singapore in 1823 and worked first as a clerk before becoming a planter, a trader and a merchant.[4] By 1839 his gambier plantation stretched across eight to ten miles, which earned him the name the "King of Gambier".[5] In 1830 he helped to found the Ngee Ann Kun, which became the Ngee Ann Kongsi in 1845 and which he chaired until his death in 1883. He was appointed a Justice of the Peace in 1867.[6] The Ngee Ann Kongsi, the association of the Teochew community, still exists and runs educational and charitable institutions in Singapore.

Advances, produce and dependence

The plantations were financed from town. A planter who opened a new clearing needed money for labour, tools, rice and opium long before his first harvest. Chinese merchants in Singapore advanced these needs against the future crop, which the planter undertook to deliver to them at a price they largely controlled.[7] The merchant then sold the gambier and pepper to the European houses for export. Planting thus formed one more link in the credit chains described below, connecting the tanneries of Britain with the coolies who worked the clearings of the interior.

The system left the planters dependent on their creditors and exposed to the swings of world prices. It also consumed the land. Gambier exhausted the soil within about fifteen years, while the boilers needed large quantities of firewood, so that the planters moved on continually and left deforested land behind them. By the 1860s output on the island had begun to decline as planters moved to Johor. By the end of the century gambier had disappeared from Singapore.[8] In Johor, the Temenggong's government organised the new settlements under a system of river concessions granted to Chinese headmen, the kangchu, whose financing again ran through merchants in Singapore.[9] The Singapore merchant community thereby extended its credit into a hinterland beyond British territory, a pattern that anticipates the city's later role as a financial centre for its neighbours.

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Notes

1. "From Gambier to Pepper: Plantation Agriculture in Singapore", *BiblioAsia*, vol. 17, issue 1, April–June 2021: Teochew planters were cultivating gambier when Raffles arrived, and a record of 1822 mentions "a Chinese gambier plantation west of Government Hill". ↩
2. "From Gambier to Pepper: Plantation Agriculture in Singapore", *BiblioAsia*, vol. 17, issue 1, April–June 2021, on the collapse after 1827 and the revival in the 1830s when "gambier was discovered to be a good source of tannic acid, used for tanning leather and dyeing textiles". ↩
3. "From Gambier to Pepper: Plantation Agriculture in Singapore", *BiblioAsia*, vol. 17, issue 1, April–June 2021: by 1849 gambier and pepper occupied "by far the largest" acreage at 27,000 acres. ↩
4. Wikipedia, "Seah Eu Chin" (accessed September 2026): born on 30 August 1805 in Chenghai, Guangdong; came to Singapore in 1823, "first working as a clerk, then becoming a plantation owner and finally becoming a trader and a merchant". ↩
5. Wikipedia, "Seah Eu Chin" (accessed September 2026): by 1839 his plantation stretched across eight to ten miles; known as the "King of Gambier". ↩
6. Wikipedia, "Seah Eu Chin" (accessed September 2026): helped establish the Ngee Ann Kun in 1830, which became the Ngee Ann Kongsi in 1845; chairman until his death in 1883; Justice of the Peace in 1867. ↩
7. On the system of advances by Chinese town merchants to gambier and pepper planters and the resulting dependence of the planters, see Carl A. Trocki, *Prince of Pirates: The Temenggongs and the Development of Johor and Singapore, 1784–1885*, Singapore, NUS Press, 2nd edition 2007, chapters 4–5, and Trocki, *Opium and Empire*, chapter 2. ↩
8. "From Gambier to Pepper: Plantation Agriculture in Singapore", *BiblioAsia*, vol. 17, issue 1, April–June 2021, on soil exhaustion after about fifteen years,

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deforestation and shifting cultivation; “By the 1860s, Singapore’s gambier output had begun to decline as planters moved to Johor”. ↩

9. On the kangchu system in Johor and its financing by Singapore merchants, see Wikipedia, “Kangchu system”, and Trocki, *Prince of Pirates*, chapter 5. ↩

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