BUNGA mas and Bunga perak - literally, golden flower and silver flower - was a symbol of the diplomatic system in the South-East Asian region. It was practised widely between the 17th and 19th centuries among mainland and maritime states.

For example, Malay states such as Perak or Kedah were in the habit of sending bunga mas not only to Siam (as Thailand was known then) but also to other powerful polities such as Aceh or Burma (now Myanmar) when it served their interest to do so. Other South-East Asian states such as the Shan States, Vietnam and Laos had, in the early 19th century, sent bunga mas to Bangkok.

Bunga mas represented the relationship that states of unequal power and status supposedly entered into voluntarily. However, historical evidence verifies that no powerful states in South-East Asia ever sent bunga mas to another equally powerful state.

Bunga mas was actually sent by a small and, militarily speaking, weak state to a more powerful state to gain goodwill and protection - especially from damaging acts by that powerful state.
Bunga mas might be viewed nowadays as a quaint tradition but in reality it was a reminder of the sender's less prestigious status in traditional intra-regional affairs.

There was, however, no socio-political stigma attached to those tribute-sending states during that period, since such status was impermanent. A state's fortune often changed drastically in tandem with the abilities of its rulers.

One decade it's an inferior state, the next, a powerful one. Aceh in the 17th century is a good example of how a South-East Asian state's fortunes could go up and down.

Resentment and frustration among rulers of tributary states against their "overlords" only came about with the emergence of the British colonial empire in South-East Asia and the socio-political changes on the South-East Asian mainland.

During the traditional period, i.e. between the 17th and 19th centuries, five Malay states practised at one time or other the tradition of sending bunga mas to the "raja maha besar Siam" (great king of Siam). The five states were the four northern Malay states of Kelantan, Terengganu, Kedah and Perlis, and Perak.

(After the 1826 Anglo-Siamese Treaty, Perak was implicitly removed from the Siamese sphere of influence. Only the four northern states remained within the political orbit of Siam until the latter surrendered them to the British in the 1909 Anglo-Siamese Treaty.)

Of the five states, Perak had been forced into the practice in the 19th century by Kedah's superior army which acted as Bangkok's agent. The other four states "voluntarily" became tribute-bearing dependencies of Siam.

Why did these states do this? The main reason had much to do with their internal and interstate politics. It had became a common feature in the late 18th and early 19th centuries in Terengganu, Kelantan and Kedah that warring factions allied themselves with a foreign power in
the hope of gaining enough influence and power to keep their domestic rivals under control, or to win the struggle outright.

A Malay ruler of this period who desired a powerful ally against either his internal opponents or against a hostile superior power might willingly accept an unequal relationship with a particular power from which he could obtain protection or assistance.

A quick survey of Siam-Terengganu relations in the 19th century provides a good illustration of this.

In 1839, in response to a request from Tengku Omar, nephew of the reigning sultan of Terengganu, who had been exiled to Lingga (in Indonesia), Bangkok assisted Tengku Omar to an easy victory over his uncle, Sultan Mohamad Shah (1836-deposed 1839). After the victory, Tengku Omar, popularly known as Baginda Omar (1839-1876), requested a formal investiture from Bangkok and willingly became a vassal of the king of Siam.

Baginda Omar, one of the most able rulers of Terengganu, proved himself a diligent vassal; his bunga mas mission was always on time, while correspondence between Bangkok and Kuala Terengganu, where Baginda Omar had his palace, markedly increased both in volume and subject matter.

While Bangkok-Terengganu tributary relations were generally warm and happy, there were, nonetheless, lapses. The reasons for such lapses are not difficult to identify. Once Baginda Omar felt secure that his power was unassailable against domestic rivals and opponents, he felt little compulsion to rely on the assistance and support of Bangkok.

Take, for example, Terengganu's involvement in the Pahang Civil War of 1857. Baginda Omar, in an effort to stem the expansion of power and influence of the Temenggong of Johor, involved Terengganu in the Pahang conflict on the side of the Temenggong's opponent, Wan Ahmad, without prior knowledge or consent from Bangkok.
Then, when Baginda Omar thought his interest and position were threatened by Bangkok's apparent change of heart towards him in 1861, he sought British support and sympathy by halting all aid to Wan Ahmad, as requested by colonial authorities in Singapore.

However, disappointment with Singapore's continuing policy of supporting the Temenggong and the latter's desire to control the East Coast made Baginda Omar mend his deteriorating relationship with Bangkok. From then on, he remained a steadfast vassal.

His loyalty was reinforced when Terengganu was bombarded by the British in 1862. It was clear to him that, as a small state living within the shadows of two powerful neighbours - the British colonial regime in Singapore and Siam - Terengganu's interests were better served by remaining within the Siamese political orbit than by shifting allegiance towards the British.

Such was Terengganu's loyalty to Siam that it even attempted, in 1903, to stave off a British effort to replace the traditional bunga mas tributary practice with contractual relations.

A mission, headed by Tengku Besar Tengku Mohamad Yusof, was sent by Sultan Zainal Abidin III (1881-1918) to Bangkok carrying a proposal to update the tributary system.

This new system, while different from the British model, would preserve traditional ties between the two polities while preventing Siam from interfering in the domestic affairs of Terengganu at will.

The crux of the draft was Terengganu's request that Bangkok's traditional right to influence Terengganu's domestic affairs be clarified and limited. The aim was to enhance Terengganu's independence.

The proposed changes indicate clearly the success of traditional relations as symbolised by bunga mas.
Forced to choose between this traditional system and the modern British Adviser system, it is evident from Terengganu's response that Malay rulers preferred to keep the traditional system with which they had become familiar.

Time was, however, running out for Siamese-Malay tributaries.

Rapid socio-political changes both within the British ruling elite and among Siamese leaders from 1897 compelled Siam to re-assess the socio-political value of its Malay dependencies.

In fact, Bangkok had come to see the four Malay dependencies as more of a source of political and social threat and frustration to the survival of Siam as a sovereign nation, and less as a symbol of power, prestige and legitimacy of the ruler.

The final outcome was the cession of Kelantan, Terengganu, Kedah and Perlis to Britain in return for British recognition of Siamese judicial power over British citizens within its borders and a loan of £4mil at the low interest rate of 4% for the construction of the railways to the south of Siam.

Siamese-Malay bunga mas relations thus came to an abrupt end with the 1909 Anglo-Siamese Treaty - without prior warning from Bangkok to its dependencies nor consultation with the four Malay rulers concerned.

It was a bitter and unhappy ending to a relationship that had withstood the test of time and that had given birth to many personal and cultural ties between the Malay royal houses and various Thai noble lines.

Ironically, it is these personal and cultural ties that have proved enduring beyond the 1909 Thai-Malay break-up, beyond the subsequent socio-political and emotional deep scars, and beyond even the passing of the millennium.
Strictly speaking, the bunga mas system forms no part of Malaysian-Thai relations now. Malaysia - or, to be precise, her predecessor, the Federation of Malaya - came into existence in 1957, long after the termination of traditional tributary relations.

Official diplomatic relations between the two countries are firmly grounded in the Western-originated international system which is based on written agreements and strict protocol. (In other words, no bunga mas relations.) Thus, Malaysia-Thai relations began on an equal footing.

And that's just as well. The new millennium deserves a new mind-set. We do not need a "bunga mas mentality" to tacitly keep us feeling resentful of our part in the history of South-East Asia.

Conversely, though, it is healthier to understand one significant fact: that it was these traditional relations that helped preserve the socio-cultural and traditional values of our past for the present.

We should be proud of our "bunga mas past" even as we appreciate our "bunga mas-less" present.

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Notes: STF -.: Continuing the Millennium Markers focus on globalisation and Malaysia's early relationships with regional powers, Dr K.S. PIAN writes about bunga mas, the tribute that was traditionally a part of Malaysia's relationship with several regional powers two centuries ago.