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Emulate positive aspects of Japanese system and leave the rest

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SHOULD Malaysia ape Japan?

This question should be rephrased, or rather, updated: Should Malaysia continue to ape Japan now that the Japanese economic bubble has burst ... that the East Asian economic miracle is showing signs of failing?

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad says we should. And he should know. After all, according to an Osaka television station, he has visited Japan 50 times.

"But not the way the Japanese are copying the West," said Dr Mahathir when asked this question by Malaysian journalists in Osaka on Saturday during his "50th visit". To him, we just choose the good and damn the bad.

And there are more good things than bad about the Japanese. Dr Mahathir himself was upbeat about the observations of a Malaysian student concerning some of the simple things Malaysians should learn from the Japanese.

The economics student from Kobe University stood up during a dialogue with the Prime Minister at the Royal Rihga Hotel in Osaka on Friday night to ask why it was so difficult for Malaysian shopkeepers to be as polite as their Japanese counterparts.

It is true the moment you are served in a bar or restaurant anywhere in Japan, the waiter is sure to say "thank you for waiting, sir" with a smile.

Or take the Shinkansen train (bullet train) from Tokyo to, say, Osaka. The schedule says the train departs at 4pm, stops at Kyoto at 6.08pm and arrives at Osaka at 6.30pm.

Take the train on any day and the punctuality is strictly observed to the very second.

Trivial as it might seem, such habits reflect discipline, and one which Dr Mahathir is trying hard to inculcate among Malaysians.

Even the Thais, according to the Prime Minister, have more refined manners. "We can copy this Japanese culture."

Dr Mahathir's first visit to Japan was in 1961, and he said he was amazed to see how the Japanese, less than 20 years after the devastation of World War II, were rising from the ashes through sheer determination and discipline.

"Some of them were paid wages not in monetary terms but food. And they persevered. They worked hard and literally built up the country from the ashes of war.

"And now they are the world's No 2 economic power. What more can we say about that and isn't this something we should emulate?" he told students during the dialogue.

But at the same time, Dr Mahathir is apprehensive about how Japan is managing its success and achievements, about how the country is becoming more and more Western.

In his speech on promoting understanding between Japan and East Asia at an economic symposium organised by Mainichi Shimbun on Thursday, he said:

"Now Japan is trying to emulate the West 100 per cent. In politics, economy and financial management, Japan is discarding all its old practices in favour of Western methods and standards.

"Japan has discarded lifetime employment, co-operation between Government and the private sector, regional cooperation, ideology, etc.

"Even Japanese youths want to be blondes, work less and play more. The

traditional Japanese and eastern culture is being discarded and replaced with Western disregard for filial piety and discipline."

So, Dr Mahathir's answer to the question whether Malaysians should continue to copy the Japanese who are copycats themselves is simply - we should not copy the way they copy.

"But there are many other aspects of the Japanese system from which we could pick up.

"For instance, the student pointed out in the dialogue that Malaysian shopkeepers do not treat customers like the Japanese do - polite, ever-smiling and helpful. This is one aspect we can copy.

"There are others of course - cleanliness, discipline and methods of bringing up children. This we can follow. Not the economic system which the Japanese copy from the West."

Dr Mahathir does not hide this fact that despite his fascination for most things Japanese, he thinks Japan should not try to be another US.

And this many people in Japan know, including Shintaro Ishihara, the governor of Tokyo who belongs to the same class of outspoken people.

Ishihara, alongside Dr Mahathir, was one of the panellists in a breakfast talk show recorded over Fuji Television network on Saturday.

The host of the show introduced the two personalities as persons "who make the right comments and who have very strong views about the US".

Ishihara was also asked what he thought of Dr Mahathir.

The answer: "An excellent medical doctor and politician. We don't have too many of his kind in the world."

And that of course came from a well-respected Japanese.

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