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Dr M: A lot to learn from China

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KUALA LUMPUR: East Asia's emerging economic dominance over the West is due to its productivity and strong work ethic, former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad said yesterday.

These traits will ensure the 21st century belongs to Asia, he added.

Dr Mahathir identified China, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and, to a lesser extent, India as the countries which would lead the Asian charge.

He dismissed strife-torn West Asia's chances of becoming a meaningful global player, calling it "the failed part" of the continent, and mocking them as a people who stabbed each other despite "loving peace a lot".

"They are not going to make much progress, unfortunately. They are not going to contribute to the Asia of the 21st century. But it doesn't matter because Asia is such a big place," Dr Mahathir said during a talk on "Asia and the 21st Century", organised by Universiti Malaya's Asia-Europe Institute.

He said the Japanese and South Koreans had improved greatly from the days when they were known for producing low-quality duplicates of Western products.

China, now following the same manufacturing formula, will see a similar improvement in the quality of its products.

However, the former premier warned of the increasing trend among young people to ape Western culture.

"Today, there are places in Tokyo where you see young people with multi-coloured hair. They look like Red Indians. These are the young Japanese who have adopted Western values.

"They want to be free and be able to change the place they work, hop from one place to another and take marijuana. This is what the Europeans do. This is progress for those young people."

Dr Mahathir said Asia would lose its competitive advantage if it allowed such thinking to flourish.

It is the West's focus on democracy, civil rights and individual liberties — attributes flaunted by Western governments — that Dr Mahathir

identified as being the reason behind its economic flaccidity.

"The British believe a lot in so-called freedom. Their workers must be allowed to go on strike all the time. So, they have the problem of being a very unproductive population.

"They must be free of everything. When you do that, productivity will drop. When productivity drops, you cannot compete."

Dr Mahathir singled out India as an Asian country that "made the mistake of being too democratic" and compared it unfavourably with China's authoritarian regime.

"India, of course, will grow, but more slowly than China. It has the numbers but is not making use of them well."

He expanded on the theme at a press conference later, saying that people "don't understand the limits of democracy".

"Democracy can be a hindrance to progress because you spend so much time politicking that you don't have time to develop your country.

"In China, there's not much politics. So, they can spend more time developing their country.



Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad (left) and Raja Muda of Perak Raja Dr Nazrin Shah at the 'Asia and the 21st Century' talk at Nikko Hotel in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

"In a democracy, everybody has a voice, everybody has a vote. But, in Malaysia, they sell their votes, which is not good at all."

Dr Mahathir said when people in a democracy lost an election, they had to accept it and support the winner.

"But, here, when you lose an election, you just take away your faction and things become bad."

The theme of Dr Mahathir's talk reflected a breakfast speech he gave at the World Chinese Economic Forum a few hours earlier, when he

said China would emerge from the economic recession "almost unscathed".

He said Malaysia needed to look at China as an alternative market for its products, due to the inability of former markets in America and Europe to take up its exports.