

The false notion of racial intellectual dominance

CENTURY FOR ALL? Asian scholars, trained in the West, will one day contribute to a two-way flow of knowledge

HUMANS from different ethnic stocks are endowed with intelligence, randomly. Differences in stages of development have to do with culture, diligence, tradition, habits of mind, repeated experiences of achievements, the spirit of adventure and a "do or die" attitude.

Intelligence is not because races are selected by nature to be endowed with intelligence, differently. To accept the false assumption regarding racial intelligence is to believe that the northern races, or Western cultures, are superior, and Eastern cultures and the southern races are inferior.

Such stereotyping leads to the question: *Can Asians Think?*

This is the title of the provocative book written in 1998 by Kishore Mahbubani, dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. It is a rebuttal of the universalism of Western ideas. This question, in turn, begs the question regarding

the correctness of Western states in business, government, education and life.

Asian weaknesses in knowledge may be more because Asians are deeply ensconced in their comfort zones, and find Western intellectual leadership so overwhelmingly powerful that it may be easier to go along without combatively engaging the prolific contributions from the West.

Since Edward Said's *Orientalism* and Syed Hussein Alattas' *Myth of the Lazy Native and Intellectuals in Developing Societies*, there have been sparse materials challenging the dominance of the definitions of realities set by the West.

It is exciting, therefore, when the 3rd Exploring Leadership and Learning Theories Association (Elita) International Conference

was again organised by Elita and Universiti Sains Malaysia on the theme of "Leadership and Learning in the Asian Century".

The theme is combative because the 21st century belongs to all, not just to Asians. However, now there is worldwide acknowledgement of the rise of China and India as economic giants, with Indonesia and Vietnam close behind. This rise is coupled with the economic ascendance of Japan and South Korea.

Half of humankind in Asia are claiming their share of wealth.

The notion of Asians contributing to mankind's economic and political well-being cannot be dismissed. The question remains whether Asians have been thinking strategically, and are willing to develop "Southern Theories" and share Asian wisdom with the West, and whether the West is humble enough to learn from the East.

Scholars from 60 countries, including Malaysia, engaged in conversations, discussions, dialogues, discourses and debates.

The quest for answers continues. Theory construction has not quite

begun, but most would find the interactions challenging, finding opportunities to probe deeper.

When John Naisbitt relaunched his book, *Mindset*, his reply to a question regarding the book was that: "The East is about learning and the West is about teaching."

The reply has a deeper meaning because at this point in time, the knowledge institutions of the West, typically driven by Western researchers, are training millions of scholars from the East.

These scholars from the East will, for the most part, return to their homelands and expand the Western-based knowledge transferred to their own milieu, with their own construction of indigenous knowledge and insights.

The day will come when the flow of knowledge will not just be from the West but will also be from the East as well.

It was inspiring to see Penang Yang di-Pertua Tun Abdul Rahman Abbas enthusiastically engaged with the subject.

Other local dignitaries were also enthused by the alluring notion of the rise of the "Southern Theories", and the confidence once again of Asians contributing to the Asian generation of knowledge; emphasising Asian creativity, innovation,

ways of solving universal problems, bringing about advancement to civilization and the betterment of lives for all.

It is so important to build a generation who believe in themselves and can make wise decisions about their lives. Such a generation must know and believe that whatever their backgrounds, they are as good as others, each with their own gifts and talents.

The differences between peoples would be more the cultural advantages and early childhood experiences, and not because they are less endowed with cognitive capacities.

Whatever disadvantages and learning deficits encountered by individuals and groups, they can be overcome by positive attitudes and self-motivation.

Just imagine, if a whole people, a whole culture, were to accept that they are less endowed than other races or groups! Acceptance of such a culturally engendered self-destructive subculture will make slaves of such unfortunate groups.

From the long lens of history, we are seeing the beginning of the shift of power from Greece, Rome, London and Washington to Asia.

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