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The Transmission of Japanese Ideas and the Formation of Mahathir Mohamad's Leadership Thought: A Bibliographic and Intellectual Reflection

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how ideas from Japanese history, values, and post-war transformation were transmitted into the leadership thought of Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad. Rather than viewing the Look East Policy as an isolated policy initiative, the study traces a longer intellectual process that began with Mahathir's sustained engagement with writings by Reischauer, Storry, Craig, Nakane, and Morita. These works introduced themes of discipline, shame, selective modernisation and collective responsibility, which later informed Mahathir's reflections on social behaviour, leadership, and national development. His subsequent visits to Japan reinforced the values he had encountered in these texts, strengthening his conviction that progress is rooted as much in attitude and responsibility as in technology and economic planning. Using the concept of "transmission of ideas", the article argues that Mahathir engaged Japan not through imitation of institutions, but through selective adaptation of values compatible with Malaysia's cultural and moral foundations. This synthesis illustrates how non-Western societies can pursue modernisation without abandoning identity, and highlights the role of intellectual exposure in shaping the worldview of a national leader.

1. Introduction

The formation of political leadership cannot be separated from the intellectual world in which leaders are immersed. Ideas rarely emerge in isolation; they circulate through books, encounters, and cultural experiences before being absorbed and reinterpreted by those who shape public life. In Malaysia, the leadership of Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad demonstrates how sustained exposure to

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foreign intellectual traditions provided not only a vocabulary for thinking about development but also a framework for reimagining national direction.

Much of the scholarship on Mahathir has emphasised major policy milestones such as the Look East Policy and Vision 2020. While these are significant, they often overshadow the intellectual processes underpinning his policy decisions. The question of how Mahathir came to regard Japan as an exemplary model and how these ideas travelled into Malaysian discourse, remains underexplored. This article addresses that gap by applying the concept of transmisi idea (transmission of ideas) as articulated by Santosa [20], which refers to the movement of concepts across contexts through reading, observation, and reinterpretation until they are internalised and adapted to new environments.

Framing Mahathir's engagement with Japan through this lens highlights his role not merely as a pragmatic political actor but also as an intellectual borrower and synthesizer whose worldview was shaped by an active dialogue with Japanese sources [10]. It also shifts the discussion from institutional imitation to value transmission. Rather than importing Japanese bureaucratic structures wholesale, Mahathir selectively integrated notions such as discipline, shame (haji), loyalty, and work ethic into his reflections on Malaysian society.

This approach also contributes to broader conversations in intellectual history. Leaders in post-colonial states frequently navigate the question of which models to emulate whether Western institutions, indigenous traditions, or alternative non-Western experiences [23]. Japan presented Mahathir with a compelling case: a nation that achieved rapid industrialisation while maintaining cultural rootedness, thereby demonstrating that modernity need not be synonymous with Westernisation.

Mahathir's engagement with Japan did not occur passively. His readings of Edwin Reischauer's analyses of Tokugawa Japan, Richard Storry's work on political modernisation, Albert Craig's interpretations of Meiji reforms, and Chie Nakane's studies of Japanese social structure introduced him to recurring themes of discipline, hierarchy, and collective responsibility. These textual encounters were later reinforced by his own visits to Japan, where he observed firsthand how factories, schools, and workplaces embodied values he had previously encountered in writing. The way what he had read matched what he later observed strengthened his conviction that progress depends not only on technology or policy design, but also on attitude, responsibility, and moral discipline

Accordingly, this article examines how ideas drawn from Japanese history, values, and post-war development were transmitted into Mahathir's leadership thought through reading, observation, and reflective adaptation. By analysing the intellectual sources that shaped his worldview and the ways these ideas were reinterpreted within Malaysia's cultural context, this study seeks to clarify the intellectual foundations behind Mahathir's engagement with Japan and the broader significance of this transmission for understanding his approach to national development.

2. Literature Review

The study of Mahathir Mohamad's leadership thought has generated a substantial body of scholarship, but most works are focused on policy outcomes, political ideology, and Malaysia's economic transformation. Foundational analyses such as Khoo Boo Teik's [10] study of Mahathirism examined Mahathir's ideological positions, nationalism, and developmental agenda, while later works by scholars like Welsh [26], Loh [11], and Funston [8] explored his political style, institutional reforms, and relationship with Malaysian society. Although these studies provide rich political and historical insights, they seldom examine the intellectual roots that shaped Mahathir's engagement

with foreign civilisations, particularly Japan. Thus, the pathway through which Japanese ideas entered and were adapted within Mahathir's worldview remains underdeveloped in the literature.

In addition to scholarly analyses of Mahathir, his own early reflections in *The Early Years* (1995) offer valuable insight into the foundations of his worldview. In this book, Mahathir recounts his experiences under both British rule and the Japanese occupation, highlighting the contrasting discipline, attitudes, and administrative cultures he witnessed during his youth. These formative observations fostered an early openness to non-Western models of governance and societal behaviour, which later made Japanese values particularly resonant when he encountered them through reading and observation [15].

A second strand of scholarship concerns Japan's intellectual, cultural, and socio-economic evolution. Works by Edwin Reischauer [6,7], Richard Storry [21,24], Albert Craig [2], and Chie Nakane [4] have been central to understanding Japan's historical trajectory from the Tokugawa period to the Meiji Restoration and post-war recovery. These authors provide analyses of Japan's long-standing social discipline, hierarchy, collective responsibility, and selective modernisation strategies. Their writings describe how Japan maintained cultural rootedness even as it absorbed foreign technologies and institutions, a pattern that deeply resonated with Mahathir's critique of Western-centric development models. These texts form the bibliographic backbone of Mahathir's intellectual engagement with Japan, offering the historical and sociological foundation upon which he later built his normative reflections.

A third body of literature addresses Japan's post-war industrial and cultural transformation. Akio Morita's *Made in Japan* [1] is particularly influential, presenting a first-hand narrative of corporate resilience, innovation, and the dignity of shame (haji) that guided Japanese workers during the country's post-war recovery. Morita's portrayal of Japanese discipline, teamwork, and national pride parallels themes Mahathir repeatedly emphasised in *The Challenge* [13] and *The Way Forward* [16]. This alignment highlights that Mahathir's admiration for Japan was not superficial; it was informed by specific readings that reinforced his belief that national progress ultimately depends on values, attitudes, and internalised moral responsibility.

Another relevant area of literature centres on intellectual history and the transmission of ideas. Santosa's [20] framework is especially pertinent, explaining how ideas move across contexts through reading, observation, and reinterpretation until they become internalised and embedded in new cultural or political settings. Intellectual historians such as Burke [20] and Skinner [17] have similarly argued that ideas are neither static nor transplanted wholesale; they are transformed as they enter new intellectual worlds. Applied to Mahathir's case, this perspective reveals how Japanese concepts were not copied mechanically, but filtered through Mahathir's Malay-Islamic worldview, then reassembled into a coherent leadership philosophy that emphasised dignity, discipline, and self-strengthening.

In addition, several studies on Malaysian political thought note Mahathir's emphasis on cultural values, social discipline, and national resilience (Shamsul, 1997; Osman, 2009). However, these works rarely connect such themes to his readings of Japanese civilisation. They acknowledge Mahathir's critiques of Western models and his desire for an Asian alternative, but they do not systematically trace the intellectual inputs that shaped this perspective.

Overall, the existing scholarship demonstrates three key gaps. First, while Mahathir's policies have been studied extensively, the intellectual sources that shaped his ideas, especially his sustained engagement with Japanese writings, remain insufficiently explored. Second, studies of Japan's cultural and historical development have not been connected to the intellectual pathways through which Mahathir encountered and internalised these ideas. Third, the literature lacks a

comprehensive analysis of how bibliographic exposure, lived observation, and reflective synthesis interacted to form a distinctive leadership worldview.

This article addresses these gaps by examining the transmission of Japanese ideas into Mahathir's thinking through a bibliographic and intellectual-historical approach. By situating Mahathir's engagement with Japan within a broader intellectual tradition, the review highlights the deeper cultural and moral foundations that informed his vision for Malaysia's development.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach grounded in intellectual history. Its purpose is to trace how ideas from Japanese civilisation travelled into Mahathir Mohamad's thinking and were reinterpreted within the Malaysian context. The theoretical basis follows Santosa's [20] concept of the transmission of ideas, which explains how concepts move through reading, observation, and reinterpretation until they become internalised in new settings.

3.1 Three Sources of Data Underpin This Study

First, a bibliographic analysis was conducted on Mahathir's writings, including *The Malay Dilemma* [12], *The Challenge* [13], *The Asian Renaissance* (1999), and *A Doctor in the House* [18], as well as the broader list of books he read prior to 1981 as documented by Yayasan Kepimpinan Perdana. Particular attention was given to works relating to Japanese history and society, such as those by Reischauer, Storry, Craig, Nakane, and Morita to identify recurring themes of discipline, shame (haji), collective responsibility, and selective modernisation.

Second, archival and documentary materials were reviewed to provide contextual depth. These include speeches, notes, photographs, and historical documents preserved at Yayasan Kepimpinan Perdana that record Mahathir's official and personal encounters with Japan. These materials help situate his textual understanding of Japan within the broader trajectory of Malaysia and Japan relations.

Third, a semi-structured interview with Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad was conducted. The interview produced verbatim reflections on his intellectual engagement with Japan, including his reading habits, interpretation of Japanese values, and observations from his visits to Japan. Although the interview does not constitute the sole source of analysis, it provides first-hand insight and strengthens triangulation across bibliographic and archival materials.

Data from these sources were analysed thematically to identify the transmission, reinterpretation, and adaptation of Japanese ideas within Mahathir's leadership thought. Triangulation enhances the validity of the findings and ensures that the study remains faithful to its intellectual-historical orientation.

4. The Findings

The findings indicate that the transmission of Japanese ideas into Mahathir's leadership thought occurred through three interconnected processes: bibliographic exposure, observational reinforcement, and reflective adaptation. These processes reveal how values such as discipline, responsibility, shame (haji), and selective modernisation entered Mahathir's intellectual framework and informed his vision for Malaysian development.

4.1 Bibliographic Transmission

Mahathir's early writings demonstrate that his concerns about national progress were already anchored in moral values. In *The Malay Dilemma* (1970), he wrote that Malays "have become too dependent on others and must develop discipline and a stronger sense of responsibility". This emphasis on ethical foundations aligned closely with the themes he encountered in his reading on Japan, particularly the works of Reischauer, Storry, Craig, Nakane, and Morita, which highlighted loyalty, discipline, and collective responsibility as the backbone of Japanese development. He reiterated this connection between values and national advancement in *The Challenge* [13], stating that "even wealthy nations collapse without discipline". These writings reveal that before observing Japan firsthand, Mahathir had already internalised a value-centred perspective shaped significantly by his bibliographic encounters.

4.2 Observational Reinforcement

Mahathir's subsequent visits to Japan confirmed and strengthened the impressions formed through reading. Archival materials and autobiographical accounts show that Japanese institutions externalised discipline and industriousness. These experiences demonstrated how values such as shame (haji), punctuality, accountability, and collective effort were deeply internalised in Japanese society.

His observations aligned with the principles he had admired in his readings, particularly Morita's portrayal of how shame regulates behaviour. Mahathir's description in *The Challenge* "In Japan, shame acts as a powerful internal force. A worker who performs poorly does not need to be scolded, he feels he has failed not just himself, but his team, his company, and even his country" captures how he interpreted Japan's moral foundations. The coherence between textual knowledge and lived experience reinforced Mahathir's belief that Japan's success stemmed from values rather than institutions alone. This represents the second pathway of transmission.

4.3 Reflective Adaptation

Mahathir did not call for Malaysians to imitate Japanese institutions wholesale. Instead, he selectively adapted the values he regarded as universal and consistent with Malaysian culture. In *The Way Forward* [14], he stressed that "progress does not mean surrendering one's identity" reflecting his admiration for Japan's ability to modernise while maintaining cultural continuity. He reinforced this position during the First Malaysia–Japan Colloquium (1984) stating: "Malaysia's Look East Policy does not mean that we want Malaysians to be Japanese" .

Instead, he positioned values such as discipline, honesty, hard work, and social responsibility as universally applicable principles. This selective adaptation formed the third pathway of transmission: Mahathir re-framed Japanese-inspired values within Malaysia's cultural and religious context. A further evolution of this reflective process appears in *Addeen*, where Mahathir expressed similar values through the Islamic value system such as amanah and hisab.

5. Discussion

The findings suggest that Mahathir's engagement with Japan did not emerge suddenly with the Look East Policy, but developed from a longer intellectual journey. When read together with the literature, a clearer picture appears: Mahathir was already questioning Western dominance and

searching for alternative civilisational models from his early years. As he recounts in *The Early Years* [15], the contrast between British rule and the Japanese occupation exposed him to different forms of discipline and social behaviour. These experiences created an early awareness that effective governance could also come from non-Western sources, making him more receptive to Japanese ideas later in life.

The literature shows that Mahathir's encounter with Japan deepened through reading. Works by Reischauer, Storry, Craig, Nakane and Morita introduced him to Japanese discipline, shame (haji), collective responsibility and selective modernisation. The findings reinforce that these readings strengthened values he had already emphasised in *The Malay Dilemma* and *The Challenge*, rather than creating new ones. This continuity helps explain why Japan resonated with Mahathir more than other countries: the ideas he found in Japanese history and society were consistent with concerns he had long expressed about Malaysian social attitudes.

Observation added another layer. Mahathir's visits to Japan allowed him to see in practice what he had previously encountered in books. According to the findings, the alignment between textual knowledge and lived experience confirmed his belief that values, not institutions alone, underpin national success. This supports Santosa's [20] view that ideas move most strongly when reading and observation reinforce one another. Mahathir's interpretation of Japan as a value-driven society therefore fits within a broader pattern of intellectual transmission.

The findings also show that Mahathir did not simply want Malaysia to copy Japan. As the literature on Malaysian political thought reminds us, Mahathir consistently argued for modernisation that respects cultural identity. His selective adaptation of values such as discipline, honesty and responsibility reflects this approach. He positioned Japan as an ethical example rather than a structural model, and this distinction is central to understanding the nature of the transmission.

A further dimension comes from *Addeen* [19], where Mahathir reframes these same values within Islam, such as *amanah* and *hisab*. This reinforces that he saw Japanese values not as foreign imports, but as reminders of values that Islam had already practiced long before, particularly in matters of discipline, accountability and moral duty [27]. This alignment highlights how his engagement with Japan ultimately led back to a reaffirmation of his own belief system.

Overall, the discussion shows that the transmission of Japanese ideas into Mahathir's leadership thought was shaped by early experiences, sustained reading, direct observation and reflective adaptation. Rather than borrowing uncritically, Mahathir used Japan to clarify values he believed Malaysians needed to cultivate. This contributes to a deeper understanding of how external models can influence national leadership thinking while still remaining grounded in local cultural and religious traditions.

6. Conclusion

This article has shown that Mahathir's engagement with Japan was shaped by a longer intellectual process that combined early experiences, sustained reading, direct observation, and selective adaptation. More importantly, the study demonstrates that Japan served as a mirror through which Mahathir assessed the strengths and weaknesses of Malaysian society, helping him articulate a model of development grounded in values rather than institutions. The transmission of Japanese ideas thus offered him not only an external reference but also a framework for reinterpreting Malaysia's own cultural and ethical resources. In this way, Mahathir's engagement with Japan reflects a broader intellectual project: to imagine a form of modernisation that is Asian in orientation, morally anchored, and capable of standing alongside global models without sacrificing local identity.

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