Asian countries confident of their status as leading medical tourism destinations should not get complacent. The dark horse in the industry - China - is not yet ready to claim its rightful place, but as it did in manufacturing, this country could simply be absorbing information on rivals with the intention of offering a cheaper alternative. China is known today as the “world’s factory” - a testament to the simplicity and success of its strategy.

Co-operation agreements with Taiwan, and encouraging Korean cosmetic surgeries, Indian and Singapore hospitals and other medical experts to set up in their country, are just the tip of the iceberg. Rivals may question the standard of healthcare in China, but although health provision in rural areas and for the poor is inadequate, the standard and price for the emerging middle class and new rich, is different.

Boai Medical Group, China’s largest private medical organization, has begun offering services to medical tourists in both modern medicine and traditional Chinese medicine. Dr. Carlos Che at Modern Hospital Guangzhou comments. “What we offer is a treatment program that provides the best of both philosophies of care, as we have a wealth of clinical evidence that shows that TCM can enhance western medicine. We are very much looking forward to bringing the benefits of this approach to patients in the Gulf region." The hospital is only one of the group’s 56 hospitals and clinics in China. It has bilingual translators to help patients from different countries.

Boai Group has appointed medical tourism consultancy ExHealth, to assist it with improving international patient practices and to identify new opportunities, as well as providing support on ethical, cultural and legal issues. The group sees opportunities to attract Gulf residents, particularly from the UAE, and wants to take business away from Thailand and Malaysia, as treatment in China would cost a quarter of what it would cost in Dubai, or two-thirds of the cost in Thailand.

But China’s entry into medical tourism has another side. Despite official attempts to limit the organ transplant trade, Malaysians are still going to China for transplants. According to a report by the Malaysian Dialysis and Transplant Registry, some 60% of Malaysians have gone overseas for transplants in the past nine years (2000-2009), with 856 seeking treatment in China alone. World Health Organisation (WHO) adviser Dr Francis Delmonico, at a forum on organ trafficking and transplant tourism warned Malaysians not to go to China, “We do not know where they get the organs. But in most cases, the organs are taken from executed prisoners. People need to know that those who went abroad for organ transplants have become ill on returning home. Some Malaysians who went abroad for organ transplants returned home with diseases including TB, hepatitis and HIV.” The forum said that 60,000 transplants are taking place worldwide each year, and one in 10 are still done illegally-mainly in China, Pakistan, India, the Philippines and Egypt.