



QUESTIONING SINGAPORE'S MERITOCRACY

Once a vaunted principle and source of pride in Singapore, meritocracy faces growing ambivalence at home and abroad.

BY SHARON SEE

Recent books and studies have exposed the hidden ills of a system that purportedly confers equal opportunities and rewards the most meritorious. Critics say that meritocracy benefits those who start with more resources and lets them “game the system”, thus exacerbating inequality.

In Singapore, politicians have repeatedly said that while the principle behind meritocracy is sound, it can be improved to be more “open and compassionate”.

But if meritocracy necessarily results in unequal outcomes, the question is: Can we rely on such a system to deliver good outcomes for everyone? >>>

The word “meritocracy” was coined in 1958 by author and politician Michael Young, in his political satire *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. The fictional essay, set in 2033, described how the rise of merit-based elites led to a different form of social stratification, rising inequality and disenfranchisement of the poor.

Despite this warning, the irony is that the term meritocracy was then embraced by those who supported the philosophy.

A meritocratic system aims to give people equal opportunities, regardless of their background or affiliation. In post-independence Singapore, such a model offered the assurance of objectivity, perhaps in a denouncement of the corruption and nepotism then rampant in the developing world.

“It provides for a competitive and transparent process of selection, using objective indicators administered without fear or favour,” said Eugene Tan, law don at Singapore Management University (SMU).

“This was and remains crucial for a multiracial, multilingual and multi-religious society, where the ethnic Chinese comprise 75 per cent of the population.”

But the assumptions that underpin a working meritocracy may no longer hold, according to researchers from the National University of Singapore (NUS) and University of Alberta (UAlberta) in a 2021 paper.

For example, the assumption that talent and capital are randomly distributed was more likely to be true in Singapore’s early years than now.

This is because some Singaporeans grew “far richer than others” as the city-state developed, said NUS sociologist Vincent Chua, NUS economist Bernard Yeung and UAlberta economist Randall Morck.

“A young Singaporean’s pre-birth environment, in-family education, out-of-family environment, formal education, additional enrichment and on-the-job training are now very unequal,” the trio added.

Narrow definitions

Besides the starting conditions, another aspect of meritocracy may have changed: the definition of merit.

Post-independence Singapore began with a meritocracy that was “less harsh, less narrow-minded and constricted” compared to today’s, said Johannis Auri Abdul Aziz, a research fellow at the National Institute of Education (NIE).

He reckons the global rise of neoliberalism and individualism in the 1980s may have contributed to the shift in Singapore’s meritocracy model. Then, economic reforms in the UK and US favoured free market capitalism while curtailing government spending and regulation. Critics say that this incentivised greed over the common good.

One problem with meritocracy today may be an overly narrow definition of merit, and the resulting difference in outcomes, watchers told *The Business Times* (BT).

The “extremely uneven distribution of rewards”, depending on what society values, is what causes the “pain” in meritocracy, said Walter Theseira, an economist from the Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS).

For example, becoming a professional foot-

ball player, lawyer or doctor is highly competitive. Yet few parents would encourage their children to pursue the former in Singapore, since one “cannot make much of a living” from it.

“Many other complaints we have wouldn’t be terribly important without this uneven distribution of rewards,” said Associate Professor Theseira.

“For example, people do murmur about whether, say, the child of successful doctors or lawyers has various advantages to getting that scarce slot in medical or law school. They regard it as unfair if there is an advantage, whether by connections, preparation or resources,” he said.

“How many Singaporeans complain about the child of, say, Singapore’s football stars of yesteryear having an advantage in trying out for the national team?”

In recent decades, merit has been measured “almost exclusively by academic achievements”, said SMU’s Assoc Prof Tan. “This then led to national exams being high-stakes affairs, which resulted in the education system being an arms race of sorts.”

Entrenched advantages

In *The Meritocracy Trap*, Daniel Markovits argues that education has become the “essential mechanism for the dynastic transmission of caste”, making meritocracy a cause of rising inequality, rather than the solution.

“Meritocrats, more than any elite that has come before, know how to train,” wrote Markovits, a professor at Yale Law School. “Meritocrats therefore cannot resist investing their massive incomes in giving their children elite educations unlike anything that middle-class parents can possibly afford.”

A study by NIE’s Dr Johannis and collaborators published last September seems to support the view that meritocracy no longer guarantees social mobility, and may instead worsen class divisions.

The team interviewed 15 individuals – assigned pseudonyms from A to O – who are “influential” leaders in various areas of Singapore society: business, education, public policy, religion, volunteer organisations and the arts.

“Subject O, a former public school educator, claimed that the education system currently provides more opportunities for academic high achievers, because they are inten-

A meritocratic system aims to give people equal opportunities, regardless of their background or affiliation.



Children at a tuition centre. SMU’s Eugene Tan says that in recent decades, merit has been measured “almost exclusively by academic achievements”, leading to national exams being high-stakes affairs and resulting in the education system being an arms race of sorts. PHOTO: BT FILE



tionally being ‘groomed for greatness’ in very selective elite schools with more resources,” said the study.

Another respondent called the meritocratic system “self-replicating”, as those who succeed in it then become decision-makers. As he put it: “They become policymakers. They reflect on their boring experience, and they replicate the same system, thinking that... it has worked for them, and it should work for everyone else.”

Even though these interviewees arguably benefited from the meritocratic system, they expressed a deep cynicism about it. “Just because you’re a winner of the system doesn’t necessarily mean you are going to always defend the system,” Dr Johannis told BT.

Conversations with these respondents, he said, show that they have reflected on their journey and are “honest enough to say that it’s partly your destiny or luck that what you achieve in life depends on the kind of society that you happen to be born into”.

A national assumption

Philosopher Michael Sandel raises a more fundamental objection. By rewarding merit rather than background, the idea seems to be that how well you do should not be determined by factors beyond your control. Yet are you able to control whether you have, or lack, talent?

“If not, it is hard to see why those who rise thanks to their talents deserve greater rewards than those who may be equally hard-working but less endowed with the gifts a market society happens to prize,” he wrote in his 2000 book *The Tyranny of Merit*.

Meritocracy also breeds hubris in winners, and humiliation and resentment among losers, he argues. The notion that one can make it if one tries, is a double-edged sword: “inspiring in one way but invidious in another”.

“For those who can’t find work or make ends meet, it is hard to escape the demoralising thought that their failure is their own doing, that they simply lack the talent and drive to succeed,” wrote Sandel, a professor at Harvard Law School.

Such basic objections are unlikely to surface in Singapore’s discourse. The relevant metaphor, said Dr Johannis, is that “for fish, water is assumed”.

Meritocracy in Singapore is not just about the distribution of rewards, but has become a system of control, he added. “It’s also a system that sorts people out into the various positions and hierarchies that we find.”

Meritocracy is so ubiquitous as to be an “operating system” for Singaporeans, constraining our ability to think of viable alternatives, he said.

“It sets our expectations of how things can be done and what we can expect. So we kind of have to break that mentality, that way of thinking, before we can make changes,” said Dr Johannis.

Fairer starting conditions

If Singapore cannot imagine an alternative to meritocracy, it can nevertheless improve the conditions under which meritocracy operates – and its outcomes.

In 2013, Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok

Tong, attending the homecoming dinner of his alma mater Raffles Institution (RI), pushed for what he called “compassionate meritocracy”.

Top schools like RI play a key role in guarding against elitism, he told his fellow alumni. “Those of us who have benefited disproportionately from society’s investment in us owe the most to society, particularly to those who may not have had access to the same opportunities,” he said.

At the launch of the Forward Singapore exercise last year, Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong echoed this sentiment: “We cannot abandon meritocracy, but I believe we can improve it and make ours a more open and compassionate meritocracy.”

Qualifying meritocracy with such adjectives is akin to “being apologetic for adopting meritocracy”, which is not the point, said SMU’s Prof Tan. Rather, Singapore should examine why meritocracy might lack compassion in the first place.

This means paying “eagle-eyed attention” to how meritocracy works, and does not work, here, he added.

In his speech, DPM Wong set out three aspects of building a compassionate meritocracy: improving starting circumstances, broadening the conception of merit, and valuing everyone across society.

Over the past decade, the Government has increased early interventions to help children from disadvantaged families. To move away from rigid academic conceptions of merit, it scrapped streaming and mid-year exams for certain school years, with a greater emphasis on learning and critical thinking.

Most participants in Dr Johannis’ study believe these changes are “too slow, too piecemeal” and would prefer “far more drastic changes”. But he cites Japan’s experience in the last decade as a cautionary tale.

Among other changes, the country tried to reduce rote learning and the emphasis on grades. “The general observation is that it was going too fast, the students were not responding very well, the parents started complaining, and so there were a couple of cohorts of students who were just victims of this transitional stage that didn’t really go anywhere,” he said.

Still, schools can help to level the playing field, said Tan Cheng Yong, an educational inequality researcher at the University of Hong Kong.

He noted that careers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (Stem) represent immense opportunities to improve socio-economic welfare. Yet research suggests that students from disadvantaged families are less inclined towards Stem.

This is often “because their families do not give them the early and extra-school exposure or enrichment”. If schools provide such exposure, some of these students may develop Stem aspirations, and thus benefit from the associated opportunities, he said.

Separately, in a 2015 working paper, he argues that schools can enable students to enjoy learning and experience different forms of success.

Instead of being “unnecessarily obsessed



NIE’s Johannis Auri Abdul Aziz says the point of having a wider definition of success is not just to raise wages, rather, it is about esteem, meaning and purpose.
PHOTO: YEN MENG JIIN, BT

“We cannot abandon meritocracy, but I believe we can improve it and make ours a more open and compassionate meritocracy.”

Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong



with maximising students’ academic achievement”, principals should aim to develop their students’ competencies for the knowledge-based economy as well as alternative talents.

Meritocracy also needs to be “continuous”, said SMU’s Prof Tan. Merits attained early in life cannot become an “automatic passport” to a good life, for that undermines the very ethos of meritocracy.

The “inconvenient truth” is that meritocracy means that people can progress and regress on the basis of their current merit, he added.

More equal outcomes

Yet levelling the playing field does not solve the problem of unequal outcomes, as SUSS’ Prof Theseira noted.

“This is about fixing the starting conditions,” he said. “But you see, it doesn’t do anything for the fact that after the race is run, we suddenly give huge rewards to the winners, and the ones who do particularly badly are placed at the bottom when it comes to social status and rewards.”

This is where DPM Wong’s third point comes in: valuing all workers.

At a Forward Singapore session last November, Minister of State for Social and Family Development Sun Xueling alluded to this, asking: “Are we prepared to pay more for services in the ‘heart’ and ‘hand’ industries where workers tend to earn disproportionately lower wages?”

Some observers took issue with this framing. NUS sociologist Tan Ern Ser said that “threatening” people with higher costs makes this seem like a zero-sum game.

“A more positive framing is to embrace social solidarity, even as we redesign jobs, together with technological innovations, to become more skill and knowledge-intensive, and thereby worthy of higher pay,” he added.

SMU’s Prof Tan cautioned against such “so-

called compromises, because they may give rise to the impression that some types of merit are less worthy than others, and that money will solve the problems of an uber-meritocratic system”.

The distinction between head, hand and heart industries is a false one, he added. “Imagine a craftsman who is not using his cognitive ability – he won’t be able to succeed in his craft.”

NIE’s Dr Johannis said the point of having a wider definition of success is not just to raise wages. “It’s primarily about esteem... and the meaning and purpose you can find, that society and you recognise these jobs that currently are not part of the meritocratic dream.”

Still, bread-and-butter outcomes matter, said Prof Theseira. “I do not believe that just being more polite or gracious compensates for some people barely earning enough to provide for their families.”

Singapore should also question the magnitude by which outcomes differ under meritocracy. He noted that Europe’s academics earn about half the income of those in the US or Singapore, and their top executives earn much less than those in the UK. But these salary gaps say nothing about their relative talent or capabilities.

“So the point is that there is room for calibration that is fairer, and it is a discussion we should have,” said Prof Theseira.

Pay needs to be higher at the lower end of the spectrum, and this increase should be funded by those at the higher end. “This by itself takes down the arrogance of winners, and boosts the esteem and status of those who aren’t quite in the winning camp.”

Reducing the uneven distribution of rewards under meritocratic decision-making systems, he said, is the only way to blur the lines between purported winners and losers.

sharons@sph.com.sg