



IPS 35th Anniversary Conference: Revisitings Panel 1: Revisiting Meritocracy

By Samantha Quek and Shaw Wen Xuan

Revisiting Meritocracy

Celebrating the Institute of Policy Studies' 35th anniversary, the conference titled "Revisitings" aimed to re-examine some of Singapore's critical issues and consider how the Singapore model can be adapted to better address emerging challenges.

This panel, titled "Revisiting Meritocracy", featured Mr Chan Chun Sing, Minister for Education; Associate Professor Daniel Goh, Associate Provost (Undergraduate Education) and Vice Dean (Special Programmes) of NUS College, from the National University of Singapore; and Associate Professor Jason Tan, Curriculum and Leadership Group from the National Institute of Education. They discussed the pitfalls of the current meritocratic system and contemplated potential solutions to tackle these problems and help Singapore to remain relevant in the global economy while protecting its social fabric. This session was facilitated and moderated by Associate Professor (Practice) Terence Ho from the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.



Panel discussion with Professor Jason Tan, Associate Professor Daniel Goh, Mr Chan Chun Sing (pictured left to right) and Associate Professor (Practice) Terence Ho (not pictured).

Revisiting our meritocracy

Mr Chan Chun Sing stressed the need for Singapore's system of meritocracy to evolve, allowing Singapore to progress in the modern world, characterised by its fragile global economic order. He noted that because the existing meritocratic system rewards individuals based on effort and performance rather than one's birthright, Singapore has been able to maximise the talents of its people and attain its current level of economic development.

However, Singapore must address four core pitfalls of meritocracy to ensure its continued success. First, adopting narrow and static metrics of success limits the size and diversity of the talent pool, restricting the nation's ability to adapt to setbacks and changes. This could make Singapore less resilient, responsive to changes and globally relevant over time. Second, having inflexible and fixed points of assessment do not account for individuals' varied development and growth. This could allow a single test to determine the trajectory of one's life and impact one's life significantly. Third, an "endowment effect" occurs due to the tendency to pass on wealth and privileges acquired, resulting in growing stratification and undermining the meritocratic system as these accumulated privileges become harder to overcome by those with fewer resources. Fourth, the danger of a misplaced notion of equating individual success to only one's effort exists since personal achievements form the core of meritocracy.

To address these pitfalls, Mr Chan shared strategies and changes that must happen for Singapore to remain relevant and competitive while maintaining a cohesive society.

Remaining relevant and competitive

As talent in Singapore has consistently been its top resource, to remain relevant and competitive in the global economy, Mr Chan said Singapore must continue to attract international talent while simultaneously developing Singaporean locals.

Achieving relevance is done through reinforcing a meritocratic system filled with opportunity and rewarding high-quality effort whilst being supported by the regulatory actions of the Singaporean government. Against this setting, Mr Chan noted that Singapore aims to be a hub for attracting individuals and businesses that desire a safe, fair, and open environment for their unique, innovative and efficient ideas.

In developing local talent, he said Singapore's meritocracy must remain fair and continue rewarding based on an individual's talent and ability rather than birthright. Simultaneously, Singapore needs to continue investing in the population over a period longer than expected, he said, such as in early formal education, while broadening the strengths and assets recognised and valued and expanding the ability and talent pool.

The vision for Singapore's meritocratic system is a cycle of improvement — where a diverse and high-quality global talent pool is grown through attracting and developing individuals and businesses from both outside and within Singapore, allowing this pool to compete and improve.

Maintaining cohesion

Mr Chan said the meritocratic system must also maintain a cohesive social fabric and unify Singapore. In acknowledging a more diverse talent pool and moving away from narrow success metrics, Singapore should shift to dignify and reward different forms of work. For example, technical, service and community care roles (i.e., "heart" and "hand" work) must be remunerated appropriately for the value of their labour, and their reward structures should be consistent with traditional, cognitive work (i.e., "head" work), ensuring that diversity becomes a source of unity and not a source of discord. Mr Chan called for Singaporeans to accept the higher costs associated with supporting and investing in lower-wage work and lifelong vocational instruction, as well as affording these workers the respect and dignity they deserve.

Concluding his speech, Mr Chan made a final appeal to Singaporeans to support others who may not possess as many resources and to remember the contributions of the community and social support systems in one's success.

Shifting the narrative

In response to Mr Chan's speech, Associate Professor Daniel Goh suggested a shift in the classic narrative of meritocracy — from one of competing issues of talent and birthright to one that examines skills and performance contrasted against endowment. He argued that a close examination of the meritocratic system is necessary due to its complex opportunity structures and will prevent it from becoming obsolete over time.

Dr Goh also highlighted the tension between equity and equality, where without considering equitable baselines, an ideal meritocratic system will paradoxically result in growing inequality over time.

“Sticky” issues of our meritocracy

Amid current efforts to promote equitable baselines, Dr Goh highlighted three “sticky” and prevalent issues within the meritocratic system, specifically in the education landscape.

First, the prevalence of private tuition in the education system creates an endowment problem, where parents and families who are financially privileged can access better and more educational resources, potentially achieving better outcomes. Despite the initial attempt to shift towards a broader and more holistic assessment system, he noted that the endowment problem persists, with the private tuition industry pushing out classes in other domains, such as public speaking and coding, to boost a child's holistic profile.

Further perpetuating the endowment problem would be alumni associations, said Dr Goh, as these can secure priority admissions for their children. As families take advantage of top learning resources using alumni associations and networks, the issue of mediocrity surfaces as these resources are not allocated based on merit or performance of the child, negating the potential for primary schools to serve as vehicles for equitable baselines for children. Although the direct impact of such schemes is limited to primary schools, this initial acquisition of benefits could snowball into the later years of education.

Proximity-based admissions lead to and are reinforced by income and wealth-based stratification within Singapore, with the development of high-income neighbourhoods depending on the location of specific schools, thereby undermining the equitable nature of Singapore's urban planning and housing policies. Proximity-based admissions thus tend to favour families with the ability to afford homes in these neighbourhoods, endowing their children with the resources that the family has accumulated over time.

Diversity and inclusion in “Meritocracy 2.0”

A lack of racial and gender diversity could threaten the narrative and beliefs of multiculturalism and equality, undermining the meritocratic system. Therefore, solutions to this threat must be established alongside equitable baselines, with Dr Goh suggesting an adapted version of inclusive growth. He emphasised growth on inclusiveness at all points of admission for all systems and the construction of spaces for individuals to utilise their unique skills and talents for performance.

Borrowing the term “Meritocracy 2.0”, as mentioned by Professor Simon Chesterman, Dean of the National University of Singapore College, Dr Goh advocated for five actionable steps: broad-based admissions; encouraging applications from racial, gender and class minorities through targeted outreach to remove psychological barriers; removal of alumni associations and proximity-based admissions; admitting for inclusion while holding equitable baselines; and finally, holding space for learning from failure rather than taking on a blinkered view of success.

Identifying parentocracy

Associate Professor Jason Tan echoed the problems of meritocracy through references to Michael Young’s writings on meritocracy in the United Kingdom. The latter highlighted the issues of narrow definitions of success, changing social attitudes and misplaced beliefs of individual success necessarily equating solely to individual effort. Dr Tan cautioned that the meritocratic system could entrench privilege rather than its intended design of subverting it.

He then laid out some key points to focus on while reviewing the meritocratic system, starting with considering the inter-generational consequence of policies, as policies in the past have provided opportunities for individuals and families to secure and pass down advantages.

He also stated that the education system is an example of the endowment of advantages going beyond a “natural tendency”. The education system plays a sorting role in determining the individual merit of each child for their performance, he said. Consequently, the system will reward each child differently, leading to unequal outcomes when they exit the various educational institutions. The phenomenon of parentocracy — through parental strategising and networking — is thus seen as a response by parents to not only secure more advantages for their children within the education system, achieving better outcomes on exit, but also to navigate the growing complexities of education in Singapore, as was seen with the introduction of holistic education.

Integrating the people’s voice

While the problem is likely impossible to regulate, the Singaporean government is attempting a shift through moral suasion, calling for individuals to be less competitive while re-evaluating the definitions of success. Dr Tan shared some scepticism on this front, stating that while collective values may be shared and understood, due to the individualistic ethos of meritocracy

and the protection of self-interests, individuals may not necessarily abide. Ultimately, the sum of the individual actions, especially towards self-interest, could still impact the public good of education and meritocracy.

When examining the equitability and fairness of our meritocracy, policymakers should gather the public's opinion about their definitions of fairness under the meritocratic system, as consideration of individual and collective values is vital in designing an effective meritocratic system. However, there is the contention that the same proximity of the system to individual success and well-being eventually makes the discussion of the issue a highly emotional topic, and policymakers must exercise caution towards those who operate under an individualistic agenda.

Question-and-Answer Session

Q: As we think about broadening the definition of merit, there is still the question of who should define merit and how merit should be assessed and rewarded. In your view, what processes, be it driven by the market, public policy or social or societal conventions, are needed to redefine, assess and reward merit in Singapore?

A: While Mr Chan, Dr Goh and Dr Tan positioned their answers to this question in three ways, they shared a point of commonality of having no one clear stakeholder responsible for redefining, assessing and rewarding merit in Singapore, but instead, a dynamic interaction between the various stakeholders.

Mr Chan paralleled the need for a continually changing definition of merit to the ever-changing global market, stating that the evolution of merit will best help Singapore survive the challenges ahead. In his examples, he highlighted two instances of tailoring merit and performance. In the sphere of security and geopolitics, he talked about the changing skillsets and sensitivities required of individuals, mentioning the need to identify and frame new or emerging challenges and co-create solutions with others. As for education, more than possessing knowledge is required; rather, the skillset of distilling, discerning and discovering knowledge sets one apart from others.

Dr Goh added an educator's perspective, speaking on the many interactions between stakeholders, namely government, students, superiors and fellow pedagogies, that aid him in his lifelong learning pursuit of becoming a better educator, assessor and rewarder of merit. Overall, he encouraged the perfection of practice in assessing and evaluating skills and performances so that meritocracy can work as a matter of practice rather than be perceived as systemic.

Dr Tan shared that the dynamic interplay across different sectors and stakeholders, such as policymakers, industry leaders, public sentiments and market forces, could influence the

definition of merit, raising the example of the rise in skills profile and wages of vocational jobs as one way that public policy serves to affect societal perceptions.

Q: In revisiting meritocracy, how could we create an education system that provides equal opportunity for all (i.e., one that embraces diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging)? What would that look like?

A: Mr Chan shared that his definition of success is grounded on “every Singaporean [being] able to do justice to their blessings”, and that calls for recognising and developing individuals with diverse strengths and abilities, including individuals with special needs and higher abilities.

Elaborating on the philosophy of the Singapore education system, he shared that it aims to uplift the bottom, enable the middle, and stretch the top. He debunked the myth that the system provides every student with the same resources but instead provides more to those with less to move towards equal outcomes.

As for examinations in the education system, he explained that it aims to sort and cater to the different learning needs through the right-sitting of the child, situating them in the appropriate educational setting for their next lap of development. With that, he shared his expectation of educators: to inspire students and imbue values that look beyond individual interests in them.

He then acknowledged the different challenges entailed in developing and educating special needs children and questioned what success can look like for them. He shared that the Ministry of Education (MOE) and Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) are intensifying efforts to structure an education system for children with various special needs, focusing on attaining their potential and gaining independence.

Mr Chan concluded his response by highlighting technology as a key push for MOE. He believes technology will help multiply MOE’s current capabilities and overcome the difficulties in mass customising an education system suited to everyone’s needs.

Q: For the majority of the public, the old meritocracy has been instilled by numerous demonstrations of what meritocracy is meant by the government, such as through the appointments made or the awards given out (e.g., Public Service Commission, Cultural Medallion). But in the case of the new meritocracy that you are propagating, what are the actual demonstrations and examples of this?

A: Mr Chan first spoke on the Edusave awards, mentioning the progression of the awards moving beyond the affirmation of merely academic excellence to including areas of service, such as Co-Curricular Activities, thus recognising students who have done well in areas beyond the academic pillar. This change is tied to celebrating broader definitions of success

beyond one's achievements and including one's contributions. Mr Chan also shares the expectation for those who have achieved more to contribute more to society.

Mr Chan then talked about remunerating different forms of work beyond academic achievement and how the advent of ChatGPT may be positioning Singapore at the cusp of rebalancing how we recognise and reward work. He thinks there will be a premium to some forms of work done, specifically within the high-touch sector, such as in care sectors like nursing and eldercare, and high-trust sector, as they will be complementary to the success of such technologies.

Finally, Mr Chan shared that beyond his wish to narrow the wage gap between degree and diploma holders, he hopes that more resources will be available to individuals to keep pace with other wage trajectories throughout their working lives. He implored industry leaders to share the skillsets of their workers with others so that they may appreciate the potential of our workers beyond their educational credentials. He also stated his belief in a system of continuous meritocracy with multiple stages for individuals to prove themselves in life.

Q: How do we reconcile the focus on meritocracy on individual performance, vis-a-vis the focus on community?

A: Dr Tan acknowledged that the traditional understanding of meritocracy in Singapore is the individual striving for opportunities and attaining individual success. He proposed the need to push two ideas across more widely: first, that individuals are situated within a wider context, and second, the element of luck such as meeting the right people at the right time. He suggested that these ideas, if perpetuated, would help prevent perpetuating a sense of self-importance.

In response to Dr Tan's statement on the element of luck, Mr Chan countered that MOE will not leave this to chance. Instead, he raised the need to be intentional in ensuring that social capital and networks are shared and inclusive as Singapore matures as a society, warning against the fracturing of society if networks remain closed circles. Mr Chan shared that he has proposed that alumni networks be formed by clustering schools together and sharing the social capital that each school holds. He concluded his response by reiterating society's responsibility towards one another and supporting those in need or relatively worse off than us.

Q: Given the upcoming change to the 70-rank point system for JC students with heightened emphasis placed on holistic admissions, how does MOE intend to balance students' mental health and prevent the superficiality of leadership positions undertaken by students?

A: In response to the balancing of mental health, both Dr Goh and Mr Chan encouraged students to move away from looking at student life as a time to fulfil academic requirements but instead as a process of self-discovery of one's aptitude and value.

Dr Goh spoke about the importance of discerning one's trajectory and purpose in life and aligning it with personal growth. In doing so, he believed that students would stop judging and looking down on themselves, recovering the mental aspect of one's purpose in life.

Likewise, Mr Chan urged students to distinguish themselves as individuals, considering their unique value contributions to organisations and what special skillsets they possess that complement the workforce.

Q: Moving forward, do we see a future where Singapore expands success beyond paper qualifications (i.e., degrees and professional certifications)?

A: Both Dr Goh and Mr Chan agreed that we are moving into a time where there has already been less emphasis on paper qualifications, with Mr Chan stating that the currency of skillsets should accompany one's credentials.

Dr Goh suggested that individuals are influenced by more than just market forces and that there is a generational change in looking to fulfil individual aspirations. He shared that he has witnessed university students looking for specific courses such as art and dance therapy offered by both local and overseas polytechnics to fulfil their aspirations as well as non-university graduates looking for micro-credentials by attending courses at universities.

Dr Tan urged the audience to take a more nuanced view of the topic. He warned against the total abandonment of academic qualifications due to the practical considerations and difficulty of shifting professional bodies against existing credential requirements, suggesting instead to balance academic qualifications and other considerations, such as having practical workplace skills and contributions to wider society. Dr Tan noted the possibility of having alternative forms of assessments to determine the suitability and competence of individuals, but also measuring that against wider issues such as public safety.

Q: When we have a meritocracy in such a capitalist system [as Singapore], it allows the rich to propagate their wealth. Should we shift the focus away from money-chasing fulfilment to a greater emphasis on promoting compassionate values to bring forth gratitude and generosity?

A: Dr Goh disagreed with the sentiment that Singaporeans hold money-chasing dreams and viewed young people as wanting to fulfil their dreams and better themselves instead. Mr Chan, on the other hand, reiterated his point about meritocracy not being just about personal achievements but collective contributions.

[Samantha Quek](#) and [Shaw Wen Xuan](#) are Research Assistants at the Institute of Policy Studies' Society and Culture Department.

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