

THE BROAD VIEW

# Meritocracy and its discontents

Critics argue that the stage on which merit operates is impacted by the inequities of the past. **By Georgios Georgiou**

MERITOCRACY is in the core of Singapore's psyche and is generally believed to be a major force behind the nation's economic success. Indeed, since the times of Plato's *Republic*, meritocracy has been credited with allocating responsibilities and resources according to an individual's talent and effort, thus bringing about superior social outcomes. Undoubtedly, using talent and effort as an allocative mechanism is better than using nepotism and patronage, the systems that preceded the advent of meritocratic institutions.

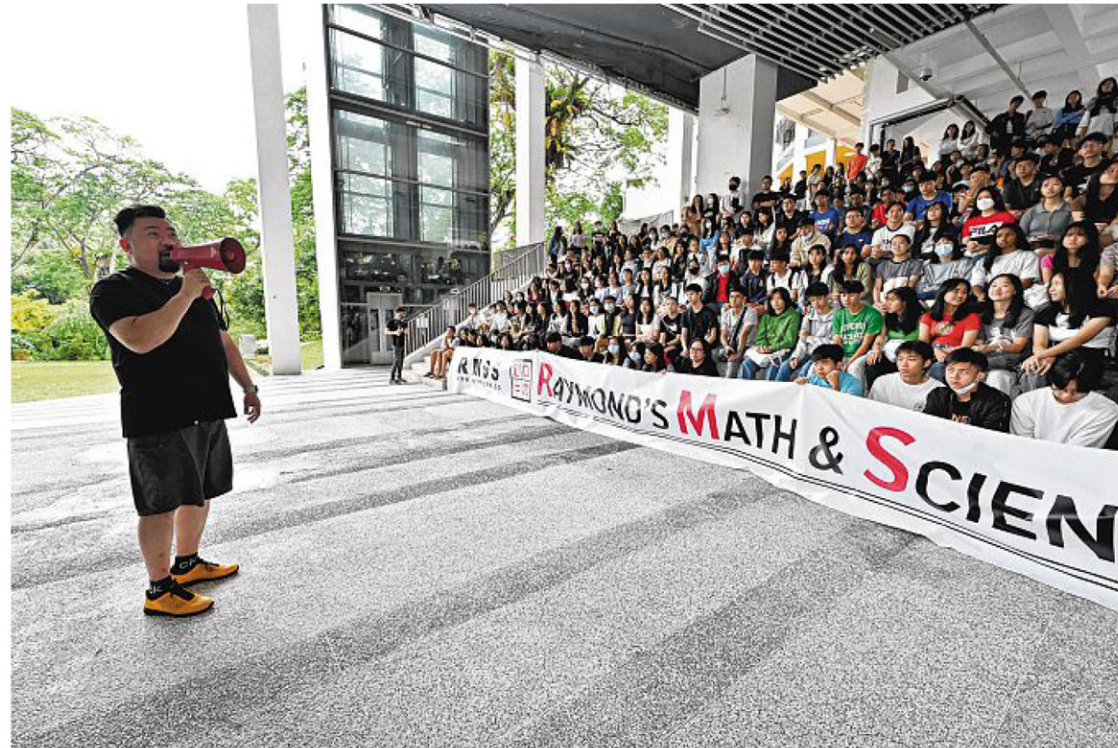
This positive view on meritocracy is also espoused by Singapore's younger generation. To measure the extent of this belief, I collected responses from NUS students from 2020 to 2023. The students were enrolled in two courses that I was involved in, and they came from a multitude of academic disciplines, from engineering and the sciences to law and humanities. Their outright support for meritocracy was strong. When they were polled at the start of a lecture on meritocracy on whether they approved of the concept, their answer was positive at a rate of 81 per cent (903 out of 1,119 responses recorded).

The bad news is that meritocracy is not exempt from controversy. And recently its critics have been more vocal. Book titles such as *The Meritocracy Trap* (Daniel Markovits, 2019), *The Tyranny of Merit* (Michael Sandel, 2020), or *The Meritocracy Myth* (Stephen McNamee, 2023) send a disconcerting message: meritocracy has shortcomings. To be fair, support for meritocracy has also been voiced recently, but it is rather limited. A good example is the book *The Aristocracy of Talent* (Adrian Wooldridge, 2021).

## Controversial concept

The overarching accusation that is being hurled against meritocracy by its critics is that the stage on which merit operates is impacted by the inequities of the past. In short, in order for someone to display their merit, they need to hone their talents through the lengthy skills-acquisition process that we call education. This process starts very early in one's life, at the time of kindergarten, which research has shown to be the most consequential investment in a person's human capital, dollar for dollar. And of course, the process continues all the way to professional schools, like medical or law school.

The problem is that access to education is not equal and it is affected by factors that are beyond one's control, such as the country one is born in, their race, gender, or their family. The random event of being born in a family of means is of particular importance, as more affluent families can buy better education for their children. This improves the children's educational outcomes, allowing them to achieve better test scores, which in turn means access to better universities and, unavoidably, better jobs. Eventually, these privileged children have children of their own and



Teen students visiting an NUS open house. Singaporean students say private tutoring, especially prior to university entrance exams, is a key factor in perpetuating inequality. PHOTO: RAYMOND'S MATH & SCIENCE STUDIO

the cycle starts all over again.

Is the young generation of Singapore concerned about such educational inequalities? To find out, I have been asking the students in that same lecture on meritocracy mentioned above, whether they think there are educational inequalities in Singapore that are based on income. Their answer has consistently been a resounding "yes" at a rate of 91 per cent (1,357 out of 1,497 responses recorded). When I probed the students more about what the source of the problem is, their overwhelming response was the operation of private tuition. Richer families can provide their children with more expensive and, accordingly, better private preparatory courses at key points of the educational process, primarily prior to university entrance exams. This is, according to the students, the main mechanism in which inequality of opportunity manifests itself in Singapore.

At the end of this process, as already noted, inequality of opportunity becomes actual economic inequality. Since this inequality has been generated by meritocratic institutions, it has been appropriately called "meritocratic inequality". Its characteristics include that it is neither dynastic nor based on passive income and laziness.

The aristocrats of the past inherited land from their rich parents and did not have to work for a living. The meritocrats of the present have to work very hard in order to maintain the privileges that they inherited and be able to pass them on to their own children. Ironically, this is their own plague. They are rich but their jobs are so demanding that they have no time to enjoy their wealth.

Therefore, at the end of my lecture, I typically ask the students if meritocratic inequality is acceptable to them. At that point, the acceptance rate of meritocratic inequality is 45

per cent (454 out of 1,014 responses recorded), indicating a loss of confidence in the meritocratic ideal.

## Salvaging the idea

Meritocracy started as a noble idea and gave so much to the world. But it has been floundering, crippled by inequality of opportunity. How can it be salvaged? The Singaporean students tell us that private tutoring, especially prior to university entrance exams, is the problem. Inequality of opportunity at that stage can be addressed in various ways, for example by providing subsidies to those who cannot afford such tutoring, or by affirmative action, that is by admitting more people from middle and low-income families to prestige universities, irrespective of their test scores.

But research tells us that there is an even better way. The educational gap between the rich and the poor is already too big at the time of university entrance. Therefore, it is more effective to address the problem at earlier stages, before it has had time to take root, for instance by equalising access to early childhood education, or by funding schools in underprivileged neighbourhoods.

Fixing meritocracy is a tall order but it is beneficial for everyone. The poor will be saved from the feelings of resentment and self-loathing that haunt them because they failed in a game whose outcome was, to a large extent, predetermined.

And the rich will finally be able to break free from the rat race they are trapped in and reclaim their lost leisure.

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