



The concept of meritocracy in the context of the modern intellectual elite of Singapore

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In the bustling city-state of Singapore, where academic excellence and innovation converge against the backdrop of a rapidly evolving global landscape, the influence of meritocracy on the formation and sustenance of the intellectual elite stands as a testament to the nation's commitment to cultivating a highly skilled population. Singapore, often hailed for its prowess in education and technology, has strategically implemented the principles of meritocracy.

The intersection of meritocracy and the intellectual elite in Singapore raises questions that extend beyond the borders of a singular nation's educational policies. At its core, the broader problem revolves around the balance between equal opportunities and potential challenges in the implementation of meritocratic principles. Furthermore, the relevance of this exploration extends to scientific and practical tasks. Understanding how meritocracy shapes the intellectual elite has implications for educational policymakers, educators, scientists etc. Addressing this issue contributes to the ongoing discourse on effective educational systems, social mobility, and the cultivation of a globally competitive intellectual workforce.

The exploration of meritocracy has been marked by influential scholars who have significantly shaped our understanding of this concept. It has been widely accepted that sociologist M. Young, in his work "The Rise of Meritocracy" (1958), introduced the term, raising critical questions about its potential societal conse-

quences. Young's perspective (though initially critical) laid the groundwork for subsequent discussions on meritocracy. Economist M. Friedman, renowned for his advocacy of free-market principles, contributed to the discourse by highlighting the economic aspects of meritocratic systems. Additionally, J. Heckman emphasized the importance of considering broader factors, such as social background, in understanding the effectiveness of meritocracy. These scholars, each with distinctive viewpoints, have collectively enriched the academic landscape surrounding meritocracy, fostering ongoing dialogue and critical analysis. Meritocracy as a social system has also faced criticism, particularly in the 21st century. T. Piketty has labeled it a political ideology and illusion, highlighting its connection to rising social inequality. A. Grothendieck, a renowned mathematician, didn't support the concept of meritocracy either, his works were marked by a deep concern for social justice. The contemporary conception of meritocracy takes on a dual nature — one aspect describes a social system based on talent and effort, presupposing social mobility, while the other views meritocracy as an ideological discourse grounded in various belief systems, such as social democratic and neoliberal conceptions. We should also mention some other scientists that have investigated the topic and have greatly contributed to it, such as D. Bell, S. J. McNamee, R. K. Miller, G. Dench, S. Harney, H. Mahé de Boislandelle, C. H. Kim, T. Krauze, K. Slomczynski, L. Vlasceanu,

C. Zamfir, D. Lipsey, T. Chong, Z. Zhang, L. Mykhailin, O. Shcherbakova and others.

A comprehensive examination of recent research and publications in the realm of meritocracy, and intellectual elite formation in Singapore reveals a mosaic of insights. Scholars and researchers have delved into aspects ranging from educational policies to societal implications, shedding light on the intricate relationship between meritocratic principles and the intellectual landscape. However, certain facets of the problem remain underexplored.

Recent studies have predominantly focused on quantitative outcomes and success metrics, providing valuable data on academic achievements and career trajectories. In this article, we will examine the cultural intricacies shaping responses to meritocratic systems, focusing on the formation and sustainability of the intellectual elite in the context of Singapore's dynamic societal fabric. In this pursuit, our article aims to bridge existing gaps by synthesizing recent research, identifying areas requiring further investigation, and offering a nuanced perspective on the unexplored facets of meritocracy's influence on Singapore's intellectual elite.

This article embarks on a journey to unravel the dynamics of meritocracy and its profound impact on Singapore's intellectual elite within the educational landscape. In this city-state, meritocracy is not merely a theoretical concept; it is a dynamic force that shapes the trajectory of individuals from diverse backgrounds, steering them towards intellectual pursuits and societal contributions. The primary goal of this research is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the concept of meritocracy, unraveling its essence within the specific context of Singapore. The investigation aims to explore its influence on the cultivation and functioning of the intellectual elite in the contemporary landscape of Singapore. By achieving these objectives, this research endeavors to contribute to understanding of meritocracy's implications on the

intellectual elite, offering valuable insights into the multifaceted landscape of Singapore.

The concept of meritocracy, first introduced by British sociologist Michael Young in 1958, has attracted significant attention and has become increasingly associated with positive ideals in Western societies. It has been tightly intertwined with the principles of capitalism, epitomized by the notion of the "American Dream" [11]. However, scholars such as Bell [3], and Zhang [15] have pointed out evidence suggesting that the concept of meritocracy may have originated in Asia before its adoption in Western societies. Hobson argues that the concept of merit was initially rooted in China and later disseminated to the West through Confucian teachings [5]. We have no doubt that it can be noticed that as a governing principle, meritocracy has permeated numerous Asian countries, including Singapore, Korea, and China. Consequently, studies on meritocracy have been conducted across various disciplines such as business, public administration, education, and psychology, reflecting a concerted effort to comprehend the social and cultural dynamics surrounding this concept.

According to the Encyclopedia of Modern Ukraine, meritocracy derives from the Latin term "meritus", meaning worthy, and "kratia", denoting rule or governance, constituting a principle of state management. It dictates that leadership positions within a state should be held by the most capable and qualified individuals, irrespective of factors such as ancestry or wealth [1]. The Cambridge Dictionary defines meritocracy as a social system or organization where individuals attain success or authority based on their abilities rather than their financial or social status [9]. Similarly, the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines it as a system wherein individuals occupy positions of success, authority, and influence based on their demonstrated abilities and merit [10].

According to H. Mahé de Boislandelle, meritocracy represents a doctrine wherein access to power is legitimized by merits derived from recognized educational achievements or labor market success [8]. C. H. Kim and Y. B. Choi describe meritocracy as a social system where societal advancement hinges on an individual's capabilities and merits, rather than familial, economic, or social background [6].

Naving analysed numerous works, it's necessary to mention that sociologists view meritocracy as an idealized social system that seeks to eliminate the influence of social origin on one's status through education, in contrast to inheritance or privilege. This notion has been examined in various sociological discussions, including those on social stratification, mobility, and the future of post-industrial societies. Notably, meritocracy is understood to correlate positively with common societal values such as income, power, and prestige, as per T. Krauze and M. K. Slomczynski [7].

Moreover, it's essential to recognize that merit encompasses not only qualifications and knowledge but also personal qualities, behavioral skills, and managerial capacity. L. Vlasceanu and C. Zamfir emphasize the statistical treatment of meritocracy, proposing that a social system can be considered meritocratic only if the probability of advancement is independent of one's initial position [12].

In addition to these perspectives, scholars have explored the multifaceted nature of meritocracy, recognizing its implications for social justice, economic mobility, and democratic governance. While meritocracy initially emerged as a principle to reward talent and effort, critics have highlighted its potential to perpetuate social inequalities and entrench privilege, particularly in contexts marked by unequal access to opportunities.

Therefore, the ongoing research seeks to unpack the complexities of meritocracy, addressing questions of fairness, inclusivity, and the distribution of power in modern

society of Singapore. Meritocracy has thus functioned as a mechanism for maintaining social order and mitigating social unrest.

Having analysed definitions of the term "meritocracy" given by scholars, we have to highlight that in our research we will define meritocracy as a social system wherein individuals' progression in society greatly depends on their capabilities and merits, rather than factors such as wealth, social background etc.

The history of meritocracy in Singapore is a narrative of remarkable transformation, shaping the nation from a humble, impoverished settlement into a global powerhouse of intellectual capital and economic success. Founded as a British trading post in the early 19th century, Singapore was characterized by its diverse immigrant population and colonial past [4]. However, under visionary leadership, the nascent nation embarked on a journey of rapid development, propelled by the principles of meritocracy [2].

It is important to say that it was the adoption of meritocratic principles that played a pivotal role in Singapore's transformation. With limited natural resources and a small domestic market, the nation recognized the importance of human capital as its most valuable asset. As such, policies were implemented to foster a meritocratic society, where individuals were rewarded based on their abilities and contributions rather than factors like social background or familial connections.

This commitment to meritocracy permeated all levels of society, including the education system. Singapore prioritized investment in education, ensuring that every citizen had access to quality schooling regardless of their socioeconomic status. Meritocratic values were instilled from a young age, with emphasis placed on academic excellence, critical thinking, and innovation.

The impact of meritocratic principles on the cultivation of the intellectual elite in Singapore is profound. The nation boasts a highly skilled and educated workforce,

with a strong emphasis on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields. Meritocracy has provided opportunities for individuals from diverse backgrounds to excel academically and professionally, contributing to Singapore's reputation as a hub for innovation and research.

Moreover, the intellectual elite in Singapore play a crucial role in driving the nation's progress and prosperity. Beyond their individual achievements, they actively contribute to the advancement of key sectors such as technology, finance, and healthcare. Their work is integral to Singapore's position as a global leader in various fields, shaping the future trajectory of the nation in an increasingly competitive world.

In the modern landscape of Singapore, meritocracy continues to underpin policies and practices, ensuring that talent and hard work are recognized and rewarded. However, challenges remain, including issues of social mobility and inclusivity. As Singapore continues to evolve, the role of meritocracy in shaping its intellectual elite will undoubtedly remain a central aspect of its societal fabric, driving innovation, and excellence for generations to come.

While the meritocratic principles have propelled Singapore to great heights, the nation also grapples with challenges and considerations in its quest to maintain a fair and inclusive society. One such challenge is the widening income gap and social stratification. Despite the emphasis on education and merit-based advancement, disparities in access to resources and opportunities persist. Socioeconomic factors can still influence an individual's ability to excel, creating barriers for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Furthermore, as Singapore has transitioned into a knowledge-based economy, there is a growing recognition of the importance of non-traditional forms of merit. While academic excellence remains a cornerstone, qualities such as creativity, adaptability, and entrepreneurial spirit are increasingly valued in the modern work-

force. Thus, meritocracy must evolve to encompass a broader definition of merit that reflects the diverse talents and contributions of its citizens. Moreover, the evolving landscape of technology and globalization presents both opportunities and challenges for Singapore's intellectual elite. The rapid pace of technological advancement requires continuous upskilling and adaptation to remain competitive in the global arena.

In addressing these challenges, Singapore continues to refine its meritocratic system, seeking to strike a balance between rewarding individual talent and promoting social cohesion. Initiatives aimed at providing equal access to education, expanding opportunities for skills development, and fostering a culture of innovation are crucial in ensuring that meritocracy remains a driving force for progress and prosperity in Singapore. As Singapore continues to develop, the influence of meritocracy on its intellectual elite will continue to shape the nation's identity and trajectory. By embracing the principles of meritocracy while addressing the challenges, Singapore strives to build a society where every individual has the opportunity to fulfill their potential and contribute to the nation's success.

In conclusion, it becomes evident that the concept of meritocracy plays a crucial role within the modern intellectual elite of Singapore. By analyzing various definitions of meritocracy and its implementation within the context of Singapore's intellectual elite, we have gained insights into the complexities of meritocratic systems and their impact on society. Our findings pay attention to the importance of meritocratic principles in Singapore's educational and societal frameworks, where individuals are selected and rewarded based on their abilities and accomplishments rather than their socio-economic backgrounds, wealth etc. However, modern societies still have to deal with challenges, connected with ensuring equal access to opportunities.

We have to mention that there are still several avenues for further research in this

area. Comparative studies across different countries and regions can shed light on the variations in the implementation and outcomes of meritocratic systems, providing valuable lessons for policy-making and institutional reforms. Moreover, investigating the evolving nature of meritocracy in the rapidly changing global landscape, characterized by technological advancements remains a fruitful area for exploration.

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26.02.2024

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