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Doing class analysis in Singapore’s elite education: unravelling the smokescreen of ‘meritocratic talk’

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This paper examines the specificity of the education–class nexus in an elite independent school in Singapore. It seeks to unravel the puzzle that meritocracy is dogmatically believed in Singapore in spite of evidences that point to the contrary. The paper draws on discursive (analysis of media materials) and institutional (analysis of interview conducted in Clarence High school) processes to mount the argument that doing class analysis in Singapore’s elite education is couched in a peculiarity, where meritocratic principles override all criticisms and contentions of the reproduction of educational privileges and advantages. The analysis of the overriding ‘meritocratic talk’ in the interviews conducted will show how the national doxa of meritocracy creates the belief environment that leads to institutional practices that echoes the dogma of meritocracy.

Keywords: elite schools; Singapore education; education and social class; meritocracy

Introduction

Elite schools are in a ‘class’ of their own. The use of ‘class’ to describe elite schools here is a synthesis of meanings borrowed from the Marxist and Weberian traditions. To the former, ‘class’ is defined relationally to the ownership of resources, material interests and wealth (Wright 2008) whereas for the latter, to belong to a ‘class’ implies a status group membership defined and demonstrated by ‘symbolic materials and subjective dispositions’ in addition to ownership of economic resources (Gaztambide-Fernández 2009, 11).

Attending an elite school is a clear marker of ‘class’, rooted in material realities as elite schools have just about the best of everything, from enviable small class sizes, to excellent student–teacher ratios, both of which are touted in educational circles to facilitate deep discussion and learning, to state-of-the-art facilities for teaching, learning and co-curricular activities. These material privileges also work symbolically to define who they are and their status group as ‘elite’ compared to other schools who are less or under-resourced. Their
privilege, however, comes with the expectation that elite schools have the capacity to groom and produce the best of the best.

Indeed, the privileges and educational advantages abound for students in elite schools. Those who enter and exit elite schools have an elite destination and pathway carved out for them (Mullen 2009). They are prepared for power and positions in society (Cookson and Persell 1985). Affirming what Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) have long argued about the role of education in social class reproduction, it is therefore difficult to ignore the politics around the education–class nexus, which at its heart lies the criticisms of ‘privilege’, ‘elitism’ and the question of meritocracy often levelled at elite schools.

In this paper, I situate this broad debate that enshrouds elite schools to an elite independent school in Singapore named Clarence High (CH). There is sufficient research on elite schools coming out of Euro-American contexts that examines the education–class nexus and problematises claims of meritocracy. Khan’s (2011) study, for example, reveals the ‘inequality within a meritocracy’ in St. Paul’s College in Concord, New Hampshire (10), whereas Kennedy and Power’s (2010) study of elite education in Ireland critiques the legitimacy of the meritocratic discourse as a ‘smokescreen of meritocracy’ that advances the interest of dominant classes.

There is, however, a noticeable knowledge gap on elite schools and their practices in Asia, and more importantly knowledge about the specificities and nuances of the education–class nexus. Class analysis is made even more complex in CH, particularly in Singapore where meritocracy, in conjunction with multiracialism is upheld as a national ideology, and where schools also practice and perform meritocracy like a religion. A cursory explanation of the significance of the twin national beliefs, meritocracy and multiracialism as a national ideology in Singapore is necessary here.

Singapore’s unequal racial composition of Chinese (77%), Malay (13%), Indians (6%) and Others (4%) (CMIO), what is also commonly known in local discourse as the CMIO racial configuration, for which the Chinese constitutes the majority, requires a non-partisan treatment of all races. A meritocracy ideology espouses that one’s ascendancy in society is purely based on merit; it disregards any privileges associated with race, gender and class background. However, over the last decade or so, class disparities have come under the spotlight. There is now a more visible widening income gap and social stratification as Singapore’s economy is more deeply connected to the volatile global economy (Tan 2010). The discontents around meritocracy have become a polemical national issue (see also Hayes 2012, for a contextualised account of the politics of meritocracy in the USA).

This paper seeks to unravel the puzzle that meritocracy is dogmatically believed in Singapore in spite of evidences that point to the contrary. It draws on discursive (analysis of media materials) and institutional (analysis of interview conducted in CH) processes to mount the argument that doing class
analysis in Singapore’s elite education is couched in a peculiarity, where meritocratic principles override all criticisms and contentions of the reproduction of educational privileges and advantages. It is to be noted that in a larger comparative context, Singaporean meritocracy differs from the universe of other systems that claim to be meritocratic such as France, USA, Australia, Canada, Taiwan, Korea, and so on. The Singapore case provides fresh fodder for charting a broader thinking about the nuances of doing studies of the education–class nexus in elite schools, one that I argue looks beyond the microscopic world of the school site and the embodiments of privileges within to a situated analysis that is informed by an understanding of the complex (local) histories and global forces that shape the country and its education system.

The paper is organised into six sections. To examine the education–class nexus in CH one has to have some knowledge of the broader class structure and existing stratification in Singapore society. The first section provides the context. The second section gives a cursory history of elite education in Singapore and its emerging stratification. The third section is a brief methodological note. This paves the way for the fourth section which features an analysis of newspaper articles that puts the spotlight on the politics surrounding elite education, meritocracy and class. I explain the peculiarity of the education–class nexus in the fifth section before finally analysing the ‘meritocratic talk’ in the last section.

A view into class and stratification in Singapore: whither meritocracy?

In Singapore’s public sphere, ‘class’ as a lexicon is rarely used in government/official discourse. Instead, ‘social stratification’, ‘social mobility’, ‘widening income gap’ are the common neutral references used. This is because ‘class’ is derivative of a Marxian definition and pejoratively carries the notion of class conflict, tension and struggle. Any hint of discontents that stems from class conflict runs counter to Singapore’s nation-building project, which valorises collectivity and harmony over any suggestion of a divided society (Tan 2004). References to ‘stratification’ on the other hand suggest unequal life-chances which can be evened out because the Peoples’ Action Party (PAP) who is the ruling government has the resources and provisions to equalise unequal life-chances ‘via a system of equality of opportunity and meritocracy for all citizens, tempered by state welfarism and community charity for the needy’ (Tan 2004, 6).

Class, in local parlance, is determined by home ownership. As far back as the late 1980s, during his term as Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew said that ‘Singapore is a middle-class society’. His premise is based on the criterion that more than 80% of Singaporeans owned the property they lived in (The Straits Times, 14 August 1987 cited in Tan 2004). Of course, it matters what sort of home one owns because class varies according to the types of home ownership. Those who own private and landed properties belong to the rich
and upper-middle class whereas those who reside in the heartlands of Housing Development Board (HDB) flats are generally classified as middle class although this further varies according to the type of HDB flat one owns (i.e., whether one owns a one, three, four, five or executive HDB flats). Clearly, there are limitations to using home ownership to determine class.

Sociologist Tan Ern Ser includes a wider, more encompassing variable such as educational attainment, occupational status, class cluster of working citizen, class structure (subjective), perceived financial situation, in addition to household income and housing type in his 2004 study of social stratification in Singapore. His study revealed that Singapore has a middle-class majority. However, if subjective class identification is used, class structure in Singapore comprises a fair mix of middle class and working class (Tan 2004). This study, however, glosses over the shifting impact of the global economy and how it could affect the livelihood and financial situation of household incomes especially during economic downturns. While studying social stratification in Singapore needs a wider spectrum of variables as Tan has used, the social stratum is, to a large extent, also predicated on the performance of the economy.

Singapore’s engagement with globalisation coupled with the rising cost of living has caused income gap to widen because its national economy has been subjected to the vagaries of global capitalism (Tan 2010). The financial impact of the Global Financial Crisis in 2008, for example, saw the PAP government handing out cash rebates in proportion to housing types. This gesture is an indirect admission that there is a subclass within the middle-class waiting for the government to equalise their opportunities. Data of household income in 2011 further confirm the widening income disparity in the Singapore society. The Gini coefficient has increased from 0.442 in 2000 to 0.473 in 2011 (Singapore Statistics 2011). In a recent parliamentary speech, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong acknowledged that ‘Our society is stratifying, … the children of successful people are doing better, the children of less successful people are doing less well. Fewer children from lower-income families are rising to the top of the heap… It’s a big gap. It exists in Singapore sharper than before…’ (The Straits Times 21 October 2011).

So what has gone wrong with meritocracy in Singapore? In my view, the PAP government has overlooked the inherent tensions of egalitarianism and elitism in the practice of meritocracy. The PAP government has always believed that Singapore needs an elite group with demonstrated track records of merit, sieve and sorted out through its highly competitive education system to helm its leadership (Barr and Skrbiš 2008). Therefore, meritocracy has been busily used as a social engineering machinery to identify talents at the expanse of paying attention to leveling up egalitarianism in the wider Singaporean society. It is only in the last few years, in particular, the discontents expressed in the 2011 General Elections (GE) over a higher cost of living and more
visible social stratification amongst other issues that the PAP government has made considerable efforts to step up egalitarianism. The recent educational reforms in early years of education such as the Primary Education Review and Implementation and early childhood education are examples of egalitarian emphasis that ‘seek to mitigate disparities in educational achievement by focusing directly at the stage of primary education, when the gap is at its smallest (V. E. Lee & Burkam 2002’ (Lim 2013, 7).

By and large, Singaporeans subscribe to meritocracy, but begrudged those who have the unfair advantage of having the extra cultural capital to help them succeed yet identified as ‘talents’ based on merit. A case in point is evident in the competition for places in schools with Integrated Programmes (IP; see the next section for a detailed explanation of IP schools). It has been reported that students who make it to IP schools receive costly private tuition that put them ahead of students who come from less wealth off families (see Gooch 2012). The level of playing field is not even to achieve egalitarian in this instance. It is this uneven playing field that continues to be a point of contention.

To assuage the discontents around meritocracy, in particular those who are left behind by the system there is a noticeable shift in the discourse on meritocracy after GE 2011. The official rhetoric now promotes an inclusive society and social mobility (see e.g., Prime Minister Lee’s speech, ‘from void deck to Nobel Prize lab’ in The Straits Times, 21 October 2011 and Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam’s speech, ‘Keeping chances alive, keeping social mobility up’ in The Straits Times, 7 April 2012). Meritocracy, too, is redefined as ‘many models of achievement’ rather than skewed narrowly towards academic merits. Furthermore, its Education Minister, Heng Swee Keat wants to remove the stigma associated with ‘neighbourhood schools’ and ‘elite schools’ that hint at educational stratification in Singapore schools. He envisions an educational landscape comprising only of ‘good schools’ (Lim 2012).

However, the existing elite schools in Singapore’s education landscape do not ease the debates on social stratification. On the contrary, it continues to treat meritocracy suspiciously and spotlight ‘elitism’. A recent media report, for example, revealed that the percentage of students in elite schools whose fathers are university graduates does not fall below 50%. By contrast, in neighborhood schools, the percentage is estimated to be only around 10% (Chang and Cai 2011). Class advantage is therefore apparent in elite schools. It also speaks of a blight in the social stratum of its education system, where meritocracy favors those who already have the capital. From this broader discussion of class and stratification in the wider Singapore society, I turn now to provide a brief history of elite education in Singapore before illuminating the politics surrounding class, elitism and meritocracy that elite schools in Singapore are entangled in.
Elite education in Singapore and emerging educational stratification

There is scant literature on the history of elite education in Singapore. Schools with a long history, some of these as old as the colonial history of Singapore (e.g., Raffles Institution, Anglo-Chinese School, St. Joseph Institution to name but a few) were informally recognised as elite schools because of their long history and tradition of producing outstanding public exam results. With School Ranking officially introduced in 1992, the competition for top spots saw a more obvious rung of elite schools emerged. It was also around the early 1990s that saw the establishment of eight independent schools, which became the bastion of elite schools in Singapore.

In the early years of their independence, these eight independent schools functioned independently only in name. They are no different from mainstream government schools except that they enjoy the ‘elite’ status of being ‘independent’. Of course their academic track record in public examinations and competitions in national sports stood out. Not unlike mainstream government schools, they too prepare secondary students (Years 7–10) for the same high-stake G.C.E. ‘O’ levels public examination. These independent schools also take directives from the Ministry of Education (MOE). However, what set independent schools apart from mainstream schools is the former has better school facilities and enrichment programmes, and its principals have the autonomy to hire and fire teaching staff.

This less than ordinary role of independent schools in the landscape of Singapore’s education development took a drastic change in 2002. The independent schools began to mark themselves as more ‘distinctive’ than before when MOE introduced the IP to create more choices and greater diversity in its education system. The IP is a ‘through train’ programme whereby students in the scheme skip the traditional ‘O’ level exams and proceed to complete the ‘A’ levels or the International Baccalaureate as the final exit point in Year 6/Year 12. There are now 18 IP schools, but competition for places is stiff determined primarily by the ‘merit’ of the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) scores – a hurdle that all Primary 6/Grade 6 students have to clear – and/or students who display exceptional talents in sports, aesthetics and the arts. In sum, the buzz in elite education is rejuvenated by MOE’s ‘more choices and greater diversity’ policy in its secondary/junior college system.

Ironically, the changing secondary school landscape that has emerged since 2002 has put the education–class nexus under greater scrutiny. Indeed, just as the ‘more choices and greater diversity’ policy had intended to create more educational pathways for secondary students, the backlash meant that it also led to educational stratification in its system. There is now an obvious distinction between the different rungs of schools in Singapore. Its education landscape now comprises neighborhood schools, autonomous schools, IP schools, elite independent schools (who also offers the IP) and specialised...
schools such as Singapore Sports School, the NUS High School of Mathematics and Science, School of the Arts and School of Science and Technology.

The name of these specialised schools alone is revealing of the kind of ‘talents’ and ‘abilities’ the school wants to nurture. I argue that the ‘more choices and greater diversity’ policy is social reproduction at work in an education system that aims to engineer an elite class in diverse fields for Singapore. But beyond this ‘social reproduction’ argument, I argue that elite education is in tension with the meritocratic principles that its education system is staunchly embedded in.

Elite education in Singapore is in demand by a growing middle class who perceive that studying in an elite school matters to their children’s future trajectories. The existence of thriving shadow education industries such as tuition and enrichment centres is evidence of the premium parents placed on their children’s educational success (Barr and Skrbiš 2008). Some wealthy ‘kiasu’ parents (a local colloquialism that means afraid of losing out) even resort to buying properties nearer brand name elite schools to fulfil the one kilometre radius criteria set by MOE in order to increase their chances of getting their child into the school. This class advantage is the root of the dis/contentions around the practice of meritocracy as the starting point of the playing field is unequal to begin with.

In his study of elite schools, Gaztambide-Fernández (2009) pointed out that the process of inclusion and exclusion is the model of meritocracy that operates in an elite school. I argue that claims of meritocratic practice in elite schools need to pass the litmus test questions of who benefits and who is disadvantaged by the system. These are important questions to ask because by asking who, we foreground the specificities of a particular demography in terms of class, race and gender and if they are over- or under-represented.

A brief note on methodology

The next section of the paper turns to an analysis of a few ‘newsworthy’ articles from The Straits Times that visibly and publicly politicise elite education. A few methodological points ought to be mentioned here as to why this paper counts on newspaper articles as data. The data used in this paper are primarily interviews from the May 2011 visit in CH. However, prior to getting into the school I visited the National Institute of Education library newspaper archive to collect newspaper articles related to CH. I found a collection of articles with a media spin on elitism occurring in elite schools. I thought these extrinsic materials, while found outside the school, are nevertheless even more important than those found within the school because I anticipated that class and the politics of privilege are taboos unlikely to be spoken of in an elite school. I was also intrigued to know that The Straits Times, known to be the political mouthpiece of the PAP government, would pry open the complicated
issues of ‘class’ and ‘elitism’ that is in tension with the meritocratic ideology deeply rooted in its education system and wider society. It is to this media narrative that I now turn.

**Education–class politics in the media**

There is a unifying narrative that emerged from the collection of newspaper articles analysed. My analysis will show that there is an intricate relationship between meritocracy, class and elitism. This relationship centres on meritocracy being used as a sorting machine to select the best. Those who are identified as ‘talents’ forms a distinct ‘in-group’. Because they are an exclusive group hand-picked by the system, a sense of pride and privilege that they are the best of the best often breeds elitism, at the same time invites envy.

One article titled ‘Why the elite envy’ (Lim and Kwek 2006), for example, attributes the politics of elite envy to the Singaporean model of meritocracy which utilises it to select the best. This selected group does well because more and better resources are pumped into elite schools. Call this the sour-grape syndrome, but it is a source of envy regarded as unfair advantage because ‘they’ have the best and naturally would do well because of the privileges extended. The axiom of meritocracy is therefore cast in doubt: is the ‘merit’ in meritocracy truly meritocratic?

In another news article, ‘Neighborhood vs elite schools: Does it matter?’ (Sim 2005) interviews were conducted with principals, educationists and students for their views. By mentioning ‘neighborhood vs elite schools’, this article overtly acknowledges the educational stratification that is already a permanent fixture in Singapore’s education landscape. The students interviewed argued that it mattered studying in an elite school because attending a brand name school ‘can add something to a resume’, and hence is looked upon more favorably by potential employers. It is also perceived that students in elite schools receive more educational resources compared to neighborhood schools. However, principals and educationists argued that choosing a school that is suitable for the student is far for important than choosing a brand name school. These arguments aside, the unspoken and unacknowledged point in this news article is that students are cognizant that elite schools embody a distinctive ‘class’ of their own and the privileges (in terms of educational opportunities, social prestige and recognition) of attending elite schools cannot be discounted.

A forum letter, ‘Why elite schools are associated with the rich’ (Tao 2005) attempted to explain the concentration of wealthy kids in elite schools. The article also hints at the issue of unfair advantage. It is revealed that wealthy kids make it to elite schools because their families can afford to engage private tutors to give them a more competitive edge. This news article raises an argument made earlier: that the playing field is uneven to begin with (Tan 2008); those who have the extra resources are already ahead of those who do not.
The politics of elitism and race is brought to the fore in an article, ‘Can we all just get along?’ (Liam 2008). The news story is about a Malay student from a neighborhood secondary school and his experience of misfit when he studied in an elite junior college. The student was bullied and ostracised because of his neighborhood school background. The article explained this episode as a problem about fitting in. What is not mentioned is that minority races are often under-represented in elite schools. The politics in this news story is in fact about the politics of elitism, intertwined with ethnicity but conveniently explained as ‘misfit’.

These media articles reveal that elite education in Singapore has stirred up sentiments of envy and elitism. Visible educational stratification is evident along the division of brand name elite schools and neighborhood schools. Significantly, the crucial issue of meritocracy is under questioned: how is it that a meritocratic education system, which ostensibly does not discriminate but gives equal opportunities to all, and a system that reward based on merit, also breeds contentions of ‘class’ politics and elitism? This is why I argue in the paper that doing class analysis in Singapore’s elite education is not a straightforward case, but locked in a peculiarity where the doctrine of meritocracy overrides any attempt to pry open issues of class and educational privilege in its education system. In the next section, I further explain the dogma of meritocracy in Singapore.

The national doxa of meritocracy

‘Doxa’ is Bourdieu’s (1990) term used to refer to a set of core values and discourses that has come to be taken as inherently true and necessary. This appositely describes the Singaporean national ideology of meritocracy. In Singapore, the principles of meritocracy filter down at every level of its organisation, from the civil service, armed forces, government agencies to schools (Mauzy and Miln 2002). Vogel (1989) terms this powerful hegemonic doctrine as ‘macho-meritocracy’ (1053). As a national ideology, meritocracy is deeply set in the national consciousness of Singaporeans such that any attempt to question this national ideology is frowned upon as being left wing and a dissident critic of the PAP ideology. In brief, the doctrine of meritocracy rewards hard work, which is advocated as a key to upward social mobility. Because one is rewarded based on merit, meritocracy therefore dismisses any accounts or charges of gender, race and class discrimination. The argument then becomes one constructed around those who work hard, and are deserving; those who do not are therefore undeserving. That is not to say, however, there is no inequality in such a system; a different rhetoric is instead used to obfuscate other determining factors such as gender, class and race. Taken together, these arguments champion meritocracy as a fair system where no one is disadvantaged or privileged.
How then does meritocracy work in Singapore’s education system? Meritocracy is measured in terms of good grades. By virtue of good grades, the ‘merit’ of hard work will open gateways to good schools as well as prestigious government scholarships. Kenneth Paul Tan (2010) calls this ‘the reward aspect’ of meritocracy (278). However, the criticism of merit based on grades alone has led to recognition of ‘exceptional talents’ in other areas such as aesthetics and sports. To address the criticism of its narrow measure of merits, MOE implemented the Direct School Admissions (DSAs) which grants and ‘rewards’ prospective student admission to elite schools if the student possesses exceptional talent in sports and the arts. But the irony of meritocracy is that the congregation of students in an elite school, even though they are admitted based on ‘merit’, nevertheless formed an exclusive in-group, a distinct class in relation to students from ordinary schools that, as the many media accounts above related, breeds elitism.

While elitism is frowned upon and invites criticism from the public, the government normalised elitism as acceptable and inevitable. The rhetoric of ‘meritocracy’ is mobilised to argue that Singapore needs a core of national elites to run the country, and elite schools provide the pool of talents for its selection. While elitism is an inevitable social outcome of such talent selection, it is the urgency of talent identification to fill leadership positions in its administrative system that gets prioritise over what it deems as peripheral and petty politics.

On the normalisation of elitism, Mauzy and Miln (2002) also concede that ‘elitism sometimes gets subsumed … under the rubric of meritocracy …’. Meritocracy and elitism are sometimes described as the more and less acceptable sides of the same coin’ (55). In other words, elitism is negated by a utilitarian logic that justifies it as harmless because Singapore needs an elite core to lead the country to fulfil its economic aspirations and for nation building.

In essence, the education–class nexus is made complex by the contentious discourse of and about meritocracy that sidelines the politics of elitism and class with a rationalised discourse about the pragmatics of nation building. In the next section, my analysis of the overriding ‘meritocratic talk’ in the interviews conducted in CH will show how the national doxa of meritocracy creates the belief environment that leads to institutional practices that echoes the dogma of meritocracy.

‘Meritocratic talk’: a vignette from CH

How is this education–class nexus played out in CH? There is plenty of evidence about the opulence (read: privileges/elitism) associated with elite schools found also in CH. But evidence of meritocratic principles is also widely practiced in the school. For example, the school takes in top 3–5% of the PSLE cohort, but it is unapologetic about being elitist because the PSLE is
a high-stake public exam that rewards those who perform academically well, which opens the gateway to elite schools such as CH. Therefore, admission at CH is purely based on ‘merit’ as it takes in the academic crème de le crème.

It is difficult to question the exclusiveness and elitism of CH even though it is recognised as a top performing secondary school in Singapore that has the repute for producing many national elites in Singapore. This is because meritocracy and its mechanisms prevail in the school. For example, the school also carries out the DSA. For those who come from less privilege background and who cannot afford the fees, the school offers scholarships and financial assistance. The principal reiterated the school’s ‘commitment to social mobility, to being meritocratic and open’ when she explained how the school reaches out to prospective top performing primary six students who aspire to study at CH yet who cannot afford the fees:

We have another scheme where we started giving out junior CH scholarships to top boys all over Singapore. I send this out to all primary schools. I say, give me a top, bright student who has got financial difficulties. We want to give them a scholarship. They must have 3 As in their 3 PSLE subjects at least one, I mean. And then, we want to cultivate them, give them a leg up, so $800 we give them by way of a scholarship can work towards educational resources for them. So this is, hopefully, to draw in those who might say, this is very prestigious, it’s hard to get in, it’s expensive…. (Interview with CH Principal, May 2011)

This is how the school silenced critics. By dispensing scholarships to the poor, the school undoes elitism and any accusatory suggestion of being an exclusive institution.

In my interview with a few students, they see meritocracy as a fair system that does not privilege those who are rich. They expressed the view that those who are at CH ‘earned’ it because of their academic merit, not wealth. Amber, for example, said that:

you need minimal grades … to enter CH. So even if you are wealthy or very rich or something, when you cannot meet the target minimum grade they cannot enter CH. So yeah, it means that even if you are not that wealthy and not that rich then you can still get into CH as long as (you) hit the minimum grade…. (Interview with Amber, May 2011)

Significantly, Amber’s understanding of meritocracy implicitly suggests that it is a system of selection that is blind to wealth but where ‘grade’ is used instrumentally as a determiner. In order words, it is not wealth that measures the ‘merit’ but ‘minimum grade’.

Jun Jie, another student I interviewed recognises the equal opportunity aspect of meritocracy that the school practices. He seems convinced that the sizeable wealth of the school makes it possible for the school to practice meritocracy.
our school has financial support programs to support those who come, who are financially disadvantaged. And I think a lot of the program are actually subsidized by the school and there’s a lot of funds like the 1823 funds to fund all these programs if you are interested. (Interview with Jun Jie, May 2011)

Again what is endorsed by another student here is the view that there is equality in the school; the school does not discriminate against students from less wealthy background.

In another interview Warren insists that everyone who makes in to CH does so purely on merit although he also acknowledges that wealth does bring advantage:

I would say, one thing that makes me very proud of (CH) would be the fact that we are very diverse. We don’t discriminate on race or religion, we are secular. You come in based on merit. As in, that’s it. I think that’s a very powerful thing. Because we take in the best of the neighborhood schools, of the other, of the elite primary schools. We take in everybody, based on merit.

when kids come from wealthier families, their parents have more money to pay for things like tuition, buy them better books, they can buy property nearer to good primary schools and then there’s the one kilometer radius rule that makes it easier to get in, especially if you are studying where MGS and all those other schools are. So, money inherently gives them an advantage. (Interview with Warren, May 2011)

Like the other students I interviewed, Warren’s understanding of meritocracy is narrowly defined as an equalising machinery. In other words, meritocracy becomes translated as some anti-discriminatory mechanism, where everyone receives fair treatment. While he acknowledges that ‘money inherently gives them an advantage’, he does not see that privilege (in terms of wealth) makes the playing field uneven. Warren’s staunch belief in meritocracy led him to say that at CH ‘we try to find the equalizers, things that wealth doesn’t usually give you an advantage in’.

This is the negation of privilege through the discourse of meritocracy that is evidenced in my interview with Warren. Not only does he not question the doctrine of meritocracy, but he also accepts it as a truisim. This interview with ‘Warren’ made me realise how ‘macho-meritocracy’ has not only become a national ideology, but also it has worked in a powerful way at the level of individual uptake that has reduced the belief of meritocracy to a common sense ‘truth’ – a national doxa – about how everyone is made equal based on ‘merit’ without realising that some are less equal than others because they do not have the economic capital to begin with.

This religiosity of meritocracy observed in the school culture is gleaned from the ‘meritocratic talk’ – interviews conducted with the school principal and students. It gives the impression that privilege coexists in harmony with the meritocratic principles practiced and performed by the school. It also
dispels all suggestions of class and race politics associated with attending an elite school. The expression of elitism and class politics in the media did not find its way in the interviews, however.

Had I relied on ethnographic evidence obtained from within the school, I would not have worked out the crux of the education–class nexus in CH, which reveals the operation of a staunch-like faith in the dogma of meritocracy that does not question the status quo. The overriding ‘meritocratic talk’ is at best, I argue, a ‘smokescreen’ that clouds any hints and suggestions of elitism and privilege.

**Conclusion**

When I conducted my first round of fieldwork in the school, I was in awe the moment I stepped into the school grounds. The ‘privileges’ in the school are evident, facilities wise. I was intrigued that the school campus even has a 7/11 convenience store and an ATM machine. This is a far cry from the secondary school I had attended and the few schools that I had taught in Singapore. Even those schools that I have been to in Hong Kong and Australia (Melbourne) did not match up to the opulence of the CH. While doing my ethnographic work in the school, I experienced moments of elite envy.

But are the signs of privileges in CH also suggestion of the presence of class politics and elitism as documented in the literature on elite schools (see e.g., Howard 2008; Maxwell and Aggleton 2010; Khan 2011)? Oddly, what I see and read (in the newspaper about the politics of elitism in elite schools) is a disjunction of what I heard in CH. If seeing is believing then what I have heard should also concur: that the privileges in CH have opened up class politics and elitism. But my interviews with the principal and students contradict this. This is the complexity of doing class analysis in CH where the national ideology of meritocracy has become a doxa of practice evident in the principal and students’ ‘meritocratic talk’.

The education–class nexus and the attendant politics are not easy to explain away, neither is the paradox inherent in meritocracy. But with the PAP leaders attempting to close the income gap, and the Education Minister’s vision of creating ‘good schools’ as opposed to the existing ‘elite’ and ‘neighborhood’ schools, it remains to be seen how education–class politics will be played out in the future.

**Notes**

2. All names mentioned in the ‘meritocratic talk’ are fictitious.
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