



Culture of Meritocracy, Political Hegemony, and Singapore's Development

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Abstract

Why have Singapore's unique developmental state arrangements persisted in a region which has experienced democratic change? This paper argues that this is due to the PAP state's successful legitimization of its unique brand of meritocracy, one which has both competitive and interventionist elements. During the colonial era, a culture of economic meritocracy evolved in a bottom-up process through social and commercial interactions between the British class and Chinese community. This was then transmuted by the PAP's top-down imposition of the institutions and discourses of political meritocracy. This cultural hybrid allows the state to sustain its hegemony in the face of progressive social change. Accordingly, our emphasis on the wider institutional environment within which merit is conceived helps to better illuminate Singapore's challenges of encouraging organic innovation, alleviating social stratification, and opening up its political arena. This paper suggests that the problems in these areas stem not from meritocracy per se, but from the PAP's "monocentric meritocracy" where merit is narrowly defined and singularly imposed in the post-colonial era.

Keywords Cultural political economy · Hegemony · Singapore · Authoritarianism · Meritocracy

Introduction

Singapore is one of the richest countries in the world, and one of the four "Asian Tigers" known for their economic boom in the late twentieth century. In just three decades from 1960 to 1990, Singapore's income per capita increased by a factor

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of 28 from \$427 to \$11,864, a rate well above the East Asian and Pacific average in the same period of \$148 to \$2598 (World Bank, 2022). Inflation rates also consistently remained well below world averages, while enjoying relative price stability. Singapore's economic development is typically held up as an exemplar for others to follow.

Much has been written about the contributing factors of its success, be it the favorable geography, astute political leadership, openness to foreign capital, and its much vaunted "economic freedom" (Ghesquière, 2007; Huff, 2010; Prime, 2012; Tupy, 2015). Less attention has, however, been given to the role of culture. Accordingly, this paper investigates the role of culture in Singapore's development. Particularly, we investigate the culture of meritocracy that pervades the Singaporean consciousness and how it evolved in the colonial era and subsequently in the post-1965 independence period. We argue that an investigation of this meritocratic culture reveals underlying tensions in Singapore's political economy, between its market elements and its interventionist elements. While a culture of economic meritocracy arose through a bottom-up evolutionary process in the context of the colonial era, institutions and *discourses* of political meritocracy were imposed in a top-down manner by the interventionist developmental state in the post-1965 era to sustain its hegemony.

The Puzzle

One of the reasons why the Singapore case has been so intriguing development scholars is its unique institutional arrangements. First, it seems to successfully combine high levels of economic growth with authoritarian governance. The nature of Singapore's developmental state means that it mixes state and market elements in a complex hybrid. Even as Singapore enjoys relatively high economic freedom and open trade, the state nonetheless enjoys a monopoly over land, employs authoritarian governance, and its government-linked corporations dominate the stock market (Sim et al., 2014). Second and more importantly, these authoritarian developmental state institutions, so prominent in East Asia's history, have undergone severe challenges owing to globalization and the rise of modern citizenry (Yeung, 2017). Yet, Singapore's variant has survived much longer than its counterparts.

There is thus a question of how its dualistic state and market elements, which may be in tension, are reconciled. Market freedoms and economic growth may generate a tendency for individuals to press for greater political freedoms. On the other hand, political authoritarianism and state control of key sectors may impinge on economic liberty. Authoritarian governance can also cause a loss of public legitimacy among citizens. The question of what makes this unique hybrid an *internally stable configuration* remains ripe for exploration. The related question is why *authoritarian* developmental state institutions have persisted for as long as they have in Singapore unlike in other East Asian nations which have to a

larger extent embraced democratization (Wade, 2018, for a recent exploration on the evolution of East Asian developmental states, and Slater & Wong, 2022, for a recent analysis of Asia's growing embrace of democratization in a post-development age). The literature on authoritarian resilience is thus relevant, particularly those that emphasize the use of legitimation mechanisms, a theme that this paper builds on (Gerschewski, 2013; Von Soest & Grauvogel, 2017).

Contribution

This paper argues that a hitherto under-explored approach to tackle these questions is from cultural political economy, which looks at the complex dynamics between formal and informal institutions. An early proponent of such an approach was sociologist Max Weber (2002, 2011) who acknowledged that a nation's formal institutions are typically animated by a particular "economic spirit," which may be understood as the prevailing culture within which economic actions are embedded. Crucially however, these "spirits" can vary, and even the "historically given form of capitalism" "can be filled with very different types of spirits" (Weber, 2002, p. 63). Contrary to the popular assumption that capitalism is always associated with a bourgeois, individualist, and entrepreneurial culture, it may instead be embedded within a traditionalist public culture, or even one where rent seeking is rife (Storr, 2013, p. 60). In this light, this paper explores the ideological and cultural foundations i.e., spirits that explain the stability and persistence of Singapore's hybrid developmental state model. Underlying the formal developmental state institutions of Singapore is a unique meritocratic spirit that has both simultaneously evolved from bottom-up and engineered from top-down.

An analysis of Singapore's public culture (Weber's "spirit") will reveal it to be generally meritocratic in orientation, generally defined as the belief that hard work yields rewards, and that success is to be earned, rather than given. While culture is difficult to quantify and definitively prove, it may be detected through qualitative means, based on the recognition that the "facts of the social sciences are what people think and believe" (Hayek, 1943; Chamlee-Wright, 2011; Skarbek, 2020). In the first section of this paper, we provide evidence establishing the pervasiveness of a culture of meritocracy in the Singaporean consciousness. Singaporean society's dominant cultural and media texts in politics, film, and literature support this claim, and are corroborated by values surveys. We argue, however, that this meritocratic culture is shaped by two opposing forces resulting from two crucial junctures in Singapore's history. In the British colonial era of 1819 to the end of the Second World War, Singapore experienced significant market-based development that was driven largely by the commercial activities of its immigrants. A culture of economic meritocracy had evolved in a bottom-up manner through the socio-cultural influences of Chinese entrepreneurs and community leaders. Such a culture of economic meritocracy formed the social bedrock that enabled market-based development, which by the turn of the twentieth century made Singapore into a flourishing port of trade. The *enmeshing* of formal capitalist institutions laid down by the British with the cultural layer of meritocracy in Singapore is a clear demonstration of what economic sociologists

have identified to be crucial for sustained economic success: the alignment of pro-market institutions and culture, without which institutions may be foisted onto an unreceptive culture (Boettke et al., 2008; Nicoara & Boettke, 2015).

However, another critical juncture that shaped Singapore's political economy was its independence of 1965, which saw the ascendancy of the People's Action Party, a group of technocratic elites who believed that market institutions ought to be supplemented with state-led development. While market forces were generally retained, the state started to intervene in the industrial structure, factor markets, and strategic sectors to catalyze industrialization. The emergence of this new developmental state required political elites to forge a new social consensus to maintain its political legitimacy, one that is based on the institutions and discourses of *political meritocracy*. Within Singapore's political meritocracy, Singaporean workers are encouraged to be productive economic assets to drive state-led development. Crucially also, through certain formal institutions and in the discursive realm, political meritocracy has seen the suspension of civil liberties to enable virtuous, capable technocrats to rule Singapore. Thus, what emerged as a bottom-up culture of meritocracy became co-opted by the new developmental state for its political hegemony.

Clarifications of key terms are in order. "Meritocracy" is a confusing term used in many ways. The most common understanding is that of economic meritocracy, best captured in the dictum "work for reward, reward for work", expressing the belief that hard work leads to economic success. Closely related is that of political meritocracy, a form of political rule where democratic participation is curtailed in favor of rule by enlightened or virtuous elites. The similarity in both is the belief that *talent can, ought to be, rewarded*. Notably, Singapore's political meritocracy is part of a larger East Asian challenge against liberal democracy (Bell & Li, 2013; Bell, 2016).

The contribution of this paper, however, is to suggest a different framing of the issue, one that is more concerned about the institutional environment within which merit is conceived.¹ I propose a dichotomy between "competitive meritocracy" and "monocentric meritocracy." A competitive meritocracy is one where merit is conceived, negotiated, and formulated in a bottom-up, evolutionary manner without conscious design. Importantly, evolutionary change implies open competition, which functions as a testing ground for different ideas.² Accordingly, competition in the economic and political marketplace *selects for* worthier options between rival products and politicians, respectively.³ In contrast, in a "monocentric meritocracy", merit is defined in a specific

¹ This paper is built on an underlying comparative institutional analysis between "market-like" and "state-like" phenomena, and the consequences arising from resorting to their different logics (see DeCanio, 2014 for a contrast).

² Here I have in mind evolutionary economists and their characterization of the competitive marketplace as an evolutionary mechanism (Alchian, 1950; Nelson and Winter, 1985). Competition functions as a selection process. At the same time, this intellectual tradition emphasizes how culture and institutions mutually constitute each other and adaptively evolve over time in a "complex, undesigned" manner (Aldrich et al., 2008).

³ In a competitive meritocracy, "merit" is an *emergent product of contestation* involving diverse people who test different conceptions against each other. For example, in democratic contests, voters may define who is worthy very differently (academics, looks, experience, etc.), the point is that the person who eventually succeeds did so through a process of competition.

manner and authoritatively imposed in society. Here, competitive forces are curtailed by authorities who resort to intelligent design-type social engineering.

The argument herein is that in the colonial era of Singapore, owing to the British stance of benign neglect, a culture of meritocracy *emerged in a bottom-up manner*, which persists to present day but was nonetheless transmuted in the post-colonial period, with an additional layer of political meritocracy *imposed* by the technocratic state. Astute observers may quickly observe that the PAP regime heavily relies on competition in recruitment and has in fact been accused of “social Darwinism” in policymaking. But this is not the full story, for the simple fact that both economic and political competitions are curtailed in Singapore and only selectively embraced. Singapore’s meritocracy under the PAP is monocentric, and not competitive.

What then is the point of such framing? The first value proposition is that it contributes to a richer understanding of the political economy of development, namely, in debunking naive liberal portrayals of Singapore as a free market success story. While liberals are generally right that markets contribute to economic progress, cultural patterns may lead to vast institutional diversity. Accordingly, Singapore’s capitalism *does not rest upon cultural foundations of individual liberty* but rather on a strong social consensus forged and brokered by the ideological hegemony of the Singapore state, which foisted onto society a *specific vision of what merit ought to entail* in society, economy, and politics. Singapore’s capitalism is also heavily shaped by the state, which has curtailed both economic and political competitions.

The focus on competitive/bottom-up as opposed to monocentric/top-down arrangements helps untangle some dilemmas in contemporary Singapore. The first is its structural inability to achieve innovation-driven development. By elevating political meritocracy over democratic contestation, the Singapore developmental state forged the sort of national consensus necessary to drive successful state-led development,⁴ but at the same time, steered itself into a sub-optimal equilibrium where creativity and innovation elements are crowded out (Audretsch & Fiedler, 2022; Cheang, 2022a). I suggest that embracing a more competitive form of meritocracy, where diverse economic agents have more say over what counts as “worth” in the economy, may contribute to a more balanced economy and the flourishing of more economic talents. The second dilemma is perhaps more pressing: recent concerns over social stratification (Teo, 2018). Such problems may not be due to meritocracy per se, but with the monocentric approach to meritocracy taken in Singapore, where talent is narrowly centered around scholastic ability, industrial skills, and values favored by the PAP. Again, a more diverse conception of merit may overcome the systematic disadvantages that some segments of the population currently experience.

Both stem from the third and central dilemma: how Singapore’s authoritarianism continues to justify itself amid progressive change. Despite some progress, politics in Singapore remains a closed shop. This stems from an internal contradiction

⁴ Political meritocracy and the developmental state model are intimately connected. Why is it that the Singapore developmental state succeeded in industrial policy in ways not seen in the West? This is because, according to developmental state theory, Singapore possesses state capacity run by capable leaders, and enjoys the extensive social consensus over the “national mission” of economic growth—both of which are components of its political meritocracy.

between its professed meritocratic approach and its essentially closed nature. While it relies on “merit” (monocentric) to recruit leaders, it nonetheless resists the “merit” (competitive) of democratic contestation in sifting through rival contenders. By wanting its cake and eating it at the same time, the PAP’s elitism has polluted the very spirit of meritocracy and pushed out its egalitarian aspects. While such a contradiction may be accepted by the populace during early years of developmentalism, how it remains justifiable to a post-material populace promises to be an interesting question in the coming years.

Singapore’s Meritocratic Culture

Singaporeans generally subscribe to meritocracy. Underlying Singapore’s merit-based culture is a robust belief that despite its high ethnic and racial diversity, these factors have little to do one’s lot in life. In a recent study, 73% of Singaporean respondents disagreed that a person’s race was an important determinant of their success, while 89% affirmed the meritocratic belief that hard work was the key ingredient to economic success (Mathew, 2016). There is an overwhelming consensus of Singaporeans that see multiculturalism as an ideal; 91% stated that they enjoyed social cohesion among a diverse ethnic matrix; 96% respected people from all races; 95% held the view that all races are equal; and 96% that people of all races should be treated equally (ibid.).

Global values surveys corroborate this adherence to the meritocratic ethos in the Singaporean psyche. In wave 7 of the World Values Survey, more Singaporeans believed that “in the long run, hard work usually brings a better life”, rather than “hard work doesn’t generally bring success—it’s more a matter of luck and connections”.⁵ With a mean score of 4.49, with a lower integer reflecting a greater belief in meritocracy, Singaporeans have a greater belief in meritocracy than residents of other major European countries in the same survey, namely, UK, Germany, and Netherlands (World Values Survey, 2023). Within Confucian East Asia, Singaporeans also have a stronger belief in meritocracy than the rest, except for Taiwan with a slightly lower value at 4.38. Additionally, when the actual policies, institutions, and practices of countries are assessed, rather than citizen beliefs, Singapore is ranked as the 20th in terms of social mobility—one of two Asian countries, the other being Japan, in the top 20 (World Economic Forum, 2020).

The culture of meritocracy in Singapore has a strong economic aspect, grounded on the underlying belief that an ethic of self-responsibility and diligence is essential to one’s own economic success. Perhaps the greatest value of the meritocratic ethic is that it has provided Singaporeans with the right motivation by combining rewards with economic incentives and competitiveness. The belief that anyone can be successful incentivizes Singaporeans to persevere and excel. Material possessions, a comfortable life, or social esteem are all visible signs of meritocratic success that

⁵ The author sought to look at the Asian Barometer Survey, but this does not examine meritocratic beliefs, and focuses mainly on attitudes toward democracy and politics.

are highly sought after. Indeed, this strongly motivated drive toward excellence has been attributed to a key explanation for Singapore's successful economic development and prosperity:

Singaporean society is one which places strong emphasis on meritocracy. The espoused national ethos includes democracy and equal opportunities for all. Apart from policies governing the strict rationing of scarce resources like land, the average Singaporean is presented with enormous material incentives—provided that he or she works hard for them. The Singaporean Chinese man can be described as “economic man”. (Lee & Chan, 1998)

The Singaporean ethic can be described as a strong belief in achieving success by the sweat of one's own brow. Narratives that one is privileged by race, social status or oppressed by an oppressor are not dominant. That one's success is determined by one's own merit is an important aspect of the Singaporean psyche. But this ethos did not just appear “ex-nihilo” on the scene, and in fact has its roots from the British colonial era, where it emerged in a bottom-up fashion in the context of Chinese migration, and henceforth drove much of Singapore's development.

The economic culture of meritocracy is connected to a favorable embrace of material acquisition in Singapore. Scholars have observed such a tendency through various pieces of social research (see Chua, 2003). The colloquial term *kiasu*—a term familiar to any Singaporean—denotes a cultural disposition of being overly competitive in the economic realm. To be *kiasu* is to harbor an obsessive ingrained “fear of missing out (FOMO)”, and going to extreme measures to ensure one achieves superior economic status. Consider award-winning Singaporean fiction author Catherine Lim's satirical characterization of *kiasuism*:

The person who possesses this attribute (henceforth referred to as the “kia-suer”) believes in the Principle of Perfect Balance, that is, any amount of money or effort expended must be perfectly matched by the returns for it; hence if the “kia-suer” pays \$4.95 for a set lunch in which six items have been advertised and he suddenly remembers after he has left the restaurant, that the sixth item, say, cucumber pieces in tomato sauce, had not been served, he will return for it, or insist that a proportionate sum be deducted from the bill. Only after this is done, will he feel satisfied. If he pays his Filipina maid a salary of \$200 and discovers that the work she is doing is worth less than that of other Filipina maids drawing the same salary, he will devise all manner of ways to redress the imbalance; for instance, he may get his maid to help out at his mother-in-law's noodles shop on Sunday. The redressing of imbalance works only in one direction: It does not operate in situations where the kia-suer finds that he is getting more than his money's worth. For instance, if he discovers that for the meal for which his \$4.95 entitles him to six items, the absent-minded waitress puts on his table eight items instead of six, or charges him for two persons when she should charge him for three, he says nothing and lets the matter rest. With regard to the affective or emotive component of *kiasuism*, the kia-suer suffers a wide range of uncomfortable feelings when he discovers that he has not got his money's worth. The feelings range from mild disap-

pointment with himself for having been foolish and unwary to acute distress that will go away only when he has redressed the wrong. A multimillionaire was known to have been apoplectic with rage when he discovered that he had over-reimbursed his chauffeur by \$1.30; a housewife was unable to sleep the whole night through agonising over the fact that she had paid the taxi-driver three dollars for a ride that would normally cost \$2.10. The same housewife, only the week before, was rejoicing over the fact that, owing to some slipup in the attachment of price-tags to clothes in a large departmental store, she had got a \$90 dress for only \$28. She had talked about it endlessly to her friends who then went to the store but found, to their intense disappointment, that the price-tags had been correctly attached this time. (Lim, 2009, p. 280–281)

Kiasuism is pervasive within Singaporean culture. Most Singaporeans self-identify with traits of *kiasuism*, which is related to being hardworking or a form of competitive behavior that stems from a fear of missing out (Chia et al., 2015). Having also inspired a franchise of comic books and television show adaptations, the *Mr. Kiasu* comic books were in much of Singapore's history the only local comic series to enjoy mainstream popularity. Extensive coverage in the state media was dedicated to this cultural phenomenon, even being a policy concern of the government for its potentially adverse impacts on tourism (Ho et al., 1998).

Signs of the meritocratic culture are reflected in Singapore's popular culture, most obviously in domestic films. The best manifestation of this value is by the most successful ever Singaporean film, the 1998 *Money No Enough* (which inspired a 2008 sequel) by filmmaker Jack Neo. The film is heralded as Singapore's first commercially successful film, holding the top grossing record until 2012, and inspiring several copycat films. The film chronicles an all-too-familiar experience of Singaporean life: the pursuit of money. Such a pursuit is at the front and center of the motivations of the three central characters Keong, Ong, and Hui. They are in a constant search for a quick buck, hopping from one moneymaking scheme to the next. A lifestyle of constant accumulation for material goods is portrayed to be dignified and held in high esteem. In contrast, the Hui character is that of the typical lower-class Singaporean. Throughout the film, he constantly expresses admiration and awe for his peers who are far more financially successful than him. When he tries to win the heart of the woman he fancies, he is encouraged (and convinced) to purchase an expensive mobile phone to impress her. He is also chided and chastised for being contented with a low-end blue collar "coffee shop boy" job and not aspiring to achieve more than his current lot in life. In Neo's films is a common theme of an excessive approval and appreciation for the well-to-do entrepreneur with a sharp business acumen. Similarly, this theme of Singaporeans being money-minded is captured in Lim's popular short stories:

This people in this country got a God, that people in that country got a God, they pray, they worship their God, they do good, holy things, but what is Singaporeans' God? I will tell you. It's money, money, money, money, money. That is the Singaporeans' God! (Lim, 2009, p. 299)

In another of Neo's popular films *I Not Stupid* (2002), again the meritocratic ethos of Singaporean culture is on full display, this time in its highly competitive education system. The film's characterization of Singaporean societal culture is clear: success in life is equated with grade achievement in school. Struggling middle school students are repeatedly lectured by their family and teachers that failure to do well in school would most certainly spell a lifetime of mediocrity. At one point in the film, a father sternly instructs his son to study hard to be able to secure a high-paying job in the civil service when he grows up. Singapore's education system, based itself on a meritocratic philosophy, streams students into different band levels where best-performing students are separated from the worst performing. In a bid to avoid placement in the underperforming stream, the *kiasu* mentality reflects heavily when parents compete against one another in a race to the bottom of subjecting their children to a range of tuition and enrichment activities to gain a competitive edge. Poorly performing students are seen as failures that eventually are shuffled into the Institute of Technical Education, a school where students are offered vocational technical training. The acronym ITE is spelt out as a joke "It's The End", suggesting that students with poor grades are doomed to be failures.

Two landmark films credited for pioneering Singapore's 1990s film industry revival with its record entry into the international film circuit are Eric Khoo's *Mee Pok Man* (1995) and *Twelve Storeys* (1997). Both films feature protagonists that tend to be socially outcasted and of low socioeconomic status. Set against the backdrop of Singapore's post-independence economic success, Khoo's destitute characters are positioned as having slipped through the cracks of the mainstream "Singapore Success Story". Indeed, a common theme among local literature writers is the featuring of this Singapore Success Story as the background of their story (Chua & Yeo, 2003). Ironically, even in stories of Singapore society's most impoverished, the endless pursuit of economic achievement is hitched to its core narrative. As De (2010) puts it, "People [Khoo's characters] are shown to be untiringly pursuing socioeconomic advancement through increasingly gainful employment and conspicuous consumption" (p. 201).

The Singapore Success Story is a theme that pervades much of Singaporean fiction, such as in literature pioneer Edwin Thumboo's famous poem *Ulysses by the Merlion*. In its final lines: "So shining urgent, Full of what is now" reflects the familiar theme of Singapore's preoccupation with economic growth and prosperity (Hayward, 2012). Similarly, this theme is the background of the film *Ilo Ilo* (2013), guiding the motivations of the film's characters.⁶ The film is set in Singapore during the 1997–1998 Asian financial crisis, depicting the story of an average-income family struggling through the economic depression. Despite having lost his job, the father character Teck continues to indulge in the Singapore Success Story by investing in stocks and buying lottery tickets, in hopes that he will create a reversal of fortune. He contemplates starting new business ventures that would require unrealistically high amounts of capital given the family's economic circumstances. He hides his job loss from his wife and is so ashamed of working in a blue collared security guard job that he conceals his uniform.

⁶ Singapore's first film to win an award at the prestigious Cannes Film Festival.

This pursuit of the possibility of striking it rich is similarly observed in other main characters. The wife, Hwee Leng, impressed by a speaker's get-rich schemes at a motivational seminar, immediately purchases his full catalog of DVD's and books, only to realize later that it was a scam. The 10-year-old son, Jiale, makes a hobby out of tracking the pattern of winning lottery numbers. When his unhealthy obsession with lottery numbers was discovered by his schoolteachers, he successfully evades punishment by bribing the discipline master himself with "winning numbers" from his scrapbook. In the film's climax, Jiale spends what little savings he has on a lottery ticket in hopes of preventing his maid from being retrenched. As Ho (2015) puts it, "Through a boy's 'unhealthy' preoccupation with 4-D, the audience can see just how entrenched the idea of material success is in Singaporeans' lives" (p. 179). She summarizes the film's main characters as "dangerously attached to capitalist and material understandings of success" (p. 183), which is a mainstay of the Singapore Success Story. In *Ilo Ilo's* depiction, the Singaporean drive to attain material success remains steadfastly strong even in the face of a financial crisis.

The belief in meritocracy within Singapore's society is by no means the only prevailing belief, nor has it been static and unchanging. As Weber claimed, there may be multiple spirits co-existing in the public domain at any one time, and these spirits are themselves interacting in complex ways. Recently, there has been grave concern about stratification in Singapore society along class lines (Puthuchear, 2018). Social research conducted shows that increasingly, there is less social mixing between those in public and private housing, and between those in "neighborhood" and elite schools (Chua et al., 2021). Interestingly, issues of class in Singapore's meritocracy may be understood with reference to a recent bestselling film, *Crazy Rich Asians*.

In *Crazy Rich Asians*, the dynamics between the protagonist Rachel Chu and the family of her boyfriend Nick Young serves to demonstrate much of the toxicity that may arise in a meritocratic society. Despite her status as an educated Western woman, she faces the disapproval of Nick's "old money" family due to her modest background. This toxicity is most expressed by her mother-in-law-to-be Eleanor, who subscribes to an elitist form of meritocracy, seeing Rachel's lack of wealth and prestigious lineage as shortcomings that prevent her from being a suitable partner for Nick. Eleanor's strict adherence to societal expectations and her attempts to protect her family's reputation demonstrate the excesses of a society where external markers of success are conflated with individual worth. At the same time, however, it may be possible to flip this interpretation: that Rachel exemplifies the very value of meritocracy itself, since she is after all a professor of game theory, an impressive achievement for someone of modest means, as opposed to Nick's family, where wealth is gained through *unearned* inheritance. Perhaps the critique of the film is not against meritocracy itself, but merely its excesses. Multiple readings of this successful film ensue, and whatever one takes from it, it is clear that concerns over class today resonate in the public sphere.

Whether these concerns about class divides may in future supersede Singaporeans' confidence in the meritocratic ethos remains to be seen, and is worth future research, but for the purposes of this paper, we take as given the premise that a belief in meritocracy remains entrenched in the public consciousness. What this

paper focuses on is the dualistic nature of Singapore's meritocracy in terms of its bottom-up and top-down variants. In the context of Chinese migration under British colonialism, a *culture of economic meritocracy arose as an emergent phenomenon*, but in the twentieth century, an additional layer of political meritocracy—where “merit” is narrowly defined by the state elites—was imposed.

The tension between both layers arises from fact that the bottom-up aspects of meritocracy set forth from the colonial era is at odds with the top-down approach introduced by the state. Importantly, economic meritocracy as evolved under the British is market-based and not imposed by a hegemonic political authority. This is best exemplified by the colonial *laissez-faire* economic structure, where the state did not pick winners and losers. In the context of economic development, such a culture facilitated the commercial flourishing of Singapore as a trade port. However, after independence, merit became narrowly defined by state elites. This served a crucial purpose for state-led development, for instance, the state's picking of industrial champions (such as GLCs) served to drive economic growth and capable civil servants in pilot agencies succeeded in long-term planning. However, this top-down approach has led to concerns over elitism, lack of democratic contestation, and diminishing returns in development. Consequently, I surmise that a renewed appreciation of relatively competitive (and diverse) approaches to merit may offer a more fruitful solution to these problems.

Bottom-Up Meritocracy Under British Colonialism

The pervasiveness of meritocratic beliefs in the Singaporean consciousness can be analyzed within a political economy framework. In other words, under what institutional arrangements did such beliefs become so pervasive and what has been the role of the state in shaping these beliefs? On one level, culture may be understood as emergent phenomena. This means that culture is a product of bottom-up evolution beyond the conscious design of any one party or entity. In fact, many social institutions today—money, language, moral principles—are themselves the product of bottom-up evolution (Ostrom et al., 1992; Mesoudi, 2011; Skarbek, 2016; Stringham, 2015). Thus, seen this way, a society's prevailing culture transcends the conscious control and direction of the state. However, it must also be acknowledged that states, in their arsenal of social control, also seek to manipulate culture. They engage in tools of rhetoric, discourse, and framing to maintain ideological, and thus political hegemony. Culture both shapes and is shaped by the actions of states.

Accordingly, Singapore's meritocratic culture has both bottom-up and top-down elements which reflect its unique political economy. In the first phase of its development, a meritocratic culture arose in a bottom-up fashion, meaning that ideas about merit were not pre-defined by political authorities and enforced in the same way as the PAP state did in the twentieth century. It was through the social interactions between the Chinese migrant community and the British class that cultural values around economic meritocracy became socially dominant, as a means of succeeding in a trade-based economy. This was in turn a product of the relatively market-based institutional framework established by the British. Under a regime of benign

neglect, culture was allowed to evolve in a relatively open, contestable environment, unlike in post-independent Singapore.

Since Singapore was sparsely populated prior to the arrival of the British in 1819, the political vision of its early governors naturally casts a long shadow over its institutional development. Particularly, Sir Stamford Raffles held a classical liberal vision of governance that led to Singapore being governed in a (comparatively) *laissez-faire* manner. To Raffles, Singapore was two things: a treasured British colony that thwarted the monopoly of naval trade then held by the Dutch in the eastern seas, and a sanctuary he hoped would one day be “the pride of the East” (Turnbull, 2009, p. 32). His intentions were clear in the very same year that he stepped foot in Singapore, as he wrote in a letter in June 1819: “Our object is not territory but trade; a great commercial emporium and a fulcrum whence we may extend our influence politically as circumstances may hereafter require”, and to develop “the utmost possible freedom of trade and equal rights to all, with protection of property and person” (*ibid.*, p. 38). Raffles’ bold vision paved the road to officially making Singapore a British possession in 1824. If the type of leadership colonial Singapore had then were indicative of the type of economic institutions that developed, there is some merit to looking at the kind of intellectual influences its leaders had. Raffles’ leadership,

...reflected the most advanced radical, intellectual, and humanitarian thinking of his day. The type of society he aspired to establish in Singapore was in many ways ahead of contemporary England or India... he established in Singapore a free port following the principles of Adam Smith and *laissez-faire* at a time when Britain was still a protectionist country. (*ibid.*, p. 50)

The classical liberal governance of Raffles was further consolidated in later years by subsequent leaders. This included William Farquhar who headed the helm as First Resident and Commandant of Singapore (1819–1823). The early Singapore port grew and prospered under Farquhar’s experienced leadership in the Melaka region. This marked the very beginnings where the poor and unknown fishing village started making its most radical transformations. However, Farquhar also went against Raffles’ instructions, legalizing gambling dens and sales of opium and alcohol to raise revenue. Coupled with his lax attitude to the slave trade among other administrative disagreements, this eventually led to a falling out between the two men, and he was replaced by John Crawfurd in 1823. Like Farquhar, Crawfurd too was aligned with Raffles’ strong free-market beliefs and advocated his *laissez-faire* policies likely harder than Raffles would have done so himself. Crawfurd made sure to keep the tariff-free port and abolished port charges, anchorage, and other fees. Crawfurd also came to a delicate agreement with Raffles who was opposed to the gambling houses. He decided to license gambling but regulate and tax it at the same time. Under his administration of 3 years, Singapore saw an unprecedented increase in trade and revenue.

The arrival of the British may be analyzed within the framework of institutional economics. According to institutional economics, political choices made in some critical junctures can push a nation toward a specific trajectory, and subsequently create an environment within which specific activities, norms, and patterns of interaction are further encouraged (Acemoglu et al., 2005). Furthermore, the values

being emphasized in such periods get crystallized and set the tone for further development (Lewis & Steinmo, 2012). In the context of Singapore, this was precisely manifested in the earliest constitutional framework, the 1823 Raffles Regulations, which articulated that “the Port of Singapore is a free Port, and the trade thereof is open to ships and vessels of every nation... equally and alike to all”. Thus, British policy, expressed through such rhetoric over the years, gave powerful impetus to and reinforced an environment within which cultural values centered around economic meritocracy were favored.

One important effect of British policy was not only that trade grew, Singapore also became a migrant city. From the 1830s to the late 1860s, Singapore’s total population quadrupled. Since then, Singapore’s population experienced a clear and sustained upward trajectory, alongside the growth of its trade revenue (Saw, 2012; Cheang, 2022b). One major aspect of this trend was the influx of Chinese migrants, who over the years grew numerically, but also in institutional importance, as they achieved economic and political prominence. The significance of the Chinese community in Asia is generally accepted; the cross-country business networks developed by the Chinese community still endure today and continue to dominate the Asian economy (Lee, 1988; Mackie, 1992, 1998; Brown, 2000; Gerke & Menkhoff, 2003). Accordingly, influential analyses of Asian development have recognized the role of East Asian and Confucian Chinese values (Berger & Hsiao, 1988; Tu, 1989).

Within the *institutional environment* of a trade-oriented territory, meritocratic entrepreneurialism as a set of values in the Chinese community was perpetuated. According to Edwin Lee (1991, p. 252), in an influential volume on Singapore’s history, “a Chinese man might have to work long years before he realized any improvement in his financial position, but the beauty is that he would go on working in pursuit of his dreams no matter how long it took”. In addition, through “a powerful desire to become his own master”, these immigrants believed that they could create a better future for themselves through hard work (Lee, 1991, p. 252). The belief in economic meritocracy connects the achievement of wealth with social honor, such that “for this group of people, becoming an entrepreneur almost seemed like a mission” (Chan & Chiang, 1994, p. 45). These cultural traits are, accordingly, important because of the central role that the Chinese played in Singapore’s historic development (Song, 2020).

Crucially, the emergence of such meritocratic values is not rooted in any inherent cultural essence unique to the Chinese ethnic group. Such an essentialist view was in fact adopted in the post-independent years by Lee Kuan Yew, who saw East Asians as racially superior (Barr, 2000, p. 185–210). Rather, the argument here is an *evolutionary* one, that in an environment where Singapore was historically and geographically oriented toward trade, a *selection mechanism* is operative, favoring cultural values that are oriented toward commerce. The wider institutional environment oversaw a process within which individuals and groups that imbibed a meritocratic ethos grew in economic and political importance.

A critical point to emphasize here is the benign neglect approach of British governance. Whatever its merits, the British did not social engineer Singapore the same way that the technocratic PAP did. The colonial authorities afforded a large scope of freedom to informal Chinese organizations to govern social life (Yen,

1986). Thus, the practices and values of economic meritocracy in the wider community grew in a bottom-up fashion outside of the conscious direction of higher political authorities.

Whatever the origins of the values of economic meritocracy, the Chinese community grew in prominence, and over time became partners of the British in joint commercial ventures. There was a fundamental convergence between both groups of not only economic interests but also shared values surrounding commerce, enterprise, and trade. This is why the academic literature has recently explained the flourishing of Singapore as a trade port as a product of an Anglo-Chinese joint venture *grounded on common interests and values* (Cheang, 2023). For the purposes of this paper, the importance of this convergence is that it acts as a self-reinforcing mechanism that further reproduces cultural values over time, well into the public consciousness of twentieth-century Singapore.

Of course, it should also be acknowledged that values also flowed from the British onto colonial society. In the context of Victorian Britain, values of free trade were ascendant in the public consciousness, and successes gained through economic competition were heralded as markers of virtue (see Searle, 1998 for one account of Victorian morality). Individuals like Stamford Raffles were steeped in this tradition of thought, and through imperial propaganda, public rhetoric, and socialization, these norms also experienced some transference from the colonial metropole to the colony of Singapore.

The acknowledgment of this view, however, does not compromise my wider argument. To reiterate, I adopt a framework of institutional development which stresses the role of cultural entrepreneurs and the co-evolutionary relationship between both culture and institutions. According to influential economic historian Joel Mokyr (2013, 2016), cultural entrepreneurs in critical junctures spread ideas in society, and thereby, contribute indirectly to the formation of a wider public culture. For our purposes, Stamford Raffles' declaration of Singapore as a free port was an act of cultural entrepreneurship. This was further reinforced by subsequent colonial governors, community leaders, and even individual migrants who reinforced the meritocratic ethos of Singapore society (see Cheang, 2023 for a recent account).

The *bi-directional interaction* between the British (the official governors) as well as the Chinese community (the dominant social group in society) is thus key for our analysis. Crucially, on a wider scale, the spread of these ideas interacts with institutions in an *evolutionary* way that defies intelligent design. So even if colonial society received ideas from the colonial Britain, this transference is part of a wider institutional fabric where other forces were also at play. Thus, my account is bottom-up in the sense of being a "complex, undesigned process" where individuals introduce changes to society at the margins, and through cumulative adaptations, macro-level change occurs (see Aldrich et al., 2008 for an influential explanation). The key point is that the British in colonial Singapore adopted a rather *laissez-faire* approach to governance where they did not explicitly pick winners and losers. In any case it never had the state capacity to penetrate colonial society in a deep way. It was a stance of benign neglect, which facilitated a bottom-up process of development, whether cultural, institutional, or economic.

Top-Down Meritocracy and Authoritarian Governance in Singapore

The economic success that occurred under the relatively liberal governance of the British had to be sustained in the aftermath of World War 2. However, this open economic strategy was continued under authoritarian governance led by the dominant People's Action Party (PAP), which has dominated Singapore politics ever since. The historical critical juncture of the years prior to Singapore's 1965 independence, and the years following, oversaw a process of institutional bricolage, where the economic policies of open trade and markets were grafted on authoritarian political institutions. Such a combination is usually unstable, since economic growth can lead to creative destruction in the political realm and foster competitive pressures (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2000). However, Singapore seems to have squared this circle.

We argue that what enables this unique institutional arrangement is a brand of political hegemony forged through discourses, rhetoric, and ideology. This is an important insight in political science: state power does not just rest on the force of arms but also on discursive-rational grounds, which accordingly favors an interpretive methodology (Eklundh & Turnbull, 2016). We show that the Singapore state uses meritocracy as a discourse to focus social energies toward economic production away from political dissent, and present itself as a natural and desirable agent of the national good.

The political dominance of the People's Action Party since 1965 is demonstrated electorally. In General Elections in 1968, 1972, 1976, and 1980, the PAP enjoyed complete walkover victories. Although the complete monopoly was lost in 1981, serious interparty competition in Parliament has practically been non-existent. Given its long parliamentary dominance, the PAP's political rhetoric does have large impacts on Singapore's culture. Unlike most liberal democracies where one can find various competing political ideologies in mainstream discourse and a vigorous contestation in the realm of culture, Singapore's political landscape is far more politically homogeneous.

The party's dominance in the ideological-cultural realm is enhanced by various mechanisms, such as social engineering, state media, and public schooling, ensuring that competing narratives are shut from the public eye (George, 2012). Informally, the government regularly uses the "out-of-bound markers" term to denote the acceptable topics of political discussion, where topics of race, religion, political corruption, and freedom of speech are described as taboo. Thus, the Singapore state's political hegemony allows it to employ discursive strategies, which in turn consolidate its power. This recalls the insight that state power is discursively legitimated (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), allowing elites to portray themselves as necessary for the national good. A focus on such exercises of hegemonic discourses allows us to understand Rajah's (2012) seminal work on Singapore's authoritarian *rule by law*, drawing on Foucaultian concepts, on how "rule of law" discourses are employed to simultaneously achieve growth but also restrict rights.

Accordingly, one of the key facets of state-created narratives in Singapore revolves around the ideology of political meritocracy. There is mutual reinforcement between the discourse of political meritocracy and political hegemony, both build on and

enable each other. The latter allows the state to push this discourse into the national consciousness. This discourse in turn feeds into the elites' carefully curated aura of being the technocratically oriented leaders best positioned to carry the nation forward, a phenomenon described by Ezra Vogel (1989, p. 1053) as "macho-meritocracy". Lee Kuan Yew demonstrated this phenomenon in his infamous remark, which equates national success with the heroism of the elite technocratic class:

The main burden of present planning and implementation rests on the shoulders of some 300 key persons. They include key men in the PAP, MPs and cadres who mobilise mass support and explain the need for policies even when they are temporarily inconvenient or against sectional interests. Outstanding men in civil service, the police, the armed forces, chairmen of statutory boards and their top administrators - they have worked the details of policies set by the government and seen to its implementation. These people come from poor and middle-class homes. They come from different language schools. Singapore is a meritocracy. And these men have risen to the top by their own merit, hard work and high performance. Together they are a closely-knit and co-ordinated hard core. If all the 300 were to crash in one jumbo jet, then Singapore will disintegrate. (National Archives of Singapore, 1971)

Such discourses of meritocracy are not merely empty words but are institutionalized on various levels to further entrench political power: through socialization, through political recruitment and through the creation of the "developmental worker." These three mechanisms collectively explain why meritocracy in Singapore is.

... enshrined and celebrated as a dominant cultural value in Singapore, it has also come to serve as a complex of ideological resources for justifying authoritarian government and its pro-capitalist orientations. (Tan, 2008, p. 11)

Meritocracy and Political Hegemony

The *first and arguably most important mechanism* is the employment of the ideology of political meritocracy in political recruitment and the design of institutions. The education system and the political apparatus are designed in such a way as to recruit top talents to fill technocratic leadership positions. Politicians who fill top political appointments or key positions in government-linked companies (GLCs) typically display an exemplary academic background, having studied in top-tier overseas universities on prestigious government scholarships that are availed only to the cream of the crop. Academic achievement and professional expertise are singled out to be the defining attributes of Singaporean meritocracy. A discourse of political meritocracy pervades the entire system, where academic merit is seen to be deserving of being rewarded by government scholarships and lucrative positions. The meritocratic ideology of the PAP parallels a market allocation mechanism for mobilizing the best labor into the state bureaucracy (Sai & Huang, 1999). Indeed, the PAP has long pursued a policy of recruiting the brightest and most talented into

the public sector as part of a strategy to cultivate an elite technocratic class that can run the machinations of the state.

Meritocratic recruitment is of course not unique to Singapore, but what is significant here is the underlying philosophical assumptions held by the elites. Largely flowing from Lee Kuan Yew's personal worldview, there is an underlying belief in a natural hierarchy where intelligence is unequally distributed. This is also reflected in racial-cultural terms, where Chinese and East Asians are considered more naturally gifted (Barr, 2000, p. 185–210). The implication is then that superior governance may be achieved by constructing the ship of state around these talented elites in society (Barr, 2000, p. 97–136; Mauzy & Milne, 2002, p. 51–65).

Accordingly, elitist technocracy is institutionalized in the internal structure of the ruling party, where an elite cadre of just several dozen individuals hold supreme authority, and which has even been likened to the nocturnal council in Plato's *Laws* (Cotton, 1993, p. 12–14). Decision-making ought to be conducted by such elitist means because democracy is seen to be irrational. Lee Kuan Yew made the following declarations:

'One-man one-vote' is a most difficult form of government. From time to time the results can be erratic. People are sometimes fickle. They get bored with stable, steady improvements in life, and in a reckless moment they vote for a change for change's sake (Lee, 1984).

When people say, 'Oh, ask the people!', it's childish rubbish ... They say people can think for themselves? Do you honestly believe that the chap who can't pass primary six knows the consequences of his choice when he answers questions viscerally on language, culture and religion? ... we would starve, we would have race riots. We would disintegrate (Han et al., 1997).

While one should not draw too much from quotes like these, Lee's statements capture a general skepticism within Singapore's political thought about the tendency of mass democratic participation to devolve into the politics of irrationality. This concern is further coupled with the existential fear that Singapore is relatively small and cannot afford to take too many political risks, as articulated by Former Prime Minister Goh (1986, p. 16)'s comment on the risks of multiparty politics: "Britain is a supertanker. She can zig-zag, without capsizing. Singapore is a sampan. If we zig-zag, we would surely sink".

The overall sentiment, a throwback to Plato's aversion to democracy is that far better to have a class of leaders selected by merit than to be governed by the irrationalities of democracy. Singapore's public service is, accordingly, structured along the lines of political meritocracy, with lucrative scholarships given to attract talent, and high ministerial salaries to reward meritocratic elites and incentive good performance (Wong, 2013). This public service system is itself part of a wider "ideological resource to maintain the PAP establishment's hegemony" in an authoritarian context (Tan, 2013, p. 316). Of course, Singapore is not as repressive as it was in the early days, with some democratic steps taken in recent decades. However, as compared to most Western democratic countries, civil liberties in Singapore are not as well protected, with persistent limits on expression, assembly, and opposition politics (Freedom House, 2023).

To add a sense of existential urgency to such a discourse, it is said that the challenges of contemporary governance faced by Singapore require the wise and stable hand of technocracy. As political scientist Kenneth Paul Tan (2008, p. 15) writes, “the PAP conceives of its meritocratic practice mainly in terms of technocratic government, since the problems faced by modern societies are technical and complicated in nature, requiring specialized knowledge for effective policymaking. A proficient and bureaucratic elite made up of professionals and specialists, therefore, is what the PAP believes Singapore needs to survive and prosper”.

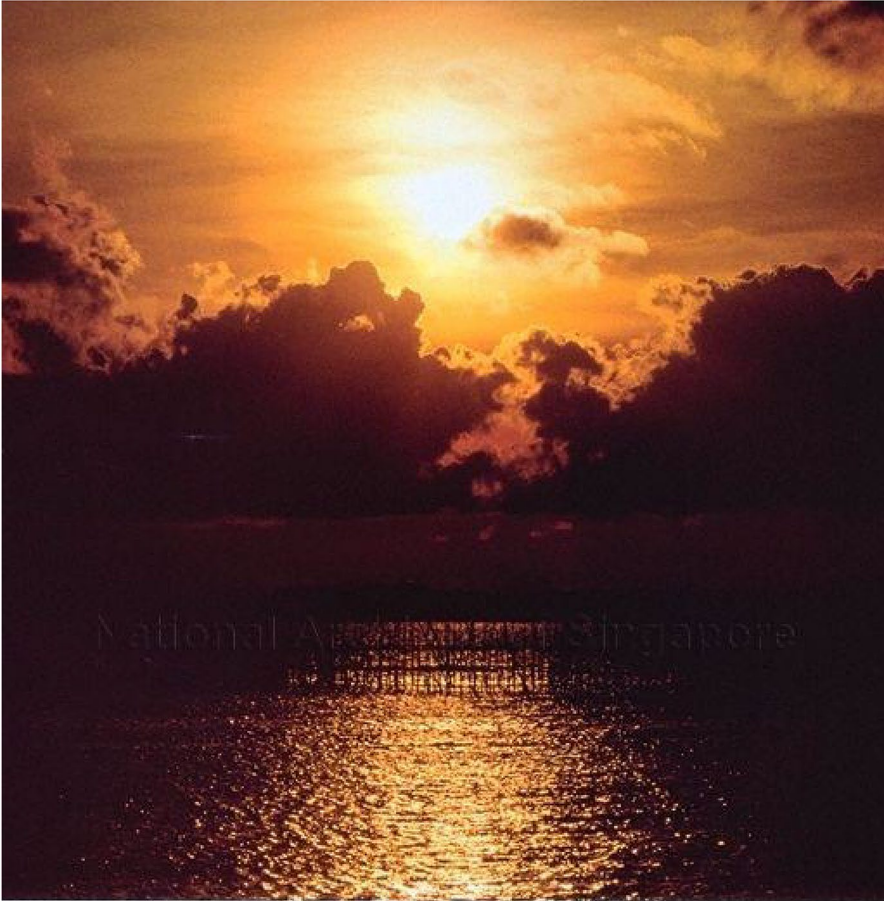
The necessity of technocratic leadership to steer the ship of state through uncertain waters closely feeds into the *second mechanism*, which is the elevation of the collective good over the individual. The idea is that individual interests, rights, and liberties are to be subordinated to that of the collective, in order to forge a national solidarity necessary for good policies to be enacted. This does not mean that individual interests are unimportant, which is still the purpose of good government, even in authoritarian Singapore. The point here, expressed in the first shared value below, is that Singapore’s political culture is not grounded on individualism unlike in liberal democratic countries. Over the years, the PAP forged a communitarian ideology as a bulwark against what was perceived (or politically framed) as the “excesses of liberal individualism” (see Chua, 2018 for a systematic treatment). From a technocratic perspective, Singapore also looks unfavorably on the sort of liberal mechanisms in the West—such as pressure groups, media scrutiny, and prolonged deliberation, which may hinder swift and effective policy implementation.

A key development came in 1991 when the state, through what is known as the “shared values” discourse, articulated its stance on the priority of the collective over the individual. Importantly, in the late 1980s, the government published a Green Paper on National Ideology, a White Paper on Shared Values in 1991, and several government-linked academic research papers on the same topic (Quah, 1990) (Fig. 1). These papers articulated five core values which have since been a part of social studies education in Singapore, a compulsory subject taken by all high school-age students. These five principles are the following:

1. Nation before community and society above self
2. Family as the basic unit of society
3. Community support and respect for the individual
4. Consensus not conflict
5. Racial and religious harmony

These shared values, which emphasize a discourse of solidarity over individualism, is justified to be necessary for national progress, which in turn is the prerogative of the technocratic elites in government (mechanism 1). According to Former President of Singapore, Wee Kim Wee,

putting the interests of society as a whole ahead of individual interests has been a major factor in Singapore’s success...If Singaporeans had insisted on their individual rights and prerogatives, and refused to compromise these for



National Values of Singapore

Our Shared Values

- NATION BEFORE COMMUNITY AND SOCIETY ABOVE SELF
- FAMILY AS THE BASIC UNIT OF SOCIETY
- COMMUNITY SUPPORT AND RESPECT FOR THE INDIVIDUAL
- CONSENSUS, NOT CONFLICT
- RACIAL AND RELIGIOUS HARMONY

<p>我们的共同价值观</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 国家至上 社会为先• 家庭为根 社会为本• 彼此扶持 尊重个人• 求同存异 协商共识• 种族和谐 宗教宽容	<p>SUSILA RAKYAT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• NEGARA MENDAHULUKI KALAM• MASYARAKAT MENDAHULUKI DIRI• KELUARGA TUNJANG MASYARAKAT• TERBUKA BAKTI DAN SOKONGAN• MASYARAKAT KEPADA INDIVIDU• PERMUAFAKATAN BUKAN PERTEKAPAN• KERAMHOSAN KAUM DAN AGAMA	<p>நம் பொது மதிப்புகள்</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• நாடுமுன் • சமூகம் முன்• குடும்பம் • சமூகம்• ஒன்றுக்கொன்று ஆதரவு• மரியாதை• மதமும் மொழியும்• ஒன்று சேர
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Fig. 1 Ministry of Information and the Arts, 1994. Source: National Archives of Singapore

the greater interests of the nation, they would have restricted the options available (Thio, 1991, p. 3).

Why does official discourse consistently tie national success to solidarity? The reason is found in the nature of developmental states, which rely on performance legitimacy and use their state capacity to forge a national consensus over growth (Chu, 2016; Haggard, 2018). The citizenry as a whole must buy into the national mission of growth and make the necessary sacrifices asked for by the state—called a “solidaristic vision” (Loriaux, 2019) or a “developmental mindset” (Thurbon, 2016).

Accordingly, a related third mechanism is the creation of the “developmental worker” through the state’s discourse of national development. Political discourses of the PAP sought to mobilize citizens to focus their energies on economic production and hard work, rather than political activity. This has been described as the creation of the “developmental worker” central to understanding Singapore’s political economy (Sung, 2006). In fact, it carefully constructs its institutions to exact social control to maximize economic growth. One example is the way the labor class in Singapore has historically been heavily disciplined with early union leaders arrested and labor issues regulated through elite-controlled institutions. The disciplining of the labor class is intended to produce a compliant society necessary for economic stability and to participate in the national economic plans (Tremewan, 1996). This is also achieved through other mechanisms, most significantly the education system, where academic success is rewarded with favorable positions in the state apparatus, which serves to mentally conflate the achievement of individual merit with the country’s national goals. The final intended effect is to discipline the citizenry and channel their energies toward being productive economic assets allocated toward the predefined ends of the developmental state. In sum, social energies are directed toward economic production but deflected away from political contestation.

Conclusion

What explains the longevity of the Singapore model, particularly the resilience of its authoritarian developmental statism, in a region where many other nations have embarked on post-development democratic consolidation? I argue that the PAP state has managed to do so through successfully legitimating its unique brand of meritocracy, where market-based, competitive elements inherited from the British are selectively retained for economic reasons, but at the same constrained within an overall technocratic and elitist form of political meritocracy.

A culture of economic meritocracy had spontaneously evolved during the British colonial era, outside of the conscious design of any political authority. The bottom-up nature of this culture, coupled with the liberal institutions laid down by the British, facilitated rapid economic development. However, in an act of institutional bricolage, the technocratic elites in the post-war era retained significant elements of this meritocratic culture for growth reasons, but at the same time shaped it to serve its own purposes. In post-independence Singapore, political meritocracy has become an ideological resource actively cultivated to sustain political hegemony and

forge consensus over the technocratic policies of the developmental state. The cultivation of this ideological resource allows for the *resilience* of the developmental state model in Singapore even as others in Asia have transcended it.

The analysis in this paper is relevant to contemporary socio-economic challenges in Singapore. Even though Singapore has achieved tremendous and rapid economic growth, there have been concerns about its structural weaknesses. Notably, there has been concern over weak entrepreneurial innovation.⁷ Even though aggregate indicators such as the Global Innovation Index create the impression that Singapore performs well, the problem is that the high amounts of government funding do not efficiently translate into tangible outcomes. In other words, “Singapore produces less innovation outputs relative to its level of innovation investments” (World Intellectual Property Office, 2019, p. 3). This also corroborated the only issue of the Creative Productivity Index which ranks Singapore as the worst in Asia (Asian Development Bank & Economist Intelligence Unit, 2014). A comparative analysis on creative industries performance with Hong Kong, Singapore’s economic twin, reinforces the point. The most recent attempt to date shows that despite almost nonexistent state support, Hong Kong exported 12 times more creative outputs than Singapore did in 2005, a gap that has since closed but remains at 2.74 times more in recent years (Cheang, 2022b, pp. 249–296). Significantly, Singapore, despite concerted funding for the arts, has never managed to grow a comparable music industry like Hong Kong’s famed Cantopop, which emerged to prominence with little state support (Chu, 2017).⁸ To explain these deficiencies, scholars have argued for a need to look beyond aggregate indicators and focus on the (1) underlying composition of innovation activities as well as the (2) cultural framework that influences it. In terms of *composition*, it has consistently been shown that most innovation activities in Singapore are driven by large firms and government-linked corporations, both of which crowd out local small-medium enterprises (SMEs).⁹ This crowding out effect occurs mainly because the state has entrenched an MNC-intensive model of development since the 1960s, and since then, larger firms dominate factor markets and enjoy privileged access to land, labor, and capital (Rikap & Flacher, 2020; Audretsch & Fiedler, 2022; Cheang & Lim, 2023). An additional *culture-based argument* is instructive. Here, the idea is

⁷ Entrepreneurship and innovation are connected but conceptually distinct. Productivity, a concern in Singapore, is also related to both. Productivity refers to the value added of factor inputs, i.e., how efficiently resources are used. Innovation refers to a higher-order quality of discovering and creating new production techniques, goods and services, and economic ideas. Entrepreneurship refers to the alertness to, creation, and seizing of profit opportunities (Holcombe, 2007). Crucially, it involves judgments made under uncertainty (Foss and Klein, 2012). Entrepreneurship is crucial for both productivity and innovation improvements since entrepreneurial judgment contributes to new production techniques and consumer products.

⁸ It should be noted that Hong Kong’s superior performance vis-à-vis Singapore is most stark in the pre-1997 period, and has waned in recent years due to internal domestic problems. A recent comparison of innovation policy, however, shows that despite Hong Kong’s recent challenges, “local private companies are still dynamic and have good innovation potential. The number of firms with R&D in Hong Kong in 2012 was more than six times that in Singapore. In particular, majority of them have performed *self-financed spontaneous innovation that is not backed by the government*, which forms a good base for Hong Kong to draw on for the development of innovation economy” (Wang, 2018, p. 406).

⁹ This is evidenced by SMEs being less productive than larger counterparts, thus dragging overall productivity performance in Singapore (Auyong, 2016).

that the culture of enterprise in Singapore is stunted due to a preference for lower-risk occupations and due to authoritarian social controls, which have chilled creative expression (Lee & Lim, 2004; World Economic Forum, 2019; Cheang, 2022a).

Economic innovation is by no means the only policy challenge in Singapore. More recently, there are also concerns that Singapore's meritocracy has led to class divides and socio-economic inequality (Vadaketh & Low, 2014; Teo, 2018). Regardless of the issues being considered, this paper contends that for better understanding, it is important to consider the wider institutional environment within which meritocracy is defined. Arguably, these contemporary problems stem from the monocentric nature of meritocracy in Singapore, where the state has foisted onto society a *specific vision of what merit ought to entail*. The PAP's idea of merit is typically academic, masculine, individualist, industrial—values befitting Singapore's "macho-meritocracy". An unequal playing field naturally results. Unsurprisingly, segments of the population who do not conform to such a vision are disadvantaged: SMEs crowded out by the state-linked MNCs, the creative sector eclipsed by industrialism, entrepreneurial innovation hampered by top-down economic strategies, as well as those who are not as "self-reliant". These points are not to say that meritocracy ought to be discarded—clearly it has contributed to Singapore's development—but that the constitutive elements of "merit" itself need to be subject to evolutionary competition, where diverse voices get to negotiate its meaning.

Declarations

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Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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