

**"Disabled people's struggle for merit in meritocratic Singapore"**  
**Meng Ee Wong, Nanyang Technological University**  
**International Disability Rights Affirmation Conference 2021**  
**November 26**

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[2021/11/26 17:29] Carolyn Carillon: Hello everyone.

Today's presentation is being transcribed so those without audio or who require text only can participate in real time. The presenter may also use a teleprompter (speak easy) in local chat.

A little explanation about this service.

Voice-to-text transcriptionists provide a translation of the key ideas discussed, NOT a word for word transcription.

Voice-to-text services provide an in-the-moment snapshot of ideas and concepts, so that those who are unable to hear or to understand the audio program are able to participate in real-time.

You will see the transcription in local chat.

Transcription is provided by Virtual Ability, Inc.

The transcriptionists are:

Carolyn Carillon

LoriVonne Lustre

The speakers will be identified by initials as they speak.

The following initials in the transcription record will identify the speakers:

MEW: Meng Ee Wong (jazzingooner)

<<transcription begins>>

[2021/11/26 17:32] wanhing13 Resident: Good day and welcome to the final session of the International Disability Rights Affirmation Conference.

I'm Wan. I do freelance work. I like to do gardening in real life. I plant papaya trees.

Today I'd like to introduce Dr. Wong Meng Ee from the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University in Singapore.

He researches and teaches about special and inclusive education, assistive technology, disability studies and teacher education.

Dr. Wong recently published a book titled "Special needs in Singapore: Trends and Issues."

His talk is titled: "Exploring the impact of meritocracy in Singapore. Implications for Persons with Disabilities."

He is exploring how people with disabilities address the challenges they face in Singapore's meritocratic culture.

Audience, please hold your questions and comments to the end,

Please do not interrupt Dr. Wong, who is new to Second Life.

He will answer questions at the end of his session.

Now let us welcome Dr. Wong.

[2021/11/26 17:41] Carolyn Carillon: MEW: Thank you for your patience

Firstly, I want to thank Gentle for inviting me

This is my first SL conference

and it's a pleasure to be here

I also want to thank Mook and Wan for helping me

This is totally new for me (laughs)

It's morning in Singapore

I appreciate those of you who are staying up late

So, welcome

I thought I'd share issues on meritocracy in Singapore

This comes from the book published in August 2021

I'll paint a background and walk through how meritocracy is understood and its impacts on persons with disabilities

You should see a picture of a fishing village

A simple idyllic fishing village

This represents old Singapore going back hundreds of years

Basic economy

Fishing being a source of income

This slide represents present Singapore -- high skyscrapers

If you're a Formula 1 fan, you'll recognize this

Since Singapore hosted the first night race

So we've seen a transformation

People have described it as an economic miracle

We had no natural resources

The government believes in its people as a natural resource

So with limited resources, the transformation has been significant

We're a top economic power

In 1965 the GDP was US\$517; now it's \$65,641

per capita

Much of the success is attributed to its people

And education

The literacy rate is above 97%

We've moved from education for the masses to education to prepare students for international competitions

Math Olympiads, physics Olympiads, etc

Competing with other countries

We've done well

Earning medals

For an education-focused country, we can celebrate

Looking at employment for the blind

It was a contradiction

Singapore has done well

But what about persons who are disabled

Specifically blind

What opportunities are there?

Telephone operator

Telemarketing

Busker

Selling goods in the markets

Some of these jobs have assumptions about what blind people are believed to be good at

For example, a masseur

It's assumed they're good with their hands

Do blind people aspire to work in these areas?

How are disabled people to find opportunities beyond areas that would be associated with them?

What is meritocracy?

It's a system that rewards hard work, ability, talents

Instead of previous systems

Aristocracy, patronage

Where resources are at the top

Or where a business person helps another business person with the expectation of a return favour

Or nepotism where families work in the same company and get special favours

Meritocracy stands clearly as an attractive system to embrace

Michael Young was an MP in Britain and wrote a book in the late 1950s

He wrote a satire about meritocracy

If left unchecked, people who have talent & have worked hard

IQ + hard work = success

If left unmanaged, it's a dystopia because the masses would revolt

A fully operational meritocracy seems to take us back to an aristocratic system

I've taken this quote from Tan

He lays in a political dimension

With talent and brains and intelligence, it's a good way to identify leadership within a country

Meritocracy sifts out able leaders from less able ones

In Singapore, the education system is one way to do that

At various points, we have exams

It helps to screen ability

Children at 12 years take a national exam

Then at 16 & 18

If students perform well, they get scholarships

The civil service identify potential candidates to join the government

This was a formula in place in Singapore

It remains today

But is it all straightforward?

Littler lays out five pitfalls

Littler points out that in a meritocratic system, there's an assumption merit is biological

■ The gifts you're given at birth

Determine your future

You can begin to see that in this simple understanding, there's some Darwinism

If you're blessed with good genes, you'll succeed in life

What about those who don't have those?

What's their trajectory in life?

■ Second, in terms of a competitive, linear & hierarchical system

If there are people at the top, there are people at the bottom

This fosters a ladder up to achievements

It has a narrow definition of what merit would be

It promotes self-interest

Not a community partnership

Here's a picture of Miss Universe

It's a winner-takes-all situation

■ Third, certain jobs and status are more valued

Success comes and goes

Definitions change

Arnold Schwarzenegger was popular in the 80s as an athlete

And movie star

Then governor

Or Bill Gates, Jeff Bezo

It's shifted from macho definitions to geeky ones

■ Fourth, preference for class values

Littler also critiques meritocracy to emphasize striving towards upper middle class values

There's a picture here that shows different tiers

The lower classes are hard at work with computers

The upper classes are drinking martinis and reading books

You see people climbing up and some are falling off

Littler suggests there's a desire to strive toward the top and bypass other tiers of society

This undermines the hard work ethic of some of the other classes

■ Fifth, meritocracy functioning as an ideological myth

Maybe talent and effort doesn't always determine social mobility

There are material and cultural influences

It's simplistic to say it's just hard work

Where is the place of disabled persons in a meritocracy?

If I go back to the competitive system of exams, chasing for results, productivity, KPIs (key performance indicators)

If we look at this list, it reflects how society has taken corporate language and culture

Citizens are expected to fall in line and generate results

If these aren't given to persons with disabilities, how will they function within a system that is highly competitive?

On the next slide, there's a picture of a big carrot

Showing how a family with a child with an IQ of 150 might have advantages depending on its family

One family might be affluent

And has support

In another family

The child might have other responsibilities

And is told they're not reaching their potential

The family setup may enhance the situation for certain students

The other challenge is there may be three additional influences

First, what is the value of a human?

In a hierarchical structure, we see in history and in certain cultures, it can manifest in a stacking order

Of how disabled people are viewed

Infanticide is practiced in some cultures

And in history

[Those in] State asylums and institutions are "rehabilitated"

so they can rejoin the economy or relieve their families

We saw genocide in WWII

Always during war, we see ranking and hierarchy becomes critical

When there's scarcity

How do people do that?

Do disabled people emerge as equal recipients of those resources?

Or are they seen as unworthy?

There's the notion of ableism

That's been covered in this conference

It questions the place of disabled persons in an ableist society

Looking at neoliberalist economies

With a more ableist society, there's a tendency

When the free market takes over, will disabled persons have access to resources?

Or will they be sidelined?

What about social support?

Will these be seen as threats to a fully free market economy?

If I look back in Singapore's history

We have travelled this journey

We've grown since 1965

From a fishing village to an economy with one of the highest GDP/capita in the world

Meritocracy has brought Singapore to its success

But what do we do with persons with disabilities going forward?

Will they be able to flourish in this system?

Do we keep that competition at the centre of developing our economy?

Or do we abandon it so we can have a more equitable society?

Do we welcome mediocracy as an alternative?

Here's a picture of Joseph Schooling

He's an Olympian swimmer

He beat Michael Phelps

A fantastic feat

He represents the notion of competition

As a young boy, he was the best swimmer in Singapore

There was nobody to compete with in Singapore so he moved to Florida in the US at age 14

He won in Rio

Competition has its place in forging success in sports and in life

Many achievements come from competition

But it's not all rosy

There's a picture here of someone wounded

There are many casualties in a competitive society

We celebrate people at the top  
But in getting to the top, casualties happen  
Moving forward, the government is aware of the pitfalls of meritocracy  
We see the government trying to address it  
We have a quote from Tharman Shanmugaratnam  
Who talks about having a broader meritocracy  
We also have a quote from our former PM, Mr. Goh Chok Tong  
Saying we have to be a compassionate meritocracy  
How do we get people to give back to society?  
How do we pull everyone in?

This is a picture of someone in a suit climbing up the ladder  
It shows the man with a saw  
As he goes up, he's sawing the bottom rungs  
Not letting others join the ladder  
It could be an interpretation of how a meritocracy could leave people behind  
And could be limited to a small number of people who could be successful but not everyone  
It's a cautionary picture  
The dangers of how a meritocracy can unfold  
We need to look at how we provide equal opportunities  
There's an inbreeding of those who are successful  
They think "I've made it. You didn't make it because you didn't try hard enough.  
You don't have the talents."  
It's destructive

This brings us back to the nature vs. nurture debate  
What school do I attend?  
Do I have access to enrichment classes?  
Do I have extra tuition?  
How do I prepare my children  
And put them ahead of the game?  
If meritocracy are the rules that operate the society, does it go so far as to determine  
who I marry  
To produce the DNA I want to produce in my offspring  
That gets in to eugenics, etc.  
What about the child with a disability?  
Does the child go into a mainstream school or a special school?  
Can the family afford therapy?  
Those are the kinds of discussions that impact families  
What about nature?  
Brings us to discussions about genetic counselling and abortion  
For parents who want to minimize the chances of having a disabled child

If someone goes to a mainstream school vs a special school, the qualifications are different  
Special schools tend to be more vocational  
Rather than academic  
Also what critical thinking courses are available?  
In different types of schools

Different schools focus on different curricula  
They view students' future roles differently  
In the UK, we have Theresa May talking about how she had aspirations to build  
Britain into a meritocratic society  
President Obama was the same  
People from different backgrounds could be successful  
In Singapore, the former education minister recognized that meritocracy is  
paradoxical  
He saw that people who already had resources had an advantage

Here's a picture of many ladders  
This captures the essence of the paradox  
Meritocracy is painted in a way where everyone has a chance  
But if we look at it, their ladders lead to different places  
We all climb our individual ladders and some of us have limited opportunities  
While Mr. Ong recognized the paradox, he still believes meritocracy is the best way  
forward  
It's not about capping the top but lifting the bottom  
In Singapore, we believe that talent needs to be encouraged and developed  
But at the same time, there's a recognition that the bottom rung needs to be helped  
to move to the top  
PM Lee's speech in 2018 talked about points that were couched in meritocratic  
ideals  
He recognized that people need opportunities  
And removing barriers to success  
The commitment remains strong  
To meritocracy  
But there's some recognition that we need to be more inclusive  
As a side note, the third point is open to interpretation: that every opportunity should  
be open to those with the right attitude and ability

In conclusion, we need to broaden access to education  
That's central  
If it's not, it's a double disability for those who are disabled  
We need to broaden the definition of merit  
Meritable contribution  
What is meritable  
And those who do not fit in to that ideal  
People who are different  
Or industrious  
Or helping themselves  
We need to be careful not to fall into the trap  
And finally, it's about building a stronger community with disabled persons in mind  
How do we do that?  
How do we define merit through an inclusive lens?  
How is it operationalized?

I've come to the end  
I'm happy to answer any questions if I can

[2021/11/26 18:39] Elektra Panthar: 🎵🎵🎵🎵 Applauds🎵🎵🎵🎵

[2021/11/26 18:39] Mook Wheeler: applause!

[2021/11/26 18:39] Varahi Lusch: 干得漂亮 Gàn Dé Piào Liàng (We celebrate your work!)

[2021/11/26 18:40] LV (LoriVonne Lustre): MEW: Thank you so much

[2021/11/26 18:40] Gentle Heron: Just a comment - I was once told that masseuse as employment for persons who are blind was appropriate because they could not see their undressed clients.

[2021/11/26 18:40] LV (LoriVonne Lustre): MEW: laughs! OK. I guess that would be helpful

[2021/11/26 18:40] Varahi Lusch: it was a very traditional job in the East specifically

[2021/11/26 18:39] Mook Wheeler: QUESTION: You pointed out Littler's 5 pitfalls, which include congenital endowments, linear and hierarchical systems. You mentioned a 97.1% literacy rate, and Singapore's educational rise to the top. It seems that Singapore has tried to achieve what it deems to be a playing field for equality and egalitarianism, but in doing so, has actually ignored the raw requirements of equity. For such an economic and educational power, research cannot be an issue. Costs cannot be an issue. Why do you think Singapore is not installing equity policies and infrastructure for its people? Could the reason be cultural? Something else?

[2021/11/26 18:41] LV (LoriVonne Lustre): MEW: thanks for the question Mook. Its a tough one

It might very well be cultural. Singapore is trying to move in this direction. We had very few resources to begin with

We are only having the conversation about equity in the past 5-10 years.

The investment in the economy was very single minded

The economy is very limited with few resources.

We had to attract foreign investment in the early years

It could now bring into focus nation building. In 2015 we celebrated 50 years. Social needs are now coming into focus.

[2021/11/26 18:45] Mook Wheeler: Yes, that makes sense. Thank you

[2021/11/26 18:45] Gentle Heron: QUESTION- Singapore is a self-acknowledged and widely-recognized meritocracy. How would you compare and contrast the features and issues that you mentioned in other countries that don't claim to be meritocracies, such as the U.S.?

[2021/11/26 18:46] LV (LoriVonne Lustre): MEW: Hmm.... Interesting Gentle. The US has a much longer history, and the runway to build meritocracy is much longer.

The promise of the American Dream is still seen as a way to a better life

When I think of Singapore in their early days -- people who came then had none of those same expectations.

The meritocratic ideal is something that is embraced by US politicians. Singapore is very young as a nation. They moved to a meritocratic society to avoid corruption in government

The founding political parties decided that the government had to be built on meritocracy, not the former ways like aristocratic

GH: Thank you very much



[2021/11/26 18:45] Varahi Lusch: COMMENT: Just something I experienced that your talk reminded me of; I subscribe to MasterClass for their streamed lessons created by famous talented people - I noticed quite early on that most of the people I have watched make a point of saying how supportive their parents were (esp a good relationship with their mothers). This indicates to me that their parents were not too stressed to be able to provide them with this secure upbringing and how, in that way, their child (the instructor) was given a big step up on the 'Meritocracy Ladder'!

[2021/11/26 18:47] iSkye Silvercloud (iSkye Silverweb): COMMENT: I was thinking about the sort of 'meritocracy' in the US vs. what is in Singapore and one difference is that in the US sometimes competency is ignored so we see people 'failing upward' and gaining access to positions of privilege or power while not being qualified for them because of connections - who they know.

[2021/11/26 18:52] Varahi Lusch: 謝謝 Xiè (Thank you)

[2021/11/26 18:52] Pecos Kidd: Well done! Very interesting.

[2021/11/26 18:52] Orange Planer: Thank you for speaking with us, Dr. Wong. We appreciate the effort you've made to be here.

[2021/11/26 18:53] Alisa Farshore: Thank you for so much

[2021/11/26 18:53] Mook Wheeler: Thank you Dr Wong, we hope you'll come back!

[2021/11/26 18:52] LV (LoriVonne Lustre): GH: Audience - thanks to Dr Wong and the challenges of multiple time zones

MEW: Thank you Gentle. It has been a pleasure. Thanks to Wan and Mook.

I would like to come back and explore SL. I would also like to view the presentations from earlier.

[2021/11/26 18:53] Orange Planer: WE would be HAPPY to see you, Dr. Wong.

[2021/11/26 18:54] LV (LoriVonne Lustre): MEW: laughs! This would be something to look forward too. Thank you.

[2021/11/26 18:53] Gentle Heron: Hi again, everyone. A long day full of information is over.

I want to remind us all that "Inclusion is intentional. It is about identifying and removing barriers so that everyone can participate to the best of their ability."

(a quote from The Inclusive Class)

Did you know that November is Gratitude Month? I'm grateful to so many people today.

First, thank you, audience, for sharing this conference with us. Without you and our wonderful presenters, the conference would not exist.

I want to especially thank the many Virtual Ability community members who have assisted in making today a success.

Our greeters are many people's first contact with the Virtual Ability community.

Thanks to Slatan for organizing the greeters, and to Vulcan, Orange, Shendara and Gemma for greeting our guests.

[2021/11/26 18:55] Orange Planer: On behalf of all greeters, you're welcome!

[2021/11/26 18:55] Gentle Heron: Thanks to our streaming team: Marcus and James.

Thank you to those who helped orient our presenters who were new to Second Life: Mook and iSkye.

Thanks to Ailgif for leading such an interesting discussion! I know that took a lot of preparation.

Thanks to the session introducers: Lissena, Don, Ruby, Anna, Sitearm, Alisa and Wan.

Secret and heartfelt thanks to the people working behind the scenes to make each session accessible:

AmazingCloud, Orange, Rhiannon and Pecos.

Special thanks and icepacks for their non-avatar wrists to our loyal transcriptionists: LoriVonne, Carolyn and Elektra.

Thank you to Mook and iSkye and Eme for all the support throughout the months leading up to today.

A reminder that we will archive the text chat and the videos of individual sessions for future review or if anyone missed a session.

Of course, thanks are always due to our amazing presenters. They all deserve another round of applause.

Thank you again, audience, for spending time with us today.

Again, a reminder to visit the posters on Healthinfo Island for additional information about Ableism.

Please stay safe everyone. Let's continue to enjoy our virtual world together.

[2021/11/26 18:56] LV (LoriVonne Lustre): Thank you everyone!

[2021/11/26 18:56] Eme Capalini: great job, thank you!

[2021/11/26 18:56] Mook Wheeler: Thank you, thank you!

[2021/11/26 18:56] Pecos Kidd: Great job everyone!

[2021/11/26 18:57] Alisa Farshore: Thank you everyone. Just a fantastic job :)

[2021/11/26 18:56] iSkye Silvercloud (iSkye Silverweb):

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[2021/11/26 18:56] iSkye Silvercloud (iSkye Silverweb): .-^!-. APPLAUSE

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[2021/11/26 18:56] iSkye Silvercloud (iSkye Silverweb):

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[2021/11/26 18:56] iSkye Silvercloud (iSkye Silverweb): .

[2021/11/26 18:56] LV (LoriVonne Lustre): <<transcription ends>>