"Disabled people's struggle for merit in meritocratic Singapore"
Meng Ee Wong, Nanyang Technological University
International Disability Rights Affirmation Conference 2021
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MEW: Meng Ee Wong (jazzingooner)

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[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.
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 mediocrity 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] Varahi Lusch: 干得漂亮 Gàn Dé Piāo 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. It's 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] 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: Hmmm... 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] 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!

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 18:56] iSkye Silvercloud (iSkye Silverweb): ☪(´·.¸.·´¨'º·'*·:*·:·.´·.¸.·´)☆
[2021/11/26 18:56] iSkye Silvercloud (iSkye Silverweb): .-'-. APPLAUSE APPLAUSE .-'-.☆
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[2021/11/26 18:56] LV (LoriVonne Lustre): <<transcription ends>>