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Journal of Confucian Philosophy and Culture, Vol. 41 (February 2024): 29-63
DOI: 10.22916/jcpc.2024..41.29
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Merit and Inequality: *Confucian and Communitarian Perspectives on Singapore's Meritocracy*

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Abstract

This paper compares criticisms of Singapore's meritocracy, especially against its impact on income disparities and class divisions, with Michael Sandel's critique of the meritocratic ethic in the United States. Despite significant differences in their history and politics, meritocracy has similar dysfunctions in both societies, allowing us to draw theoretical conclusions about meritocracy as an ideal of governance. It then contrasts Sandel's communitarian critique of meritocracy with recent Confucian promotion of political meritocracy and meritocratic justice and argues that the Confucian principle of "promoting the virtuous and talented" is different from the contemporary conception of meritocracy. Textual evidence indicates that a Confucian understanding of "merit" is contrary to the technocratic expertise of contemporary meritocracies. Furthermore, pre-Qin Confucian texts do not support a conception of justice that emphasizes individual desert; they address distributive problems from the perspective of needs and sustaining social relations. The texts also support limiting the reign of merit when it results in inequalities that cause suffering, inhibit personal cultivation of some groups, or undermine social relations. The paper concludes with an assessment of Singapore's on-going attempts to improve its meritocracy from a Confucian perspective.

Keywords: Confucianism, equality, egalitarianism, justice, meritocracy

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I. Singapore's Meritocracy and Its Discontents

Singapore became an independent republic in 1965, after two turbulent years as part of the Federation of Malaysia. A former British colony, this tiny nation-state with little natural resources and a culturally diverse, mostly immigrant, population has defied the expectations of many in its journey from third world to first within a generation. It is one of the four "little dragons" of Asia—together with South Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong—these are economies in the region with spectacular growth beginning in the 1980s, which has been credited to their Confucian cultural legacies.[1] Despite inheriting a Westminster style parliamentary political system and regular elections, Singapore has been governed by only one political party, the People's Action Party (PAP), since 1959. To many outsiders, limited political and civil liberties make Singapore an authoritarian state, and the lack of robust and fair competition among political parties renders its political system democratic only in name.[2] The late Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's Prime Minister for 31 years (1959–1990), was unapologetic about how his party governed Singapore and rejected liberal democracy as culturally unsuitable for Singapore. He justified what others consider authoritarian as necessary for social order, without which neither individuals nor society could thrive. He also emphasized the importance of educating the population, providing equal opportunities to motivate all to do well, and highlighted the qualities possessed by the people that contributed to the country's economic success: "the belief in thrift, hard work, filial piety, and loyalty in the extended family, and, most of all the respect for scholarship and learning" (Zakaria 1994, 114).

According to Daniel A. Bell and his co-editor Chenyang Li (2013, 3), Singapore's leaders do not defend authoritarianism as much as

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[1] Japan was also included in this "Post-Confucian thesis" (MacFarquhar 1980; see also Berger and Hsiao 1988; Chan 1993).

[2] The reality is of course much more complex, but a comprehensive and nuanced account and assessment of Singapore's politics is outside the scope of this paper. More detailed studies on Singapore include Lee (2008); Chua (2017); Mauzy and Milne (2002). For characterization of Singapore as "authoritarianism," see among others, Kampfner (2009, 5); Means (1996).

they are committed to meritocracy.[3] Historically, PAP's objection to implementing Malay special rights in ways that undermined an open and competitive economy was one of the issues that led to the separation of Singapore from Malaysia.[4] On its own, "Singapore set out to become a multiracial society of equal citizens, where opportunities are equal and a person's contribution is recognized and rewarded on merit regardless of race, language, culture, or religion" (Lee 2000, 254). The doctrine that power, jobs, income, statuses, and other valuable goods should be distributed on the basis of merit—defined in terms of educational, professional qualifications, and economic contribution—has played a key role in narratives of Singapore's development and nation-building (Ibrahim 1992).[5] The PAP founders believed in recruiting "the best and brightest" into the party and once the party came to power, it applied the meritocratic principle to the civil service, the military, government linked companies, and the education system (Mauzy and Milne 2002, 55–56; see also Bellows 2009). Lee (2000, 691) identified "the basic principles that have helped [Singapore] progress: social cohesion through sharing the benefits of progress, equal oppor-

[3] Although Michael Young has been credited with coining the term, "meritocracy," according to Young himself (1961, 21), "The origin of this unpleasant term, like that of 'equality of opportunity,' is still obscure. It seems to have been first generally used in the sixties of the last century [i.e. 1860s] in small-circulation journals attached to the Labour Party, and gained wide currency much later on."

[4] The majority Malays and a few tribal minorities in Malaysia are classified as bumiputra, "sons of the soil"; they make up about 70% of the population in 2022. Since the seventies, Malaysia has implemented various affirmative action policies in their favor, in education and the public sector, as well as the economy. Lee insisted that he had no quarrel with the special rights of the Malays, what he objected to was affirmative action which he firmly believed is an ineffective way to improve the Malay's economic situation (Han et al. 1998, 285–95). Article 152 of the Singapore Constitution (2020 revised edition) requires the government "to recognise the special position of the Malays, who are the indigenous people of Singapore, and accordingly it shall be the responsibility of the Government to protect, safeguard, support, foster and promote their political, educational, religious, economic, social and cultural interests and the Malay language."

[5] A reviewer pointed out that meritocracy is not the only idea that was talked about or operationalized in Singapore through the years. I agree that the ruling PAP's ideology, let alone ideas underlying various policies, cannot be reduced to meritocracy, which is not my intention. And the reviewer could be right that other ideas present in the Singapore system include a "Fabian-socialist sense of equality" and even some concern with a "sufficiency principle and priority to the worst off."

tunities for all, and meritocracy, with the best man or woman for the job, especially as leaders in government." When Goh Chok Tong took over the premiership in 1991, he reiterated that "The PAP . . . stood for multi-racialism, meritocracy, equality of all races, equal opportunities, fairness and justice" (Fernandez et al. 1996). Lee Hsien Loong (1998, 5), who became Prime Minister in 2004, also affirmed that "Meritocracy underpins the entire Singapore system." Similar statements are found in minister's speeches, readers' letters to the local press, among other forms of public discourses. It is no surprise that meritocracy is often referred to as Singapore's national ideology (Tan 2008; Chua 2017, 8; Low 2014, 44; Zhuo 2020a).

The first two decades of independence were the golden years of Singapore's meritocracy. Providing equal opportunities to education through subsidized, high quality public schools, and government scholarships for academic high performers who then entered the state bureaucracy, coupled with meritocratic recruitment and performance assessment, *inter alia*, contributed to the establishment of an efficient and relatively corruption-free civil service that has proven highly competent in implementing policies that facilitate economic growth. Lee Kuan Yew proudly declared in 1971 that Singapore's political leaders and top public servants came from poor and middle-class homes. "Singapore is a meritocracy. And these men have risen to the top by their own merit, hard work, and high performance" (Han et al. 1998, 315). Through the seventies and eighties, some children of working-class rose to the top of their professions or were appointed to prominent public office. Many were able to take advantage of the opportunities offered by a fast-growing economy to move up the social ladder.[6] Economic growth was accompanied by reduced inequalities in income and wealth. According to Thomas Bellow (2009, 26–27), "Singapore's socio-economic achievements have persuaded a majority of the citizenry the virtue of meritocracy as an objective and its implementation."

[6] According to a government occasional paper, 14.3% of Singaporeans born between 1978 to 1982 to families from the lowest 20% in household income made it to the highest 20% in household income, compared to 7.5% in the USA, 9.0% in the UK, 11.7% in Denmark, and 13.5% in Canada (Singapore Ministry of Social and Family Development 2018).

Despite its efficiency as a mechanism of resource allocation that ensures finding qualified persons for jobs, its incentive for people to do their best, and its apparent fairness in rewarding people on the basis of individual merit instead of their class, race, or connections, meritocracy has been publicly criticized more and more frequently in Singapore since the 1990s. The Singapore government prides itself on its adaptability to changing circumstances, so its meritocracy has not been static. However, the criticisms arose not because what used to work has been changed to something no longer acceptable to the same population. Neither is it just a matter of the citizenry's perception of the same system having changed, although it is true that the priorities and expectations of Singaporeans have changed, and a more vocal population has also been given more space for airing their opinions. The criticisms of meritocracy are the result of a complex dynamic. With the change in people's priorities and expectations, coupled with increasing competition within a system that still functions reasonably well in terms of economic and public service efficiency and effectiveness, some unforeseen consequences began to emerge. These raise questions about fairness and the promise of better life prospects for individuals and families. Although social mobility and fairness are different from meritocracy, which could be valued for itself, in most cases, including Singapore's, meritocracy is justified as a fair system that facilitates social mobility.

According to one critic, Singapore's meritocracy "unfairly penalized late developers and placed too much emphasis on academic success," and streaming in schools to sort students according to academic abilities measured by exam results inflate the ego of the gifted and traumatize the ego of those in the normal and monolingual streams (Tan and Chua 1990). The education system puts tremendous pressure on children and parents; it encourages competition that promotes selfish, me-first mentality and undermines social trust, cooperation, and cohesion (Low 2014, 50–51; Sum 2018; Goh 2019). Many believe Singapore's meritocratic system defines merit too narrowly, overemphasizes material rewards and rewards only those who directly contributed to economic growth, so it "leaves the majority of its people feeling not appreciated or respected for their individual talents and

contributions" (Koh 1991; see also Ibrahim et al. 1991; Yahya 2018a; Kuah 2019; Ho 2021). It leads to a society that "worships the rich and has less respect for those in the service industry, or blue-collar workers" (Yip 2018; see also Chua 2017, 54).

Some question the fairness of meritocracy in the absence of equal starting points and a level playing field: equal opportunities will not translate to equal or even fair outcomes not only because of differences in natural abilities, but also because of socioeconomic differences (Cheng 2017; Low 2014, 53). Research on the Singapore education system reveals that, despite the government's continuous efforts to enhance equality of opportunity, from eliminating discrimination to compensating for differences in family resources, the playing field has never been level. Furthermore there are signs that it has become less level over time due to the marketization and commodification of education and the rise of parents' involvement in their children's education (Tan 2018). Kenneth Paul Tan (2008, 10) goes so far as to call meritocracy "an ideology of inequality" that "also obscures how success often depends on factors other than individual merit, such as inheritance, marriage ties, social connections, cultural capital, opportunities arising from developments in the economy, and plain luck."[7] Concerns about intergenerational mobility slowing down and meritocracy in the age of global competition increasing the income gap between rich and poor have intensified since the 1990s, prompting warnings of Singapore becoming an "academic aristocracy" (Ibrahim 1993; Chua 2018).

The PAP government's decision in 1994 to benchmark the salaries of ministers and top civil servants to the salaries of top earners in the private sector in order to continue attracting talents to the public sector is consistent with the logic of meritocracy and the party's neoliberal outlook, as "the political and administrative leadership sees itself as part of an exclusive class of global meritocratic elites engaged in an intensely competitive knowledge driven economy" (Wong 2013, 295). The unpopularity of the decision was among the major issues in

[7] For a study of how Singapore's ideology of meritocracy legitimizes "systemic discrimination" in education as necessary, see Talib (2021).

the 2011 general elections, described as a "watershed election" in which the PAP's share of the popular vote fell to its lowest and opposition parties won the greatest number of seats since 1959, including one of the Group Representation Constituencies (with five seats in parliament) for the first time.[8] In the aftermath, the government reviewed and revised downwards the ministerial salary formula, "to reflect the ethos of political service and sacrifice" (Wong 2013, 294). Nevertheless, critics including some PAP members continue to see the scheme as "self-serving," "arbitrary, and smacks of elitism" (Wong 2013, 304). Many see elitism as an integral part of Singapore's meritocracy: in Singapore, "it is the belief in elitist principles that has in turn led to the establishment of a meritocracy based on educational achievement and job performance" (Mauzy and Milne 2002, 55).[9] Some defend elitism as justifiable provided it is a meritocratic system in which merit is broadly defined and that benefits the broad masses ("Elitism for the Masses" 1994; "Re-Inventing Singapore" 1997). Contrary to such complacency, Tan's (2008, 24) critique of Singapore's meritocracy as "a complex of ideological resources for justifying authoritarian government and its pro-capitalist orientations" expects the inherent contradictions between its egalitarian and elitist dimensions, disarticulated by the forces of globalization, to unravel meritocracy itself.

> As the economic and political elites are rewarded (or are rewarding themselves) with larger prizes, a vast and visible inequality of outcomes will replace the incentive effect with a sense of resentment,

[8] Introduced to ensure minority representation, each Group Representation Constituency must have at least one candidate/MP from a minority racial group (that is, not Chinese), this arrangement has also been criticized as another way the PAP has made it difficult for opposition parties to challenge its dominance, as most opposition parties have lacked the resources to make a credible bid for a Group Representation Constituency (GRC). For more on GRCs in Singapore, see Sun (2015).

[9] One might consider meritocracy a merit-based elitism and it is no coincidence that "Rise of the Elite" is part one of The Rise of Meritocracy (Young 1961). For an account of how the PAP has reinforced elitism in Singapore and the population's revolt against PAP elitism and use of the ballot box to express their discontent and disagreement with government policies, see Chua (2017, 54–57). See also "Re-Inventing Singapore" (1997). Meritocracy may be viewed as "merit-based" elitism. Daniel Bell (2006) did not distinguish between elitism and meritocracy; Cf. Tan (2009).

helplessness, social disengagement, and even envy among those who perceive themselves as systematically disadvantaged.

Public discussions of Singapore's meritocracy continue into the new millennium and came to a head in 2018, intensified by two studies of Singapore society that brought inequality under the spotlight.[10] The Institute of Policy Studies, a government think-thank, conducted a survey of 3,000 Singaporean citizens and permanent residents to study their social networks. The findings reveal that class differences, as indicated by the type of housing (public vs. private) and the schools attended (elite vs. non-elite), pose a greater barrier to social mixing than race or religion (Lydia Lim 2018).[11] Singapore's multicultural meritocracy has resulted in "a society segregated by winners and losers of meritocratic competition, who increasingly have entered their own orbits of social living with little mixing between them" (Chua et al. 2021, 2). While the common critique of meritocracy in Singapore is that it is not working as it should, sociologist Teo You Yenn (2018, 31) argues that it is "working exactly as it can." She points out that "Inequality, in fact, is a logical outcome of meritocracy" and there is misrecognition of meritocracy as a system that "rewards each individual's hard work when in reality it rewards economic and cultural capital passed on from parents to children" (Teo 2018, 26, 31).

Teo's (2018, 30) ethnographic study of low-income households living in rental flats in eight public housing neighborhoods in Singapore between 2013 and 2016 shows how some of those who are "left behind" and "unable to keep up" in the meritocratic system "are often stuck in these positions by a confluence of educational credentials that do not open doors, jobs that are paid poorly, and care gaps that are not adequately addressed." The tales of their poverty and the structural forces that produced it provide a vivid contrast to the do-

[10] The issue of meritocracy and inequality was debated extensively in parliament, mentioned in Ministerial speeches; panels of academics and public figures were organized on the topic, and many letters to the *Straits Times* expressed the public's opinion, not to mention the cacophony in social media (Hussain 2018).

[11] The study has been published as a monograph: Vincent Chua et al., *Social Capital in Singapore: The Power of Network Diversity* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

minant narratives of mobility and progress of Singapore's success story, showing readers that Singapore is "not one city but multiple cities."[12] For the successful, it is a cosmopolitan city "full of promise—entertainment, safety, solid infrastructure, security and mobility."

> For the low income, it is a city of limited movement—their lives are characterized by physical hardship and a strong sense that they will go nowhere. The qualities they and their children have—of resilience, independence, and generosity—have little legitimacy and standing in this shining global city. Furthermore, encounters between the winners and losers of Singapore's meritocracy often deepen the chasm separating them. Customers generally do not say hello to cashiers or make eye contact with them. Office workers and residents frequently sidestep cleaners in their buildings as if they are invisible. Drivers cut into the lanes of motorcyclists and delivery vans. Supervisors and customers speak to them loudly and in demanding tones. People do not consistently say please and thank you. . . . When one lives life as a low-income person, every single day is made up of micro instances of rudeness and disrespect. Every day is a struggle with (in)dignity. (Teo 2018, 193–94).

Beyond material differences, the national narrative of meritocratic mobility is grafted onto individual narratives of worth, as those who succeed through the system are considered "legitimately *deserving*," and by implication "those at the bottom have failed to be deserving" (Teo 2018, 26). Teo insists that to tackle the problem of poverty, it is necessary to disrupt these dominant narratives to disclose the misrecognition in Singaporean's understanding of their own meritocracy and its relationship to inequality.

The Singapore government has not been unmoved by public criticisms of meritocracy. It concedes that "unfettered meritocracy" has undesirable consequences. However, far from writing it off as a mistake or obsolete, it has defended meritocracy's positive contributions and continued relevance while acknowledging the social problems that have arisen from its promotion. In November 2018, the Ministry of

[12] Cf. Chua (2018): "There are two Singapores—a wealthy one where life is good and we live in our condo-and-car bubble, and another where life is a struggle."

Social and Family Development issued an occasional paper, the first of its kind, defending Singapore's track record in improving the lives of low-income and vulnerable families: "The Singapore system is not perfect, but it has performed better than most." It reaffirms the government's commitment to build "a fair, inclusive and caring society, which provides an environment for all Singaporeans to do well and progress" (Singapore Ministry of Social and Family Development 2018). However, Linda Lim (2018), Professor Emerita of corporate strategy and international business at the Stephen M. Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan, notes that, "One of the world's richest countries by per capita income, Singapore ranks absolutely and comparatively high in income inequality, by standard measures," and cites belief in meritocracy among the features that discourages more redistributive policies to reduce inequality. Improving social mobility through equality of opportunity is a key strategy in the Singapore government's endeavor to address income disparity and social stratification. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong maintained that safeguarding social mobility is more important than reducing inequality. He reminded Singaporeans that a progressive tax system, high quality and affordable housing, education, and healthcare for all have kept inequality in check over the years, but even more important are policies aimed at preventing social stratification from reifying (Yahya 2018b). Other ministers have spoken about improving social mobility, broadening the definition of success, of moving towards a "compassionate meritocracy," the responsibility of those who have done well to help those who have not, and ensuring that no Singaporeans are left behind (Ng 2018; Edmund Lim 2018; Koh 2018; Ong 2018; Kurochi 2019; J. Heng 2020; M. Heng 2020; Lai 2021b).

In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and amidst a transition to the fourth-generation leaders, the PAP government has initiated a year-long nation-wide public consultation exercise, "Forward Singapore," to refresh Singapore's social compact. The leader of the fourth-generation team, Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong, launched the exercise on June 28, 2022, calling on Singaporeans to contribute ideas for policy recommendations and suggestions on how various sectors of society could work together towards shared goals. In contrast to the social contract familiar to political theorists, Wong sees a social compact as "a

shared understanding of how all of us in society relate to one another. It's about the respective roles and responsibilities of different groups" (Wong 2022). Earlier, he had spoken about "resetting" Singapore post-Covid for a fairer, greener, and more united Singapore. Among other things, this requires "combating inequality and ensuring social mobility" with "a permanent shift towards further strengthening of our social safety nets in Singapore to protect the disadvantaged and vulnerable" (Lai 2021a). Increasing investment in pre-school education is one of its recent efforts to level the playing field. In charting the course for Singapore in the coming decades, he hopes "to see a society and system that benefits many, not a few; that rewards a wide variety of talents, not a conventional or narrow few; that values and celebrates all individuals for who they are and what they can achieve; and provides all with opportunities to do better throughout their lives" (Wong 2022).[13]

II. A Communitarian Response to the Tyranny of Merit

Michael's Sandel's recent book, *The Tyranny of Merit*, joins a long line of critiques of meritocracy since Michael Young's dystopic novel, *The Rise of Meritocracy*, was first published in 1958.[14] Observing how unprepared the United States was when confronted by the Covid-19 pandemic, which demanded solidarity "at a time of nearly unprecedented inequality and partisan rancor" following the populist backlash that brought Donald Trump to power, Sandel (2020, 5) analyzes how the development of the meritocratic ethic over the past four decades has undermined social bonds and mutual respect among Americans and brought the country to its present predicament. According to Sandel (2020, 19), the recent populist backlash in several liberal democracies including the United States was fueled by the "technocratic way of conceiving the public good" and "the meritocratic way of defining

[13] For a full report of the exercise, see https://www.forwardsingapore.gov.sg/

[14] Some recent book-length examples of this literature include McNamee and Miller (2014); Frank (2016); Littler (2018). For a defense of meritocracy, see Mulligan (2018).

winners and losers" by mainstream political parties in their countries' globalization project over the past four decades.

While the contexts are quite different, the workings and consequences of meritocracy in Singapore and the United States of America share some significant similarities. Michael Sandel's recent criticisms of meritocracy resonate with several issues raised in Singapore's discourse on meritocracy. A book review in the *Straits Times* notes that the criticism that only the "best and brightest" should govern is "a myth born of meritocratic hubris" that "ignores the need for practical wisdom and deliberation, not just technocratic expertise," could easily apply to Singapore's well-credentialled political leadership, and the "rhetoric of responsibility" also speaks to the use of means-testing and emphasis on self-reliance in its policies. To the reviewer, the most important of Sandel's warnings "is that meritocracy erodes the common good. It erodes the dignity of low-wage work, which it took a pandemic for many to deem 'essential.' It erodes social bonds by pitting individuals against each other" (Zhuo 2020b).

Meritocracy in the United States, as in Singapore, emphasizes academic and professional qualifications and contributions to economic growth in its definition of success and failure. Tertiary education became the primary vehicle of upward mobility and pressures to get into prestigious universities have changed parenting norms and children's lives; the "admissions obsession" even led to a widely publicized college admissions scam involving millions of dollars. Thirty-three wealthy parents were charged in 2019 with cheating to gain admissions into elite universities—including Yale, Stanford, Georgetown, and the University of Southern California—together with a "college consultant" who master-minded the scam (Sandel 2020, 7–8). Beyond the pressures of increasingly fierce competition, a competitive meritocracy is "a heavy burden for young people to bear" also because it "forces them to believe that their success is their own doing, and that if they fall short, they have no one to blame but themselves" (Sandel 2020, 14).[15] The harm this does to the losers' self-esteem is

[15] Sandel (2020, ch. 6) provides a more detailed analysis of meritocracy's impact on education.

obvious; less obvious and no less harmful is the arrogance and sense of entitlement it engenders in the winners, and the way it corrodes civic sensibilities.

Americans who believe in meritocracy share Singaporeans' faith in social mobility, equated with equality of opportunity, as the answer to inequality. Yet the same link between meritocracy and growing inequality have been observed in both societies and the problem is clearly not just imperfect equalizing of opportunity. Despite the attention to education, "higher education in the age of meritocracy has not been an engine of social mobility; to the contrary, it has reinforced the advantages that privileged parents confer on their children" (Sandel 2020, 165). In the United States, no less than in Singapore, "today's meritocracy has hardened into a hereditary aristocracy" (2020, 24). Sandel (2020, 23) challenges the incentive effect of inequality on people to avail themselves of the opportunities provided by social mobility to the benefit of both individuals and societies by pointing out that more egalitarian countries tend to have the highest mobility. Meritocracy justifies inequality as fair if based on merit, but few of its advocates question how merit is defined. If meritocratic fairness postulates "that we do not deserve to be rewarded or held back, based on factors beyond our control," then perfecting the equality of opportunity, and hence social mobility, will not make a meritocracy fair since people have no control over which abilities they are born with or which "talents" would be valued and rewarded by the society they live in (Sandel 2020, 23–24, 122–23; see also Tan 2012, 129–30).

According to Sandel (Sandel 2020, 87), the Democratic Party in the United States over last few decades had come to be defined by a "meritocratic liberalism"—"embracing globalization, valorizing a college degree, and believing that the talented and well-credentialed deserved to land on top." In the process, it has lost touch with its traditional supporters and failed to grasp the nature of their disaffection. The populist reactions against globalization and the loss of support for political parties that traditionally has counted social justice among their missions is due not only to the unjust distribution of gains from globalization but also the way "the reign of technocratic merit has reconfigured the terms of social recognition in ways that elevate

the prestige of the credentialed, professional classes and depreciate the contributions of most workers, eroding their social standing and esteem" (29).[16] This has generated hubris among the winners and humiliation and resentment among the losers of technocratic meritocracies. These morally unattractive attitudes distinguish what Sandel calls "the politics of humiliation" from "the politics of injustice":

> Protest against injustice looks outward; it complains that the system is rigged, that the winners have cheated or manipulated their way to the top. Protest against humiliation is psychologically more freighted. It combines resentment of the winners with nagging self-doubt: perhaps the rich are rich because they are more deserving than the poor; maybe the losers are complicit in their misfortune after all. (Sandel 2020, 26)

His analysis convincingly explains what otherwise seems to be irrational sentiments in the populist protests. These sentiments are compounded by a sense of frustration as ordinary citizens are increasingly disempowered through the detachment of merit from moral judgment and civic virtue and its reduction to technocratic expertise focused on increasing GDP in political life. Defining the public good mostly in economic terms and ignoring moral and civic questions that require public debate has resulted in ineffective governance by meritocratic elites whose accountability to voters through periodic elections has become increasingly questionable.

In Western liberal democracies, the appeal of meritocracy goes beyond efficiency and fairness. Sandel's exploration of the centuries-old dialectic between the ethic of mastery and self-making on the one hand and the ethic of gratitude and humility on the other in Christian theologies and European philosophical debates associates the meritocratic ideal with a powerful notion of freedom affirmed in "the idea that our destiny is in our hands, that our success does

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[16] See Sandel (2020, ch. 7) for detailed discussion of how the work of those without college degrees or professional qualifications has become not only poorly paid but also deemed less worthy of social recognition and esteem.

not depend on forces beyond our control, that it's up to us" (Sandel 2020, 34). Unfortunately, its promise of mastery and self-making became perverted into the assumption "that we are, each of us, wholly responsible for our lot in life," which led to the tyranny of the principle of merit (34–35). This then "erodes solidarity and demoralizes those left behind by globalization" when inequality is rampant and social mobility has stalled or decreased (73). Together with the "credentialist prejudice that undermines the dignity of work and demeans those who have not been to college," and disempowerment of ordinary citizens through "insisting that social and political problems are best solved by highly educated, value-neutral experts," it has made meritocracy toxic (73). Nor is such toxic meritocratic thinking celebrating freedom and deservingness confined to societies with Christian and liberal traditions, as Sandel discovered in his encounter in Xiamen with a Chinese student, whose comment on a Chinese teenager who sold one of his kidneys to buy an iPhone and iPad was, "Having earned their wealth, rich people are meritorious and so deserve to live longer" (61). The tyranny of merit may be rooted in Puritan and providential traditions, but its branches have global reach through the expansion of capitalist markets.

Sandel argues that the real problem with meritocracy is not that the ideal has not been achieved; but rather it is a flawed ideal. A perfect meritocracy would still be unjust if it is a matter of luck instead of desert whether we are born with talents contingently valued by society, and if effort is entangled with talents and does not guarantee success. His examination of free-market liberalism and welfare state liberalism as alternatives to meritocracy concludes that their rejection of merit and desert as the basis of justice is not thorough going enough. Their emphases on personal responsibility and valorization of talent still "give rise to attitudes characteristic of meritocratic societies—hubris among the successful and resentment among the disadvantaged" (2020, 134).[17] To overcome the tyranny of merit, Sandel recommends that meritocratic societies rethink their conceptions of success, "ques-

[17] Detailed discussion of these two alternatives to meritocracy is found in Sandel (2020, 125–51).

tioning the meritocratic conceit that those on top made it on their own," and challenge "inequalities of wealth and esteem that are defended in the name of merit but that foster resentment, poison our politics, and drive us apart" (155). Among other things, it would require renewing the dignity of work and a recognition of the importance of contributive justice beyond concerns with the size and distribution of GDP. Contributive justice demands that everyone has a right and responsibility to contribute to the common good and earn the esteem of fellow citizens for his or her contributions, with an understanding of the common good as not merely an aggregate of preferences and interests but the product of citizens deliberating together, critically reflecting on their preferences and interests, and aiming to live worthwhile and flourishing lives together (208–12). An adequate ideal for a good society, in Sandel's view, must go beyond the remedial principle of equality of opportunity to achieve a "broad equality of condition that enables those who do not achieve great wealth or prestigious positions to live lives of decency and dignity developing and exercising their abilities in work that wins social esteem, sharing in a widely diffused culture of learning, and deliberating with their fellow citizens about public affairs" (224).

To a limited extent, the Singapore government's "Forward Singapore" exercise could be charitably seen as an effort at engaging citizens in critical reflections about the common good as recommended by Sandel, although genuine democratic deliberation would require less controlled arenas of public discussions and more widespread participation than the organized sessions of Forward Singapore, and it remains to be seen whether this exercise could do better than previous attempts to solicit citizens' feedback on government policies when it comes to significantly improving democratic participation in the long run.[18] What is worthy of note is the emphasis on solidarity in its idea

[18] Daniel Bell and Pei Wang (2020, 225n57) singles out Singapore as an example of a "political meritocracy" that has "peacefully evolved into a much more open and participatory political community over the past few decades" in response to demand for more participation from those excluded from elite rule. Bell (2015, ch. 2) discusses the Singaporean contribution to the debate about political values. According to the official report, more than 200,000 Singaporeans participated in the year-long Forward Singapore

of renewing the social compact, and implicit acknowledgement that citizens should have a say in the future of Singapore, instead of its being determined by "experts" and technocrats assumed to have all the answers to whatever problems the country faces. Notwithstanding its shortcomings, it is not surprising that Singapore's response to the problems caused by meritocracy appears communitarian. Unlike the United States, Singapore is not hampered by any commitment to liberalism and the PAP's faith in meritocracy is definitely not a meritocratic liberalism. Singapore's political leaders have long promoted "society above individual" and often adopt communitarian language in its criticisms of Western liberalism.[19]

The PAP government's emphasis on self-reliance in its approach to welfare does not endorse a liberal notion of freedom promising mastery and self-making; it is a form of "economic individualism" rewarding individuals for their respective economic contributions in order to maintain incentives for productivity, but its pursuit of economic growth is defended as beneficial for all (Chua 2017, 54). Rather than individuals, it sees families as the basic units of society and continues to expect the family to be the first line of support and help for those in need. Lee Kuan Yew portrayed this as the Confucian idea of duty: "You're supposed to look after your family and your extended family, and to be loyal and supportive of your friends. And you should do it from your private purse and not from the public treasury."[20] While many have located Confucianism in the communitarian camp, I have resisted any dualistic approach to the liberalism-communitarianism debate and my own reconstruction of Confucian philosophy has attempted to address the

exercise: more than 35,000 in 275 partnerships and engagement sessions, and more than 165,000 through surveys, roadshows and other platforms (https://www.forwardsingapore.gov.sg/chapter1).

[19] On the PAP's government's antipathy to liberalism and its communitarian ideology, see Chua (2017, ch. 1); see also Chua (1995).

[20] Lee was speaking in an interview with BBC, reported in "Suharto's Fall Due to Economic Failure" (1998). Chua Beng Huat (2017, 21) treats this Confucian idea as "communitarian" to the PAP. For a more detailed discussion of the relationship between Confucianism and Singapore's communitarian ideology, see Chua (1995, ch. 7). Singapore's state promotion of Confucianism in the 1980s failed and it was abandoned for a set of "national values" intended to appeal to the diverse ethnic groups in Singapore (Chua 2017, 57–58; see also Kuo 1996).

concerns of both sides with a balance between protecting individuality without positing atomistic selves and valuing human relationality without endorsing oppressive collectivism (Tan 2003, 11–14). However one classifies the PAP's ideology, it is more important in this paper to clarify the similarities and differences between communitarian and Confucian responses to the problems of meritocracy.

III. Questioning Confucian Meritocracy

The idea of meritocracy has gained ascendancy in contemporary Confucian political discourse in the new millennium.[21] Joseph Chan (2007, 191) believes that "despite the fact that there are elements in Confucianism that might favor democracy as a political institution, the most favored model in Confucianism is one of meritocracy and guardianship. . . . How democracy can be combined with meritocracy for the sake of promoting the common good is a central concern for Confucians today."[22] Chan (2014, 174–75) also develops a Confucian perspective on social justice that includes a principle of distributing offices and emolument according to merit and contribution, constrained by two other principles of sufficiency for all and priority to the worst off.[23] Daniel Bell (2006) first defended a "Confucian democracy with Chinese characteristics" based on Confucian teachings about appointing the "worthy and capable" (*ju xianneng* 举贤能) for good

[21] Besides Daniel Bell, whose works have been mentioned above, Tongdong Bai (2020), Joseph Chan (2007), and Jiang Qing (2013, ch. 1-3) have also advocated Confucian meritocracy, all of them incorporate some democratic features in their theories. However, they focus their attention on defending Confucian alternatives to Western theories of democracy and do not specifically address the problems of meritocracy that is the subject of this paper. See also chapters by Tongdong Bai, Joseph Chan, and Ruiping Fan in Bell and Li (2013). For discussions of Bai's account of Confucian meritocracy, see Mulligan (2022), Hominh (2022), and Wall (2022).

[22] Although Chan (2014, 100–9) proposes a non-democratically selected second legislative chamber in his combination of democracy and Confucianism, he does not use the term "meritocracy" at all in that book.

[23] Chan (2014, 22) describes Confucian justice as "sufficientarian," within a Confucian social ideal that "integrates justice and care, recognizing both individual merit and personal responsibility."

governance, combining democracy with meritocracy in a "bicameral" political structure—comprising an upper "house of virtue and talent" (*xianshiyuan* 贤士院) and a democratically elected lower house. Subsequently, he has argued for "political meritocracy" as a "China model" of governing, underpinned primarily by the same Confucian ideas of selecting good leaders but ending with a model of "democratic meritocracy" with democracy at the bottom, experimentation in the middle, and meritocracy at the top (Bell 2015, ch. 3). Most recently, he and his co-author describe political meritocracy as a "Legalist-Confucian" ideal that has "not only informed Chinese politics for over two thousand years, more surprisingly, it has also inspired political reform in China over the past four decades or so" (Bell and Wang 2020, 72). They argue that "the ideal of political meritocracy is an appropriate standard for assessing political progress and regress at higher levels of government in China because the ideal has been central to Chinese political culture, it has inspired political reform over the past few decades, it is appropriate for large-scale political communities, and it is endorsed by the vast majority of the people" (Bell and Wang 2020, 74).

Bell (2015, 111) acknowledges the problems arising from meritocracy pointed out by Young: "(1) political rulers chosen on the basis of their superior ability are likely to abuse their power; (2) political hierarchies may become frozen and undermine social mobility; and (3) it is difficult to legitimize the system to those outside the power structure."[24] Unlike Sandel, Bell and Wang do not consider the ideal of meritocracy flawed and set out to explore different ways to address these problems, drawing on historical and modern Chinese political experience. Bell and Wang (2020, 86) point out that in Chinese history, critics of the prevailing system of political selection did not blame meritocracy itself for the ossification of political hierarchies. "Quite the reverse, political meritocracy, with new interpretations and practical innovations, is the only solution for improving the political impasse" (86). They discuss these interpretations and innovations in various Chinese dynasties of how to appoint the "virtuous and

[24] Bell and Wang (2020, 72) also admit "a large gap between the ideal and the practice" of political meritocracy in China.

talented" to public office and imperial laws that prohibited collusion between merchants and officials to prevent corruption; he refers to arguments advocating the adaptation of traditional Confucian disciplinary mechanisms aimed at checking rulers' abuses of power and contemporary calls for Confucian moral education for public officials, and cites the *Analects* and the *Mencius* to elucidate the different understanding of democracy among the Chinese—emphasizing government for the people over government by the people—that makes performance legitimacy pertinent to the Chinese system (Bell and Wang 2020, 84–91).[25] While Bell's model of political meritocracy is clearly inspired by Confucian texts and informed by political experience within the context of a strong Confucian cultural legacy, his response to the problems of meritocracy is however not primarily Confucian, as he relies primarily on the features typical of democratic societies—such as rule of law, freedom of speech, independent supervisory institutions, transparency in decision making, various institutions for popular participation short of universal suffrage to elect national leaders—to address them, especially the problem of legitimacy (Bell 2015, ch. 3).[26] His suggestions of a humble political discourse, broadening the criteria for merit in selecting political leaders, and opening the ruling party to more diverse social group as possible solutions to the ossification of political hierarchies could address to some extent the negative effects of meritocracy on solidarity discussed by Sandel but

[25] A broader literature survey might raise questions about whether the Confucian concern about "economic and social disparities" in the texts has been common among the political elites of various Chinese dynasties. A reviewer pointed out that most of these elites, including some top Ming officials known as Wang Yangming followers who "did all sorts of good stuff too . . . were entirely ready to accumulate wealth for their own families." This gap between reality and ideal exists with all normative theories, behavior that falls short of Confucian ideals should prompt us to question the Confucian credential of such individuals.

[26] For proposals to adapt traditional Confucian institutions designed to curb the power of rulers, see chapters by Hahm Chaihark and Jongryn Mo in Bell and Hahm (2003). Although he does not specifically discuss the problems arising from meritocracy, Tongdong Bai (2020, 89–90) also proposes rule of law, some human rights and limited popular participation to check the authoritarian tendencies of the Mencian ideal of government which he identifies as meritocratic, but he also gives moral education a key role in preventing the ruling elite from being captured by special interests.

Bell is less concerned with challenge to the value of equality posed by the consequences of meritocracy. From a "progressive conservative" perspective, Bell and Wang (2020, 17) consider it more important to separate "just hierarchies" (which includes political meritocracy) from unjust hierarchies such as those based on race, gender, and class.

I have argued that equating the Confucian ideal of governance with meritocracy is misleading and the problems of meritocracy, including its tendency to widen economic and social disparities, would be unacceptable to Confucians (Tan 2012). In the present context, it obscures aspects of Confucian thought that could offer different solutions to contemporary problems of meritocracy. Or to put it in another way, Confucian ideal governance can avoid those problems because it is not a meritocracy even though "worthy and capable" in Confucian texts could be interpreted as referring to merit. Yuri Pines's (2013, 162) study of the evolution of the idea of "elevating the worthy" in China during the Warring States period reveals multiple tensions in the conflicting views of "worthy" and "merit," and a contradiction between support for social mobility and "a subtle but discernible desire of the members of the educated elite to monopolize power in their hand." In my view, Pines' (2013, 191) conclusion drawn from the premodern Chinese experience that "the meritocratic system can be highly efficient but is not necessarily conducive to increased morality of either officials or the public in general" means that meritocracy is inadequate for Confucian good governance which must not only deliver material welfare for the people but also provide a conducive environment for ethical advancement.

Besides differences in what counts as merit in Confucian and liberal societies, the role of merit in Confucian thought differs from how merit functions in contemporary meritocracies discussed earlier. A key element that leads to the tyranny of merit in Sandel's critique of American society is the idea of desert according to merit. I disagree with Chan's assertion that Mencius and Xunzi "believe that desert should be based on a person's achievement and contributions" (Chan 2014, 175). Confucian advocacy of "raising the virtuous and talented" is justified on the grounds that this will lead to good government, but not by any consideration of desert, that is the fairness of rewarding the

selected according to their merit, especially when it comes to material rewards.[27]

> When Zihua was on a mission to Qi, Master Ranyou asked to supply Zihua's mother with some grain. The Master said, "Give her a full measure of grain." Master Ranyou asked to give her more. The Master said, "Then give her a double measure." Master Ranyou gave her ten measures of grain.
>
> The Master said, "In travelling to Qi, Zihua was driving choice horses and wearing fine furs. I have heard it said, 'Exemplary persons help out the needy, they do not make the rich richer.'" (*Analects* 6.4)[28]

Confucius' objection is not that Zihua's merit did not deserve the ten measures of grain; rather, being well off, Zihua was more than capable of taking care of her mother's needs—this implies a distributive principle based on need instead of desert.[29] Given Confucius' response in *Analects* 12.9 that Duke Ai should not expect to have "sufficient" for his expenditures when his people did not, one could argue that, instead of a meritocratic principle of justice, Confucians should insist that those who are more powerful, meritorious, and successful deserve no more than those who are not when it comes to material goods. At its most idealistic, Confucianism believes that virtue is its own reward, as Mencius argues that the reward the virtuous should seek is not rank or wealth but the "high honor bestowed by heaven"—humaneness, rightness, doing one's best and keeping one's words, and "unflagging delight in what is good" (*Mencius* 6A.16–17).[30] Mencius is realistic enough to insist that virtuous advisors to rulers should be given material rewards even though gaining such rewards is not the purpose that motivates the virtuous advisors' contribution (3B.4); but what the

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[27] Pines (2013, 188) also points out that "'fairness' as such was never considered a goal of 'elevating the worthy.'"

[28] Unless otherwise stated, translations of the *Analects* are from Ames and Rosemont (1998).

[29] Chan's principle of sufficiency and priority to the worst off accommodates needs in his account of justice, but I go further in both rejecting a justice-based approach to problems of social distribution and tying merit and contribution to rewards.

[30] Translations of the *Mencius* are from Lau (1970).

virtuous is entitled to is measured less by calculation of contribution than by the respect due to them, which matters much more than the material reward (5B.6).

The more realistic Xunzi maintains that "a person's emoluments must match his services to the state," but he owes this principle not to Confucius but to Mozi (Knoblock 1990, 122).[31] Even then, he defends this not on the basis of desert but out of consideration for its social consequences. Resources and rewards given to the worthy and capable are justified by their necessity in discharging responsibilities effectively in order to bring genuine benefits to the community; they are not for those in high positions to indulge in "reckless extravagance" (Knoblock 1990, 124–26). In his criticisms of the *Gongsun Nizi*'s praise for Prince Fa, a military commander of Chu, who refused a reward for his service to his state, he emphasizes that "to honor the worthy and employ the able" and "to reward where there is achievement and punish where there is fault" provide incentives for good acts and discourage their opposite; and he further condemns Prince Fa's action for its impact on others:

> He would bring to naught the flourishing accomplishments of ministers and put to shame subordinates who would accept rewards. Although he brought no disgrace to his family, yet the prestige of his posterity was diminished and reduced. (Knoblock 1990, 240–41)

While Xunzi does not address Prince Fa's reason for refusing the reward, that it was "inappropriate to make use of the awesome power of his soldiers to receive a personal reward," it would be consistent with his reasoning to suggest that Prince Fa could share the reward with his

[31] Citations from the *Xunzi* will reference Knoblock's translation. Knoblock (1990, 303n22) notes that "Here Xunzi has adopted a cardinal teaching of Mo Di." Pines (2013, 168) also argues that meritocratic ideas and practices did not develop in China before the Warring States period, and "the text of the *Lunyu* 论语, the major repository of Confucius's ideas, contains no direct endorsement of the concept of social mobility, which is prominent in later writings of Confucius's followers." In contrast to Confucius' hesitance, Mozi was "the most radical supporter of social mobility" (170). And it was in the Mozi and the Hanfeizi that we find direct connection of merit with corresponding reward of rank and wealth (183).

soldiers. This debate brings out the difficulty of determining desert as well as the low priority assigned to individual desert in what has been (in my view misleadingly) cited as meritocratic principle of government or justice in Confucian thought.[32]

IV. A Confucian Perspective on (Singapore's) Meritocracy

Unburdened by the individualistic sense of desert and personal responsibility that renders merit tyrannical in Sandel's diagnosis, Confucianism has resources to resist the increasing inequalities associated with rampant meritocracies today, whether in America or Singapore. Rather than arrogance, Confucians value humility, especially in those who rise to high positions, who possess wealth and status. Their acknowledgement of external circumstances beyond human control in the notion of *ming* 命 ("fate," "destiny," or "ineluctable circumstances") that could frustrate even the most virtuous and capable mitigates against any assumption that the meritorious totally deserve their worldly rewards.[33] The Confucian conception of persons as cultivating themselves to fulfil their humanity within key relationships also implies a sense of personal responsibility that is social. Although Confucius emphasizes self-motivation in personal cultivation—"Becoming humane originates from oneself, how could it originate with others" (*Analects* 12.1)—this does not preclude acknowledging that others have a role to play in one's personal cultivation and other endeavors that contribute to one's success or failure in life. Chan (2014, 175) points to social environmental factors that account for differences in ability and moral development acknowledged by both *Mencius* (7A.36) and *Xunzi* (4.8 and 8.11), and notes that "neither thinker asserts that those made worse off by such uncontrollable

[32] We could consider Prince Fa as offering an alternative Confucian position on the issue as the Han History listed a Gongsun Nizi among the Confucian texts (Ban 1975, 1725). Some of Xunzi's contemporaries might even consider it the more orthodox Confucian position and it supports the social sense of responsibility I defend below.

[33] For discussion of the complex issues raised by the notion of *ming* in early Confucianism, see Valmisa (2019), and Puett (2005).

factors should be compensated." Chan infers from this that neither Mencius nor *Xunzi* would endorse luck egalitarianism. I would draw a different conclusion: compensation for such disadvantages of unequal starting points would not be an issue for Confucians because to begin with they do not endorse distribution according to desert understood as the outcome of meritocratic competition. For them, even in a perfect meritocracy, one's success would never belong solely to oneself. Beyond others' discernable direct contributions to one's projects (such as those acknowledged in Prince Fa's case above), one is indebted to countless others who have had an impact on the very person one has become, the choices one has made and one's actions, and such impact need not be intentional or even conscious on their part. While one would have a stronger obligation to share the rewards of success with the first group, it is usually not possible to do so for those in the second group with any specificity. Even for the first group, it is not always possible to share one's rewards because they may be beyond one's reach, or they may neither need nor desire what one could offer them. This moral debt then becomes a debt to the community as such. Just as others have benefitted or helped us, we must benefit and help as many others as possible. Although I am skeptical whether Confucian culture is still deeply rooted in Singapore, if enough of that Chinese cultural legacy has survived, then it would lend some weight to the government's call for a "compassionate" meritocracy, which could be strengthened by avoiding misrepresentation of "compassion" as a matter of charity, and instead emphasizing social responsibility—the Chinese majority could understand "compassion" as a matter of humaneness (Confucian *ren* 仁).[34]

Instead of the powerful notion of freedom promising self-mastery and self-making in meritocratic liberalism that ends up undermining solidarity, the Confucian conception of persons as embedded within networks of human relationships eschews the focus on individual desert and supports a non-justice based approach to distributive problems from the perspective of what would achieve the optimal

[34] My skepticism notwithstanding, Singapore is regularly included in "Confucian Asia" (for example, Inoguchi and Shin 2010).

results in maintaining and nurturing social relations.[35] Confucius and his followers are keenly aware that social distribution that is highly unequal undermines human relationships and is incompatible with their ideal of harmonious community. Without any explicit commitment to the value of equality, they nevertheless object to inequalities that cause hardships to the people and erode their ability to live a decent life.

> Confucius said, "… I have heard that the ruler of a state or the head of a household does not worry that his people are poor, but that wealth is inequitably distributed.… For if wealth is equitably distributed, there is no poverty." (*Analects* 16.1)

Mencius (1A.4) condemns rulers who enjoyed an extravagant lifestyle while his subjects "dropped dead from starvation," while Xunzi warns rulers of the subversive effects of political leaders enriching themselves instead of the people (Knoblock 1990, 98).

In the relation between government and the people, all three pre-Qin texts demand that people must have "sufficient" (*zu* 足). In *Analects* 12.9, Confucius said to Duke Ai, "If the households of your people had sufficient, you could expect to have the same; but since the households do not have sufficient, how can you expect to have enough?" The main tasks of a good government are to "enrich the people" and then "educate them" (*Analects* 13.9). Mencius' ethical idealism does not obscure his insight that material well-being is a prerequisite for ethical life, and it is the government's responsibility to ensure that people have sufficient support "on the one hand, for the care of parents, and on the other, for the support of wife and children, so that people always have sufficient food in good years, and escape starvation in bad" (*Mencius* 1A.7). Xunzi's recipe for "enriching the state" includes to "employ the people so that they succeed in their assigned tasks, make certain that the profits from their assigned task are sufficient to provide a means of living for them" (Knoblock 1990, 123). Confucian good government also gives priority to the worst off.

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35 For a defense of this approach based on a study of the *Mencius*, see Tan (2014).

> Old men without wives, old women without husbands, old people without children, young children without fathers—these people are the most destitute and have no one to turn to for help. Whenever King Wen put benevolent measures into effect, he always gave them first consideration. (*Mencius* 1B.5).

Besides urging special attention to orphans, childless old people, widows and widowers, as well as "those in poverty and need," Xunzi also emphasizes the state's responsibility to take care of people with physical defects, so that "the deaf, blind, lame, and halt, those who have been mutilated, and those who are stunted and dwarfed," "should be given official duties commensurate with their abilities and employment adequate to feed and clothe themselves so that all are included and not even one of them is overlooked" (Knoblock 1990, 94, 97, 162, 167).

Both the sufficiency principle and priority to the worst off in the Confucian approach to social distribution problems mitigate against increasing inequalities. Adjusting for different social conditions of different historical periods and other circumstances unique to particular societies that govern what counts as a decent life in which one could raise a family and cultivate oneself as a Confucian, the pre-Qin Confucian texts' discussions of sufficient support for the people and priority to the worst off converges significantly with Sandel's (2020, 224–26) recommendation to overcome the tyranny of merit by ensuring "equality of condition." Singapore's combination of its family-centered approach with a strengthening of social safety net for those who need help is justifiable from this Confucian perspective. In this context, any means-test implemented in the distribution of subsidies and other assistance should avoid any implied distinction between "deserving" and "undeserving," and instead focus on identifying the people in need of help to avoid "making the rich richer." Confucianism's emphasis on sustaining social relationships would reject using individual merit or desert to justify inequalities that undermine solidarity. While Confucians following Xunzi could support inequalities for their "incentive effects," if such effects are empirically proven, merit and con-

tribution would still not be given free rein the way they have been in technocratic meritocracies privileging economic productivity and financial rewards; attention would be given to how the resulting inequalities affect various social relationships. The harmful attitudes highlighted by Sandel, arrogance among the winners and humiliation on the part of the losers, or the selfishness and entitlement mentality observed in Singapore, would be reasons for Confucians to reject meritocratic justification of distributive policies.

Singapore's experience reflects Pines's (2013) observation based on the Chinese historical experience with merit-based appointments to public office: impressive results in terms of efficiency but more problematic when it comes to moral cultivation. Singapore's relative success in minimizing corruption owes more to rigorous enforcement of strong anti-corruption statutes than any attempts at moral education. My own reconstruction of Confucianism for contemporary societies rejects perfectionism that interferes with citizens' personal lives; however, a functioning democracy requires a "public morality" in the sense of appropriate ways of relating to fellow citizens which preclude the kind of selfishness encouraged by a belief that one deserves one' success and those who are worse off deserve their lot, however much they may suffer. In their discourse on renewing the social compact, the fourth-generation PAP leaders have tried their best to eschew a moralistic tone—which in the past has alienated voters—but they would agree with Sandel that government and political discourse cannot ignore moral and civic questions. Rather than moral education in schools or rewarding moral behaviors, engaging ordinary citizens in public discussions of moral and civic questions related to the common good and in cooperative endeavors to improve fellow citizens' lives is more promising for cultivating public morality. The practice of give and take in trying to reach agreement on public policies, of taking others' interests into account in return of others doing the same for oneself, and the nurturing of empathy through direct encounters with the sufferings of those who are worse off, facilitate the cultivation of civic virtues.

Beyond the practical outcomes of policy recommendations, the

Forward Singapore exercise is an important effort at strengthening the trust between the PAP politicians and ordinary citizens (Ho 2022). The PAP government has presented its performance in terms of bettering the lives of Singaporeans as the key in its relationship of trust with the people. However, the new generation of PAP leaders are aware that maintaining that trust will take more than technocratic abilities to sustain economic growth and solve practical problems. Besides interactions with ordinary citizens to foster empathy, by inviting participants to suggest/volunteer how they might contribute to different areas, the public discussions have the potential of involving them not only in policy making but also in cooperative undertakings to benefit fellow Singaporeans. Realizing this potential will provide a form of democratic participation that would strengthen trust among citizens and between the government and citizens much better than technocratic performance alone.

Very few Singaporeans doubt the abilities of PAP candidates for office, but there is increasing evidence that many Singaporeans would no longer tolerate paternalistic government. Their rejection of the assumption that a capable government would know and do what is best for the population shifts the axis of trust from technocratic performance to empathy between politicians and voters. This became very clear in Singapore's 2020 general election, in which a well-credentialed and more experienced team of PAP candidates—which was led by an ex-Singapore Armed Forces government scholar who had held a ministerial post and also included a former Senior Minister of State and a former Parliamentary Secretary—was defeated by a team of young opposition candidates probably because voters of that Group Representation Constituency (GRC), mostly young families, could identify better with them and are persuaded that the opposition candidates could empathize with them and therefore serve them better.[36] Improving Singapore's meritocracy by limiting it in ways that Confucians could support is not enough. To win the hearts as well as minds of the people, the relationship between politicians and

[36] Credentials are still relevant, as Singapore voters have not given significant support to any opposition members totally without professional qualifications. One of the opposition team that won the Sengkang GRC is an Associate Professor of Economics.

voters must change. Selecting the “best and brightest” or recruiting candidates based on more diverse criteria with attention to moral character for political office is not enough. A relationship of trust would require a more equal relationship that gives the governed a genuine role in government.

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■ Submitted: July 17, 2023
Accepted: January 16, 2024