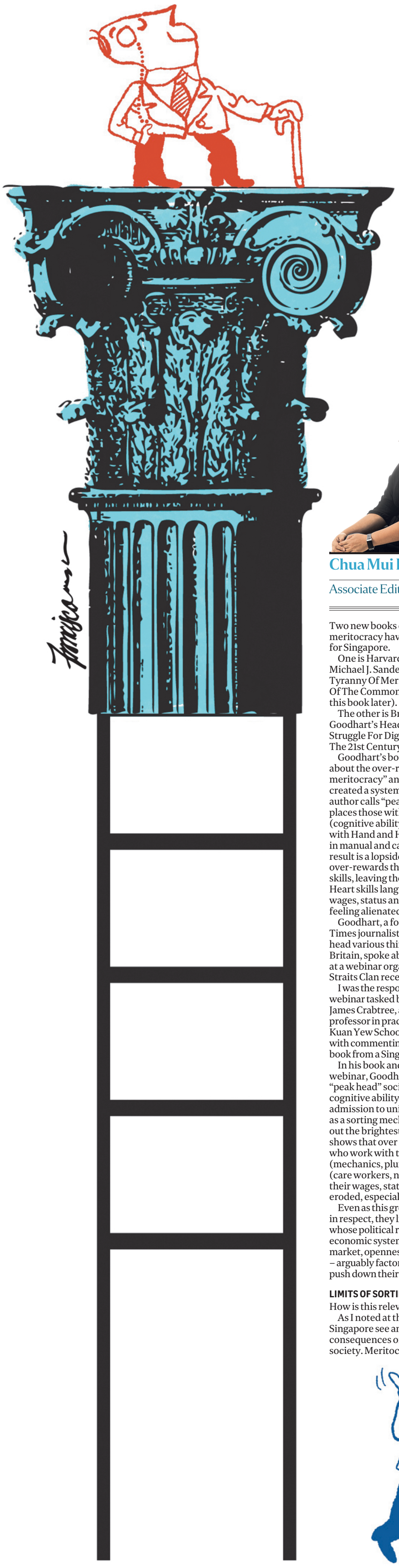

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Meritocracy and how to manage its downsides

Meritocracy as a system to sort people into jobs and social status could lose its allure, as a younger generation of well-educated Singaporeans come of age, all with high expectations of a good life

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Two new books on the excesses of meritocracy have lessons relevant for Singapore.

One is Harvard professor Michael J. Sandel's latest book, The Tyranny Of Merit: What's Become Of The Common Good? (More on this book later).

The other is British writer David Goodhart's Head Hand Heart: The Struggle For Dignity And Status In The 21st Century.

Goodhart's book is a warning about the over-reach of "cognitive meritocracy" and how it has created a system of what the author calls "peak head". This places those with Head skills (cognitive ability) above those with Hand and Heart skills (those in manual and caring jobs). The result is a lopsided system that over-rewards those with Head skills, leaving those with Hand and Heart skills languishing behind in wages, status and respect, and feeling alienated.

Goodhart, a former Financial Times journalist who went on to head various think-tanks in Britain, spoke about his latest book at a webinar organised by the Straits Clan recently.

I was the respondent at the webinar tasked by moderator James Crabtree, an associate professor in practice at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, with commenting on Goodhart's book from a Singapore perspective.

In his book and remarks at the webinar, Goodhart describes how "peak head" societies extol cognitive ability, and use admission to university education as a sorting mechanism to sieve out the brightest citizens. He shows that over the decades, those who work with their hands (mechanics, plumbers), or heart (care workers, nurses) have seen their wages, status and respect eroded, especially in Britain.

Even as this group suffer a deficit in respect, they live in a society whose political rhetoric and economic system emphasise the market, openness and globalisation – arguably factors that have helped push down their wages.

LIMITS OF SORTING

How is this relevant to Singapore?

As I noted at the webinar, we in Singapore see and live the consequences of a "peak head" society. Meritocracy is akin to a "state religion" here, as Professor Crabtree noted. The principle of sorting places and allocating rewards based on academic merit is woven into the education system (think of streaming), employment to public sector jobs and recruitment to political office. Those with cognitive skills not only excel in school, but are also on track to good careers that enrich their lives.

So Goodhart's appeal for wages, status and respect to be more evenly spread among those with Hand and Heart, not just Head, skills is an important message for Singapore. As I put it starkly at the webinar: "Because it is totally not sustainable that we have a society where the cognitively skilled go around feeling well rewarded and well regarded, while large segments of the rest of our society suffer from precarious jobs, low wages and just go around feeling disrespected. That is a recipe for massive resentment and eventually massive unrest."

One consolation for Singapore is that we have not neared the situations of Britain and the United States, with declining median wages, rising unemployment among graduates from non-elite universities, and the closing of access to higher education.

Instead, as I told the virtual audience of about 100 at the event, we learnt from the British tendency to over-focus on academic merit. So from the 1970s, Singapore learnt from the Japanese, German and French to set up technical institutes. Today, our polytechnics and institutes of technical education provide a strong second pillar of technical education as good as its academic, university sector.

This has translated to wage growth: Singapore's median incomes grew 32 per cent in real terms over the last decade, bucking the trend of stagnating or declining median wages in many developed countries. In nominal terms, it is $4,600, up from $2,900.

CONTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE

One useful insight from Professor Sandel is that people do not want distributive justice so much as contributive justice.

Many free market liberals want an open economy where rewards flow to the able, and the use of taxes to subsidise the disadvantaged.

But to Prof Sandel, this is not enough.

What the low-waged and unemployed want is not unemployment benefits or handouts. They long for work that pays enough for a decent life, and the chance to do work that contributes to society.

Liberals today want distributive justice – fairer, fuller access to the fruits of economic growth. Welfare advocates want redistribution in the form of state grants to replace or augment income.

"But what these voters want even more is a greater measure of contributive justice – an opportunity to win the social recognition and esteem that goes with producing what others need and value," writes Prof Sandel.

So giving grants to supplement income or strengthening social safety nets like increasing unemployment payouts won't address the anger and resentment of those left behind.

This is because "the injury that most animates the resentment of working people is to their status as producers. This injury is the combined effort of meritocratic sorting and market-driven globalisation".

He adds: "Only a political agenda that acknowledges this injury and seeks to renew the dignity of work can speak effectively to the discontent that roils our politics.

"And it is in our role as producers, not consumers, that we contribute to the common good and win recognition for doing so."

The distinction between our roles as consumers and producers is important. Our contribution to the common good is not as consumers who buy goods and services, but as producers – people who "develop and deploy our abilities to provide goods and services that fulfil the needs of our fellow citizens and win social esteem".

So, as Prof Sandel notes, instead of consuming more things and maximising gross domestic product, one can imagine that a well-functioning society's goal is to create a labour market conducive to the dignity of work and social cohesion.

TAKEAWAYS

For Singaporeans, the key takeaways from the books are these.

First, even as we console ourselves that our system of education and jobs remains resilient, offering good pathways and careers to the masses and not just the exam-smart, we should not duck from the hard truth that an excessively competitive system can cause a similar crisis of respect and recognition in our society, especially among low-skilled workers and their families.

Those who doubt this should read sociologist Teo You Yenn's influential 2018 book, This Is What Inequality Looks Like. It stirred the conscience of many for its vivid description of the class divide and the shame felt by low-waged workers and those seeking financial assistance. Before Singapore sees the political dysfunctions that led Britain to Brexit and the US to vote for a Donald Trump presidency, we should address the grievances of this group seriously.

Second, we should think beyond distributive justice, to contributive justice. This is potentially revolutionary for Singaporeans. Instead of celebrating cheap prices at hawker centres or in cleaning services, we need to think of how the labour market as a whole functions, and how to support and sustain the entire ecosystem of workers – hawkers, hawker assistants, food suppliers, cleaners, cleaning supervisors – so they can do productive work, contribute to the collective good, and earn decent pay that allows them to take part as full citizens in the public arena.

Meritocracy as a justification for explaining why some workers have low-paying jobs and others earn millions a year may have inspired a past generation to strive to become winners by dint of ability and effort. But can it remain persuasive to a generation where nine in 10 have earned a post-secondary qualification and feel they are of good enough merit?

At its heart, the wound to society caused by an overly competitive meritocratic society is a moral one – as much about loss of respect and dignity as it is about too-low wages and compensation.

After all, if one's status is determined by birth, one can blame luck or fate. If status is based on one's own effort or ability, one can only blame oneself. Hence British sociologist Michael Young, who coined the term meritocracy in his 1958 book The Rise Of The Meritocracy, revisited the issue 40 years later to remark that in a society that makes so much of merit, having none leaves today's underclass "morally naked".

To clothe the underclass with dignity today requires us to form and support labour markets that create jobs with decent pay for all, not just those with Head skills.

Singapore's open, globalised and competitive economy has high income inequality – wages at the top are bid up by globally oriented employers and wages for the low-skilled are kept down by the large pool of low-cost foreign workers here who offer domestic service employers a cheap alternative source of labour.

While past generations have lived with this inequality, it is uncertain if future generations will. As noted above, Singapore's median wage is rising, as are average education levels. A high median carries its own brand of political risk.

More than 95 per cent of young adults today get post-secondary education. This means Singapore's demographics are changing, from one with highly differentiated education levels, to one with a broad-based, highly educated population.

We are becoming a much flatter society with far less differential in educational achievement. This is likely to reduce the gap in expectations of the good life and have impact on aspirations, identity and politics.

Meritocracy as a justification for explaining why some workers have low-paying jobs and others earn millions a year may have inspired a past generation to strive to become winners by dint of ability and effort. But can it remain persuasive to a generation where nine in 10 have earned a post-secondary qualification and feel they are of good enough merit?

How do you justify high income inequality to someone who went to the same polytechnic or university, served in the same national service vocation and bought their first flat in the same Housing Board estate as the other 35-year-old who earns 10 times his salary?

Inter-generational gaps in income, aspirations and expectations will continue. But as aspirations and expectations converge among the younger generation, we need a major effort to rethink the role of meritocracy and how to allocate work, wages and worth more equitably.

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• This is the first of a weekly column on Singapore issues by Chua Mui Hoong.