Singaporean Malays' Perspectives of Income Inequality and its Impact on their Opportunities in Singapore's Education System

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มุมมองของชาวสิงคโปร์เชื้อสายมาเลย์ถึงความไม่เท่าเทียมในรายได้และผลกระทบที่มีต่อโอกาสในระบบการศึกษาที่สิงคโปร์

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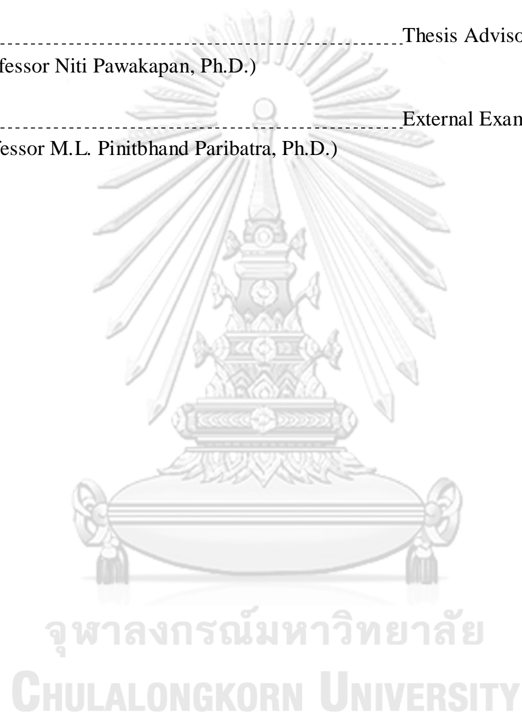

งัก เล็ง ต้น : **มุมมองของชาวสิงคโปร์เชื้อสายมาเลย์ถึงความไม่เท่าเทียมในรายได้และผลกะทบที่มีต่อโอกาสในระบบการศึกษาที่สิงคโปร์** (Singaporean Malays' Perspectives of Income Inequality and its Impact on their Opportunities in Singapore's Education System) **อ.ที่ปรึกษาวิทยานิพนธ์หลัก**: Assoc. Prof. **นิติ ภวัครพันธุ์**Ph.D., 54 **หน้า**.

การศึกษาโปรไฟล์ของความไม่เท่าเทียมในรายได้บุคคลได้เผยให้เห็นว่าชาวสิงคโปร์เชื้อชาติมาเลย์นั้นครองลำดับชั้นรายได้ที่ต่ำที่สุด อีกทั้งยังมีผลการเรียนที่ค่อนข้างจะต่ำกว่าเมื่อเปรียบเทียบกับเชื้อชาติอื่น ในระบบการศึกษาที่มีความแข่งขันสูงซึ่งตอบแทนความดีในการเรียน แต่ไม่คำนึงถึงความไม่เท่าเทียมกันในภูมิหลังของแต่ละคนที่มีจุดเริ่มที่ไม่ยุติธรรมนั้น ครัวเรือนเชื้อชาติมาเลย์ที่มีรายได้ต่ำนั้นก็เหมือนจะอยู่ในระบบที่ด้อยโอกาสในเชิงรายได้ที่ไม่เท่าเทียมกันและการเข้าถึงการศึกษาที่ดีกว่า ภายใต้สถานการณ์เช่นนี้นั้น ความไม่เท่าเทียมในรายได้จึงยืดเยื้อต่อไป

โดยการใช้การสนทนากับกลุ่มเป้าหมายและการสัมพาษณ์อย่างลึกซึ้งนั้น งานวิจัยที่ผมเสนอในที่นี้จะพยายามที่จะเข้าใจว่าชาวสิงคโปร์เชื้อชาติมาเลย์นั้นมองถึงความไม่เท่าเทียมในรายได้และผลกระทบที่มีต่อดารศึกษาของพวกเขาอย่างไรบ้าง นอกจากนี้วิทยานิพนธ์ฉบับนี้จะนำเสนอข้อมูลเชิงลึกว่ามุมมองของพวกเขานั้นมีความหมายอย่างไร ผู้วิจัยหวังว่าข้อมูลเหล่านี้จะสามารถนำไปเสริมความรู้ให้กับนักวิชาการท่านอื่นและชี้นำไปถึงวิถีทางที่จะเข้าถึงชุมชนเชื้อชาติมาเลย์ เพื่อที่จะปรับปรุงชีวิตความเป็นอยู่และช่วยให้พวกเขาได้เจอกับความปรารถนาของพวกเขาแม้ว่าพวกเขาจะต้องเจอกับอุปสรรคเหล่านี้ และเพื่อให้พวกเขามั่นใจว่าจะมีส่วนร่วมที่เท่าเทียมกันในอนาคตของประเทศสิงคโปร์

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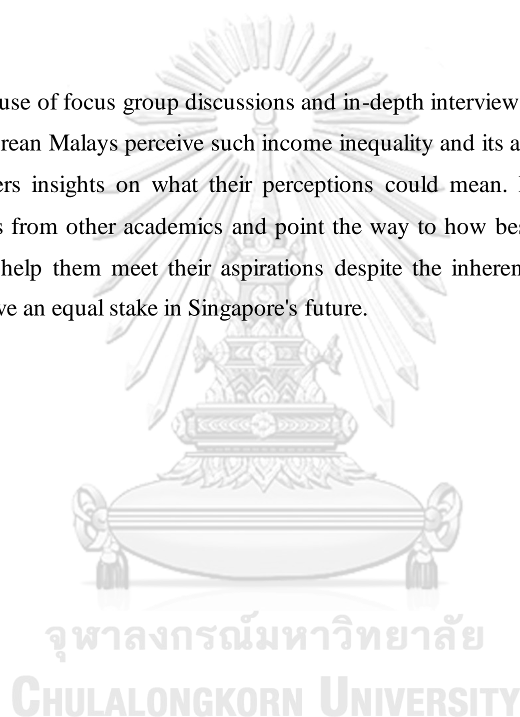
Studies on the profile of income inequality revealed that Singaporean Malays continuously occupied the lowest income strata and fared relatively poorer in their academic performance compared to other races. In a highly competitive meritocratic education system that rewards relative merit, yet neglects how unequal backgrounds provided unfair starting points for some, such low-income Malay households may appear to be systemically disadvantaged by income inequality and their access to better education. Under these circumstances, income inequality is further perpetuated.

Through the use of focus group discussions and in-depth interviews, my proposed research will seek to understand how Singaporean Malays perceive such income inequality and its adverse impact on their education. In addition, this paper offers insights on what their perceptions could mean. It is hoped that these insights will complement the findings from other academics and point the way to how best engage the Malay community, to improve their lives and help them meet their aspirations despite the inherent challenges they may face and to assure them that they have an equal stake in Singapore's future.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Chapter I Introduction

This thesis is concerned with Singaporean Malays perspectives of the impact of rising income inequality on their education. This chapter provides an introduction to my thesis topic and touched on the background of income inequality in Singapore's context and its relationship to education and social mobility, the role of meritocracy in the education system and the implications of these developments for low-income Singaporean Malays. This chapter also covers the research objectives, questions, methodologies and scope and concludes by highlighting the constraints and limitations and the significance of this research.

1.1 Widening Income Inequality

Since independence in 1965, Singapore's main aim was to achieve sustainable economic growth by maintaining political stability, ethnic peace and cohesion in a multi-racial society. It was believed that the fruits of economic growth would benefit everyone and consequently reduce income inequality between races. But as Singapore's GDP per capita grew, the rising tide did not lift all boats as the distribution of wealth did not permeate all levels equitably. Yet the government did believe that all Singaporeans would benefit from rising inequality; that if the rich got richer, everyone would benefit from the jobs created and poverty would be alleviated (Mahbubani. 2015). But the promise of 'trickle down economics' from the wealth accumulated from economic growth was a false dawn.

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Many critics asserted that economic inequality was a political phenomenon and argued that Singapore's 'growth at all cost' policy worsened income inequality, eroded its 'growth with equity' social compact, divided the community and undermined social cohesion (Rahim 2015). For instance, the tight labour market in the 80s prompted Singapore to restructure its economy to redefine its competitive advantage. Consequently, Singapore successfully transitioned from a low-paid, low-

skilled, labour intensive assembly manufacturing to a knowledge economy; characterized by advanced high technology production processes and international finance (Castells, M. 1992).

However, this rapid transition to a knowledge-driven economy resulted in skill-biased growth. While the educated and highly skilled were assured of growing employment opportunities, the less educated, semi and unskilled locals could not adapt to the new demands of the rapidly evolving economy and were faced with structural unemployment (Dhamani, 2008). And as Singaporeans became more educated they shunned manual, low-paid work. Hence, the government has had to bring in unskilled foreign workers to meet the shortfall in the lower-skilled jobs in manufacturing, construction and domestic services (Yeoh, 2007).

The situation is further exacerbated by Singapore's demographic challenges. The number of working Singaporeans is projected to decline from 2020 (as the number of younger citizens starting work fail to replace the older ones retiring). From 2025, Singapore faces a rapidly aging and shrinking population (Population White Paper, 2013). These demographic challenges pose an existential threat to Singapore because economic development is not merely a goal but a means to survival. Being competitive in the international economy is Singapore's way of surviving, both as a state and as a society (Castells, M. 1992).

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Hence, the government has continued to emphasize, even at some political cost, why Singapore needed to maintain the policy of an open society that welcomed skilled and unskilled foreign workers to sustain and drive economic growth. Under these circumstance, Ho (2011) and Weng (2013) attributed income inequality in Singapore to this *relentless* pursuit of economic growth that resulted in a chronic labour shortage, a high influx of unskilled migrant workers that depressed wages at the bottom and the reduced progressive taxes to attract and retain skilled foreign talent.

1.2 Relationship between Income Inequality, Education and Social Mobility

The Singapore government sees education as a way to social mobility and a hallmark of its education system (Ministry of Education, 2011, as cited by Senin & Ng, (2012)). In principle, the meritocratic education system would ensure that the best schools were open to all Singaporeans (Li, 1990). Yet, Singapore's education system has been criticized for features that appeared to reduce social mobility; where education became another way for parents to transfer their economic status to their children (Ng, 2007).

Better-off parents were channeling more resources, effort and time to help their children succeed. These resources and the family background gave these children a competitive edge over those from low-income households directly (e.g. finance for books, fees, and tuition) or indirectly through parental and teachers' expectations of the child's ability and potential (Li, 1990).

The "privatization and marketization" of schools and the encouragement of competition among schools further intensified competition (Tan 1993, 1998). As the elite independent schools charged higher school fees, they were much better resourced financially. They also had greater autonomy in their curricular and were able to develop specialized programs that raised the schools' and their students' social status (Lim & Apple, 2015). As competition between schools intensified, schools became increasingly academically selective to raise their rankings. These developments disadvantaged students from low-income households with relatively lesser resources because they had to compete against the well-off for limited placements in choice schools (Ng, 2007).

The competitive nature of Singapore's education system has further exacerbated inequality as children of these well-to-do Singaporeans achieve tangible educational advantages and stand better chances to access independent schools, attend prestigious universities and command higher salaries. The conditions for competition

have been equalized partly by community groups that provide tuition services for poor families which are heavily subsidized. However, one may argue that the quality of such subsidized big-group tutorial services is not comparable to the elite tuition centers that are only accessible for the well-heeled.

When these independent schools provide priority admission for students from their affiliated schools, it makes it even harder for students from mainstream schools to access such elite institutions (Lim & Apple, 2015). Such a system also ensures that families that have had access to privileged education would transmit this privilege to the next generation (Li, 1990). In a system where priority admission will be given to those who live nearer to the school, the disproportionately higher number of good primary schools in rich neighborhoods further limits access to those who do not stay in the vicinity. The preferential enrollment for children of alumni further perpetuates this inequality. Under such circumstances, if access was limited only to children of the wealthy, education may impart "intergenerational inequality" (Mukhopadhaya, 2003); and if certain groups obtain higher rewards from their education than other groups, then education may increase income inequality.

As Singapore's schools continued to be heavily biased towards the cognitive elite, those who failed to qualify for polytechnics or junior colleges after their secondary education could only pursue vocational and technical training at the Institutes of Technical Education (ITEs). The greater weight that employers place on tertiary educational qualifications is reflected in the gap in starting salaries between graduates from ITE and those from universities and polytechnics. This closes the loop that links higher income with better educational opportunities and consequently higher potential income. Thus, when employers view educational performance as an indicator of potential job ability (especially for fresh graduates), it makes the education system even more competitive and more unequal. The absence of more tracks to success, especially for the academically weak, widens the income gap.

In Singapore's context, income inequality takes on a more serious complexion since it appears that there are implications on racial distribution of life chances

through education. We have thus far touched on how income inequality affects educational performance. We shall next explore how the educational system in Singapore reinforces racial stratification and widens income inequality.

1.3 The Role of Meritocracy in Singapore's Education System

Meritocracy was and has remained a key principle of governance in Singapore. Early policies sought to reduce inequality by leveraging the principle of meritocracy as an equitable way to distribute education in Singapore (Lee, 2000). This entailed equalizing opportunity not outcomes, and allocating rewards on the basis of an individual's merit, abilities or achievements. The best is selected, regardless of who that person is.

Besides enhancing the value and productivity of Singapore's manpower, the education system also served as a driver of Singapore's meritocratic sorting process by attempting to assess levels of merit objectively and streaming people to their respective socioeconomic position (Moore, 2003). However, Amartya Sen described meritocracy as intuitively appealing but an "essentially under-defined principle" because much hinged on what counted as merit.

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For instance, the criterion for admission to the best government secondary schools is based on the results from the national Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE). Hence, the nub of the issue is whether the education system assesses merit fairly and objectively, regardless of class and ethnicity. While it would appear fair that every twelve-year-old student sits for the same examination, the concern with streaming is that the assessment process does not consider the individual's background (e.g. the challenges that students of low-income, uneducated home backgrounds had to overcome) to produce the level of performance shown.

Furthermore, an unintended consequence of streaming is that it systemically categorizes schools into 'good' or 'bad'. Students who performed poorly would only

qualify for schools with a bad academic track record and generally performed as predicted (Li, 1990). Li claimed that such a system inadvertently formalized and entrenched the tendency of teachers to expect poor performance from students who didn't do well; even when such students were most unlikely to have shown the full potential by the age of twelve.

Thus, a key criticism of Singapore's meritocratic education system is that policies based on free meritocracy focused too much on equalizing opportunity, engendered a culture of competitiveness and further perpetuated inequality by neglecting how unequal backgrounds provided an unfair starting point for some (Tan, 2008).

Notwithstanding the above, as every Singaporean was provided with 'equal opportunity' to access education, the idea of meritocracy continued to cement itself as a legitimate instrument to achieve equality. Over time, meritocracy as an ideology gained legitimacy among the populace. Having seen how income inequality affects educational performance and how meritocratic processes widens inequality we next examine their impact on Singaporeans Malays.

1.4 Implications for Singaporean Malays with Low-Income

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Lest one succumbs to the nostalgic view that Singapore was a largely egalitarian society in the past, it should be pointed out that inequality was already present when Singapore was founded and it remained a highly unequal society even during its independence in 1965. The Malays, who were the indigenous race, were much poorer than the other migrant races (Moore,2003).

Singapore's development was premised on the basis that economic growth would advance the whole population and consequently reduce inter-racial income disparity. However, the fruits of economic growth were not distributed to all races equitably. Statistics of household incomes in 2000 showed that compared to other

races, Singaporean Malays earned the least income and yet had the biggest household sizes (Dhamani, 2008). In other social economic categories such as education and housing, the racial hierarchy still showed the Chinese at the apex, the Malays at the foot and the Indians sandwiched between (Moore, 2003). For instance, between 1996 – 2005, Malays fared poorest in their 'O' level examinations among all races (Dhamani, 2008). In fact, pass rates of Malay students were lower than the other ethnicities at all levels, from primary leaving to secondary leaving (Senin & Ng, (2012); Ministry of Education, 2016). Singaporean Malays were significantly under-represented in higher levels of education and in high status and salaried jobs (Moore, 2003).

Consistent with the studies linking income and educational performance, Chinese with the highest household income perform much better academically than the Malays who had the lowest income, Consequently, there were disproportionately more Chinese in tertiary education earning higher starting salaries than the Malays.

Thus, the narrative portrayed by these statistics suggest that as Singaporean Chinese were better educated and earned higher incomes, they had more resources to provide developmental support for their children. These children subsequently qualified for finer schools, were educated in universities and consequently earned higher salaries during employment. On the other hand, as more Singaporean Malays came from lower-educated, poorer families, they were less likely able to afford the developmental opportunities for their children. Hence, these Malays were more likely to perform relatively poorer academically, eventually employed in low paying jobs and face continual challenges to be free from the low income trap (Dhamani, 2008).

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1.5 Research Objectives

The first research objective is to understand what Singaporean Malays views are on the fairness of meritocracy in the education system, the consequent starting

salaries of fresh graduates from ITEs, polytechnics and universities and their race's relative position compared in the income earned and the qualifications attained.

The next objective is to understand whether there is a shift in perception when presented with past research findings on how Singapore's highly competitive meritocratic education system rewards 'relative merit', where one's achievements prevents others from accomplishing the same or doing better (Low. 2013), yet neglects how unequal backgrounds provided unfair starting points for some perpetuates income inequality. Lastly, to understand from Singaporean Malays what they think low-income Malay households need most to help them improve their current and future lot in life.

1.6 Research Questions

Main Question: How do Singaporean Malays feel about income inequality and the adverse impact it has on their chances in education?

Sub-Question (1): What are Singaporean Malays views when presented with past research findings on:

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a. How Malays continually occupied the lowest income strata in society;
b. The uneven playing field that low-income Malay households had to compete under in the national education system; and
c. The consequent adverse implications on such families' future social mobility.

Sub-Question (2): What are their views on the ideology of meritocracy? Is it fair?

1.7 Research Methodology & Scope

Documentary and field research was carried out for this thesis. Documentary research involved basic literature review into the concepts of income inequality on

education, especially in Singapore's context, and about the challenges that Singaporean Malays faced.

For my field research into understanding Singaporean Malays perspectives, I had considered adopting questionnaires and surveys for better reach. However, these methodologies may not provide the means for a deeper understanding of the underlying reasons behind subjects' responses. Besides, the concepts and relationship between income inequality, meritocracy and social mobility cannot be easily explained in a questionnaire, participants may not fully understand the questions and this may influence their response.

The most important reason influencing the choice of my field research methodology was the sensitivity of racial and religious issues in Singapore and the need for any such discussion to be handled very carefully. For this reason, I opted for a qualitative study using focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with a small sample of Singaporean Malays. Being a Singaporean Chinese may limit my ability to elicit open, honest responses from my participants on the impact of income inequality on their education. It was also crucial that there was trust between the participants and I. For these reasons, I relied on my Malay colleagues from the same organization that I worked in to help approach their fellow Malay colleagues to volunteer as participants in my research study.

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The focus group discussions and most interviews were conducted at the organization's training room, somewhere familiar and not intimidating. As the period of the interview was during the month of Ramadan, the Muslim fasting month, it was important to choose a venue that would facilitate participation and minimize inconvenience to participants. Two focus group discussions were conducted involving a total of twelve participants and four participants were selected for in-depth interviews.

I started first with focus group discussions and prepared two sets of presentations. The first presentation familiarized participants with the concepts and terms used. It touched on the common narrative on the merits of meritocracy,

Singapore's education system, and starting salaries of graduates, diploma holders and ITE graduates. After the presentation, I invited participants to talk about what they had just been briefed (e.g. what they thought of Singapore's education system, the idea of meritocracy and the rewards on education?). Participants understanding of these concepts, right or wrong, was still useful research material.

I then followed up the discussion with a second presentation that touched on how Singaporean Malays earned the least income relative to other races. I pointed out how in most developed societies, better off parents were channeling more resources to their children and putting much more effort and time with their kids at a very early age and through life to help them succeed. I explained how students from low-income households would have to compete against those who were more well-off; how such competition in a meritocratic educational system could further perpetuate inequality. Participants then started discussing the second presentation.

After both focus group discussions were conducted, I carried out in-depth interviews over the next few days with some participants to dive deeper into what was discussed during the focus groups; to uncover underlying motivations, beliefs for the views that they had expressed during the discussion. At the end of the interview/focus group discussion, each participant was presented with a token to compensate them for their time.

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1.8 Constraints and Limitations

Racial and religious issues are extremely sensitive in Singapore and public discussions on these issues have to be handled very carefully. As my literature review suggested that certain races constantly fared better than the Malays, this raised the sensitivity level significantly as I would need to discuss with my Malay participants about how their race appears to be systemically disadvantaged (and by extension, another race benefits).

Given the nature of the research topic, I was cognizant that as a Singaporean Chinese, I may face limitations on how open, honest and direct the selected Malay participants would be during the focus group discussions and interviews. It was thus crucial for me to establish trust between the participants and I. Choosing Malay participants from the same organization that I worked in helped provide a certain degree of assurance to the participants that they could trust me. Furthermore, as participation was strictly voluntary, there was no reason for participants to take part if they felt that they would not be able to speak freely for fear of retribution. Every effort was made to assure participants on their anonymity so they could speak freely. Nonetheless, it was still possible that some participants would not speak truthfully and instead provide only 'politically correct' views.

It was also critical to ensure that the briefings I gave at the focus group discussions and interview sessions were objective and not lead them to believe that governance based on meritocracy and the educational system was *deliberately* designed to disadvantage or favor any particular race. I was very cautious in providing a balanced, objective view to prevent the likelihood of inadvertently stoking racial tensions within participants.

The three months given for the preparation and submission of this research thesis report limited the depth of the research. Time constraints limited the number of focus group discussions and interviews that could be conducted. Hence, I do not purport that the findings from the interviews and focus group discussions reflect the views of the entire Singaporean Malay community. Instead, I understand that whatever narrative I present from my findings represent only the samples interviewed and my personal interpretation of their views. Nonetheless, it is still important to gain insight into how Singaporean Malays perceive these issues, recognize that such views exist, understand what drives these views, identify the possible consequences and think through how to address these challenges.

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1.9 Significance of Research

I understood that the path of development that Singapore took ensured its survival as a state and as a society. Trade-offs had to be made and the negative impact mitigated. Yet, I was deeply concerned when I read studies on the adverse impact that income inequality had on low-income Malays. Some may argue that the problem of income inequality affected all races. However, as Malays were over-represented in the low-income stratum, it meant that proportionately more Malays encountered the challenges linked with low incomes (Li, 1990).

Past research also exposed the flaws in the ideology of meritocracy. The Government claims that the *hallmark* of Singapore's education system was its ability to enable social mobility. However, it seemed contradictory that low-income Malay households appeared to be systemically disadvantaged by government education policies and meritocratic processes that rewarded relative merit in a zero-sum race and widened income inequality. These households were disadvantaged when they competed with higher income households to qualify for limited placements in choice schools. As a consequence, the inability to qualify for higher education adversely affected their social mobility. Arguably, the system even appears to transmit such inequality to the next generation.

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If Singaporean Malays whether rightly or wrongly perceive that they are being methodically disadvantaged and marginalized, the social fabric that binds society together is being threatened. Knock-on effects could even lead to economic and political instability. And if trust in the meritocratic system is eroded, the virtues of meritocracy founded on principles of equal opportunity may no longer resonate strongly with the populace. Over time, the principle of meritocracy may lose its capacity as leverage for political legitimacy. There would be reduced social cohesion over time as a culture of resentment, helplessness, social detachment and envy sets in. Growing inequality would threaten the very foundation of Singapore.

Such trends are a serious social, political and security concern for a small 'red dot' surrounded by larger Muslim neighbors. It is increasingly common for racial and religious issues to be played up in the region to secure political votes. History has shown that such anti-racial/religious sentiments have the potential to spread easily to Singapore.

A persistent and widening income gap between the 'have-not' Malays and the 'haves' from the other races and an education system that appears to entrench Malays in their existing social-economic strata may amplify their perceived sense of injustice and incite similar animosity in the local Malay community. Such developments provide the conditions for racial tensions to be easily stoked. Social media post(s) of insensitive remarks or acts by non-Malays against members of the Malay community or their faith, culture can be fueled by the online vitriol that ensues, could easily ignite violent racial conflict.

Thus the impact of income inequality on Singaporean Malays' education and social mobility is a "black elephant" problem[1]. Sweeping the matter under the carpet, pretending that it is not there and not discussing the problem because of reasons of sensitivity do not help. Arguing that the system is fair and racially blind is not enough since *perceptions* of a lack of justice alone could affect behavior. In my opinion, there is never any deliberate attempt to racial bias in the government's policies. Yet, we cannot ignore public perception to the contrary.

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There is no single 'silver bullet' policy that would resolve the complex issue(s) surrounding the challenges faced by low income Malays to improving their economic situation, their academic performance in the national education system and their social mobility. However, acknowledging the existence of this *Black Elephant* problem is

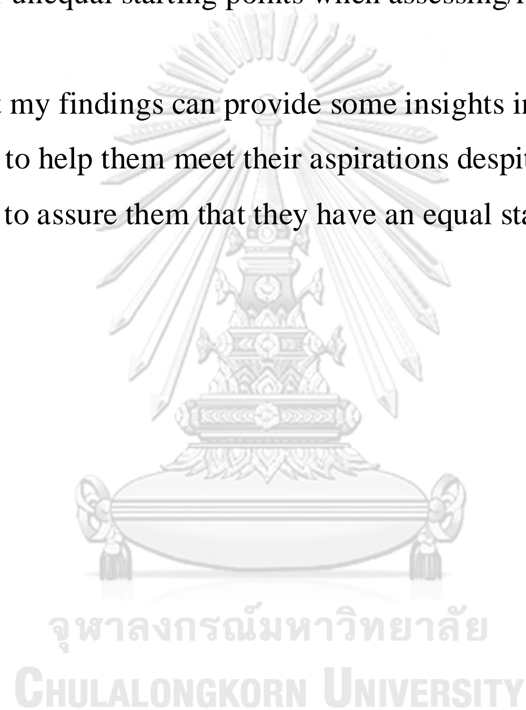
[1] Mr Peter Ho, former Head of the Singapore Civil Service, coined the term "The Black Elephant" and described it as a cross between the black swan and the proverbial elephant in the room. The black elephant was a problem that was actually visible to everyone, but no one wanted to deal with it, and so they pretended it was not there. When it blew up as a problem, everyone pretended to be surprised and shocked, behaving as if it were a black swan.

the first step. The gap in knowledge that my research aimed to fill is to provide insights into how Singaporean Malays felt about:

a. Their relative position in the income inequality hierarchy where Malays continually occupied the lowest income strata in society; and

b. How a meritocratic education system appears to fail to give them a fair chance of success in education when it rewarded 'relative merit' and which failed to account for unequal starting points when assessing/rewarding merit

It is hoped that my findings can provide some insights into how best to engage the Malay population, to help them meet their aspirations despite the inherent challenges they may face and to assure them that they have an equal stake in Singapore's future.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Chapter II Literature Review

My literature review reflects my learning journey in this research. Each section reflects both the knowledge I gleaned from the many learned academics but at the same time, challenged me to think differently.

2.1 Inequality and its Dimensions

In seeking to understand the history of income inequality in Singapore, Bryan Turner's 1986 work "Equality" argued that capitalism alone did not create and sustain inequality. Turner pointed out that history has shown that inequality already existed a long time ago and where "agrarian feudal people" experienced degrading poverty and inequality in a market-dominated society. Turner identified three forms of equality: (1) equality of opportunity where access to rewards is open to all; (2) equality of condition where all start from the same position; and (3) equality of results or outcome.

2.2 Singapore's Development Journey and the Rise of Income Inequality

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Understanding Singapore's development history allowed for a better appreciation of the reasons behind key policy decisions that may have resulted in growing income inequality downstream. Manual Castells' 1992 work "Four Asian Tigers with a Dragon Head – A Comparative Analysis of the State, Economy, and Society in the Asian Pacific Rim" observed how economic development was not merely a goal but a means to Singapore's survival. It was this 'survival mentality' that guided most of Singapore's key economic decisions, especially when there were difficult trade-offs that had to be made.

It was also important to trace Singapore's post-independence development journey and identify the circumstances that contributed to income inequality in

Singapore. Ishita Dhamani's 2008 piece "Income Inequality in Singapore: Causes, Consequences and Policy Options" charted Singapore's early economic strategy after independence.

Dhamani pointed out that Singapore started by focusing on labor intensive exports to provide jobs for the majority unskilled locals. However, the government had to transition from a labour intensive economy to a knowledge economy to avoid competing with regional countries on labour costs. This rapid transformation involved heavy investment in education and technology. However, the trade-off was that such skill-biased growth resulted in structural unemployment for those who could not adapt to the demands of the rapidly evolving economy. Consequently, the majority of the poor were the 'working poor' who worked in sectors that became structurally redundant to the national economy (Li, 1990).

The 2013 Population White Paper projected that the number of working Singaporeans would decline from 2020 and Singaporeans would also age quickly and the number would begin shrinking from 2025. These demographic challenges posed a direct existential threat to Singapore's survival because it meant that its only mode of production – its people, was at risk. The government implemented a slew of policies to attract skilled foreign talent and facilitate the inflow of unskilled foreign workers. These migrant workers would augment the local population to sustain and drive continued economic growth.

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Consequently, unskilled foreign workers depressed wages and the reduced progressive taxes widened the income gap between the haves and the have-nots even further. Hui Weng Tat and Ho Kong Weng, in their respective pieces "Economic growth and inequality in Singapore: The case for a minimum wage" (2013) and "Growth, Opportunity, and Inequality: Some Empirics from Singapore" attributed Singapore's income inequality to the relentless pursuit of economic growth that resulted in a chronic labour shortage and the high demand for skilled and unskilled migrant workers. The fact that neither Hui nor Ho appeared to criticize this outcome

suggested that it may have been a necessary trade-off that the government had to make to ensure Singapore's survival.

2.3 Meritocracy

Any discussion on Singapore's education system necessitated an understanding of what meritocracy was, its value as a governance tool, Singaporeans perception of meritocracy and the direct/indirect impact that an unfettered meritocracy had on stakeholders.

Tan, K. P.'s 2008 article "Meritocracy and Elitism in a Global City: Ideological Shifts in Singapore" explained how meritocracy engendered a competitive culture that overshadowed its egalitarian attributes. If the meritocratic process focused too much on equalizing opportunity, it risked neglecting how unequal backgrounds could provide an unfair starting point for some and thus may further perpetuate inequality.

Notwithstanding the inherent flaws of a *pure* meritocracy, Donald Low (2014) argued that more attention be paid to how meritocracy was converted from an ideal into practice, "Meritocracy is unambiguously desirable only if we distribute rewards on the basis of *absolute performance*, as opposed to *relative merit*". A meritocracy based on absolute performance enhanced societal health because the realization of those standards did not prevent others from accomplishing the same or doing better. Such meritocracy promoted cooperative behaviors.

On the contrary, Low cautioned that a meritocracy that rewarded relative merit was wasteful and "turned the game from a positive sum one to a competitive, zero-sum one over relative position". To increase their chances of attaining the coveted positional good (or to avoid penalties), everyone would channel more resources to compete. Low's point challenges Singapore's national education system because it allocates rewards based on relative performance.

2.4 Singapore's Education System and How it Exacerbates Income Inequality

David Ng's "Strategic Management of Educational Development in Singapore (1965–2005)" detailed how the education system supported Singapore's economic strategy at every phase of her development journey. Ng pointed out how government spending on education had increased over time from S$1.78 billion in 1985 to S$6.1 billion in 2005, an average of about 20% of its total budget annually. Ng opined that this reflected the government's seriousness in developing human capital through education. However, in relation to the impact of income inequality on education, it would be as important, if not more, to determine how the education budget was allocated to provide greater equity.

Primary One registration and PSLE in Primary Six are two of the most stressful stages for parents in their children's education journey. A primary reason for this is because of Singapore's highly competitive education system. Jason Tan's (1993) "Independent Schools in Singapore: Implications on Social and Educational Inequalities" and (1998) "The Marketisation of Education in Singapore: Policies and Implications" criticized the government's initiative to allow schools greater autonomy by privatizing selected schools and encouraging greater competition between schools by publicizing their rankings. These initiatives had the effect of further intensifying competition for access to education. And in an education system that leverages meritocratic processes to measure performance, unequal backgrounds meant that some would enjoy an unfair advantage over others arising from such unequal starting points.

Irene Y.H. Ng's (2014) "Education and intergenerational mobility in Singapore" highlighted how Singapore's education system showed features that appeared to hamper social mobility. She cited how ability and school-based streaming, together with the privatization of education, reduced the chances of social mobility for low-income households competing with others for limited placements in good schools.

Lily Zubaidah Rahim's (2015) "Reclaiming Singapore's 'Growth with Equity' Social Compact" echoed how economic inequality was a political phenomenon. She opined that the government's 'growth at all cost' policy worsened income inequality and eroded its 'growth with equity' social compact, divided the community and undermined social cohesion. This was the biggest threat that growing income inequality posed, especially when there appears to be a racial profile for Singapore's income inequality.

2.5 The Racial Profile of Singapore's Income Inequality

Tania Li's "Malays in Singapore" (1990) provided a historical account of how the Dutch and the Portuguese completely eliminated the indigenous Malays trading class that dominated inter-regional shipping facilities in the 15th and 16th centuries. By the mid-17th century, these colonial powers had fully monopolized international trade in the Indonesian Archipelago. When the British arrived in Singapore in 1819, the conspicuous absence of an indigenous trading class led the British to perceive that the natives, i.e. the indigenous Malays, as "indolent and uninterested in economic pursuit" [Alatas (1977), as cited by Li (1990)]. The British branded the Malays and other Southeast Asian natives as lazy because their yield from subsistence agriculture allowed them to turn down poor work conditions in colonial mines and plantations [Alatas (1977), as cited by Li (1990)].

Two pieces of work that highlighted the racial profile of Singapore's income inequality were from R. Quinn Moore (2003) "Multiracialism and meritocracy - Singapore's approach to race and inequality." and Ishita Dhamani (2008) "Income Inequality in Singapore: Causes, Consequences and Policy Options" Moore pointed out that economic growth in 1970s and 1980s did not benefit all races equitably. Consequently, there were significantly fewer Malays in higher standards of education and in high status and salaried jobs. Even in more recent studies, Malays continued to

occupy the lowest income strata. Their income per individual was dragged down even more because they also had the biggest household size.

Li (1990) claimed that during post-independence years, there were few courses taught in the Malay language for the few Malays who qualified for university. The low economic value of the Malay-language education saw many Malay-stream students effectively excluded from all the professional and scientific courses taught in English.

Like Moore, Dhamani too pointed out that Malays occupied the lowest societal strata for income distribution and most came from lower-educated, poorer families. Dhamani stated that owing to their lower income, Malays were less likely able to afford the developmental opportunities for their younger generations. As a result, Malay in Singapore were more likely to perform poorly academically, eventually employed in low paying jobs and face continual challenges to be free from the low income trap.

2.6 Conceptual Framework

This thesis set out to understand how Singaporean Malays perceive the impact of income inequality on their opportunities in Singapore's education system. The conceptual framework for this thesis assumes that education has the capability to raise social mobility. However, income inequality, a meritocratic education system and some government policies had influenced students' education opportunities and performance. Details were outlined in the preceding paragraphs.

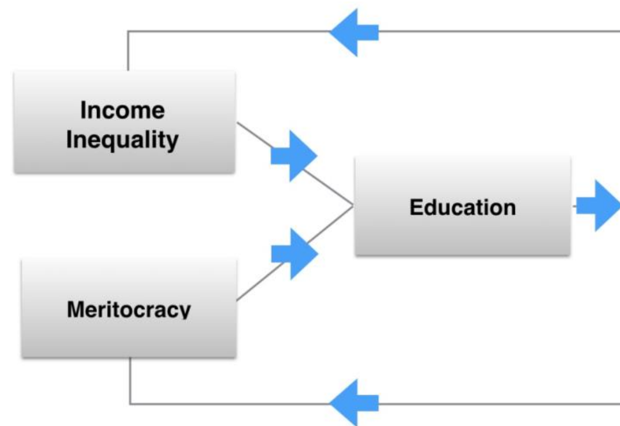

Figure 1: Meritocracy interactions

But it is at this point where the thesis will seek to understand what Singaporean Malays views are on each of these factors, their confluence and the consequent impact on their chances in education. This study recognizes that Singaporean Malays have agency, their mental models will shape their views and this in turn would translate into action. These insights will be useful to guide stakeholders engage the Malay population, to work together to address the challenges they face.

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Chapter III Research Findings

3.1 Introduction

I chose to conduct focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with a small sample of Singaporean Malays because of the sensitivity of racial and religious issues in Singapore. It was prudent to ensure that such discussions were handled very carefully. To build trust and to elicit open honest responses from my participants who are of a different race from me, I decided to ask two of my Malay colleagues from the same organization that I worked in to help approach other fellow Malay colleagues to volunteer as participants in my research study.

Two focus group discussions were conducted involving a total of twelve participants and four participants were selected for in-depth interviews. I started first with focus group discussions and prepared two sets of presentations. The first presentation introduced participants to the common narrative on the merits of meritocracy, Singapore’s education system, and starting salaries of graduates, diploma holders and ITE graduates. After the presentation, participants would talk about what they thought of Singapore’s education system, the idea of meritocracy and the rewards on education.

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Next, I gave a second presentation on how Singaporean Malays earned the least income relative to other races and how such wide differences in income gave rise to unequal starting points in the meritocratic race. I explained how students from low-income households would have to compete against those who were more well-off and gave examples on how such a system further perpetuated inequality. Participants then started discussing the second presentation.

After both focus group discussions were conducted, I carried out in-depth interviews with some participants to understand more about what was being discussed

during the focus groups. This is to uncover underlying motivations, beliefs for the views that they had expressed during the discussion.

3.2 Participants' Backgrounds

Borhan is a 54-year-old Malay Muslim who is married with a wife and two children. He currently draws a monthly salary of about S$4,000 (approximately THB$100,000). Borhan's elder son is 22 years old and is currently pursuing a degree in social work at the National University of Singapore. He was a graduate from Anglo-Chinese School (Independent), an elite school in Singapore. He had qualified for the prestigious integrated program[2] and had previously been awarded various scholarships for academic excellence. His daughter graduated with a Diploma in Customer and Business Management from Republic Polytechnic.

Born to a middle-income family, Borhan's parents were both 'A'-level holders and were Malay-language teachers. Borhan was the youngest among the four siblings. He had an eldest brother and two elder sisters. When Borhan was 13, his father passed away from cancer leaving his mother to become the sole breadwinner in the family. Despite the setback, Borhan and his eldest brother graduated with a diploma while his two sisters were 'A'-level holders. Although their 'A'-level results did not qualify them for the local university, Borhan's sisters wanted to go on to study overseas. Unfortunately, Borhan's mother was unable to afford to send them overseas and both sisters started working after 'A' levels.

Borhan and his wife had originally planned to have 3 or 4 children. Borhan drew a good salary and both felt that they could have afforded more kids. Unfortunately, Borhan's wife had a miscarriage and she was advised not to conceive again for medical reasons. Borhan said "*If God thinks I should just have two, I am already thankful for that*".

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[2] The Integrated Program is a scheme that allows high-performing secondary school students who were 'clearly university bound' to skip the 'O'-level examinations and proceed directly to 'A'-levels.

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Siti is a 30-year-old Malay Muslim. Her father is 54 years-old, holds a diploma and is currently a mosque manager after he was retrenched from his previous job about a year ago. Her mother is also 54-years old, has ‘O’-level qualifications and is working as a clerk in a different mosque. Siti has four younger siblings. One of them is a graduate from the Nanyang Technological University and is married. The remaining three are still schooling. One of them is pursuing a degree at the Singapore Institute of Technology, another is studying for a diploma in Republic Polytechnic, and the youngest is studying for her ‘O’ levels in secondary school.

Siti currently stays alone in a rented room in Tampines while the rest of her family lives in Johor Bahru, Malaysia. The family apartment has since been rented out for extra income. Every day, the family would travel across the causeway that links Peninsula Malaysia and Singapore to go to work and to attend school.

Siti used to be a kindergarten teacher for a year before she joined a Montessori for another year. However, as she didn’t have a diploma in the field of early childhood education, she was paid a salary of $1,450 monthly. As she didn’t like desk bound jobs, she decided to change her job when the current organization offered her $1,800 monthly. She has been working at this organization for almost 8 years and had since been promoted once.

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Siti currently draws a monthly salary of about $3,400 (excluding overtime pay) and considers herself in the middle-income bracket. In her view, any income below $2,000 a month is considered as low-income. As she has to pay $800 rental monthly for her room, Siti supplements her income by working about 50 hours of overtime a month. This brings her another $850 monthly ($17.00 per hour of overtime). She is currently preparing for her wedding to another colleague in the same organization and plans to have children eventually.

Halim is 30 years old and currently earns $3,700 a month. Even though Halim qualified for a place in the university, he decided to work after his diploma because he

wanted to help his family out of a bad financial situation. He told himself that he could work first and then study later on. True to his work, he has since graduated with a degree while he was working full-time. His primary motivating factor to get a degree was to challenge himself and to prove to himself that he could do it.

Halim's mother is currently 48 years old. She had to quit secondary school during her teens to help take care of her father who was diagnosed with lung cancer. Despite these challenges, Halim's mother currently earns $3,000 monthly as a cook and a supervisor at a food stall in Sembawang, working from 6am to 1pm daily. Halim's father is 54 years-old and has only primary school education. He started out as an electrician then moved on to be a lift technician and now a bus driver.

Halim has 2 younger brothers and a youngest sister and is the eldest of 4 children. Halim's sister is married and is currently working as a kindergarten teacher in a mosque. His first brother graduated with a diploma after completing ITE and is working at Airport Emergency Services. Halim's second brother graduated with a diploma and is now studying part-time for a degree in Nanyang Technological University while working the permanent night shift as a technician in Seagate.

Suhaidah is aged 62 and worked in the same organization as her 65-year-old husband. Their combined income then was about $7,000 a month. Suhaidah had highest qualification was 'A' levels and her husband 'O' levels. In her own words, she described herself as a 'commoner' while her husband was from a wealthy family. Suhaidah has three children. Her eldest daughter graduated with a diploma, while her two sons were university graduates.

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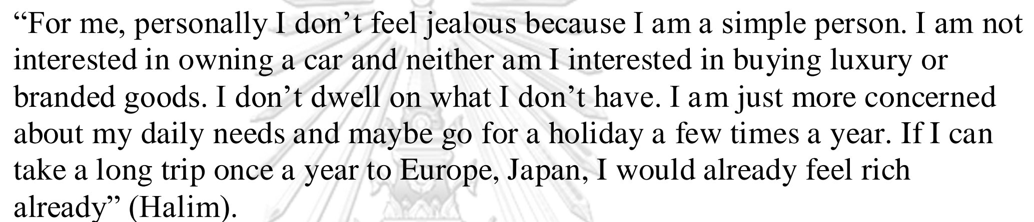
I worked with Suhaidah for almost three years previously as she was in the same team as I. She is a feisty lady who is unafraid to speak her mind if she thought she was right, even at the risk of a reprimand. It was hardly surprising that she was a mentor to younger female Malay colleagues who went to her for advice on professional and personal matters.

3.3 Income and Education Disparities

Every participant rightly saw themselves as a middle-income earner as the income that they currently earned proved that. Most participants claimed that they did not benchmark their salaries against another group but based it on what they were able to afford. When asked if they felt any sense of envy or resentment towards those who were earning more income or doing better academically, most claimed that they didn't. They claimed that they didn't compare themselves with others as their focus was on themselves.

> "For me, personally I don't feel jealous because I am a simple person. I am not interested in owning a car and neither am I interested in buying luxury or branded goods. I don't dwell on what I don't have. I am just more concerned about my daily needs and maybe go for a holiday a few times a year. If I can take a long trip once a year to Europe, Japan, I would already feel rich already" (Halim).



Nonetheless, Halim's comments below were interesting in that while he saw himself as belonging in the middle-income group, he deemed that his income would be considered high if he compared himself with members of his own race.

> "To me, I consider a salary of $3,000 to $4,000 to be middle income. Once you pass the $3,000 mark, I think it is quite a comfortable income for an individual. It allows you to meet your basic needs, afford public housing. Hence, I consider the income I earn as definitely above average. But if you are limiting the comparison to just the Malays, it may even be considered high already to me" (Halim).

Some participants expressed their disappointment when they were shown statistics on how Singaporean Malays continually ranked at the bottom for income earned and educational performance. However, none appeared surprised by the state of the Malays presented in the statistics. They claimed that such trends had already been publicized and they were aware of the situation.

Only one participant claimed that his income would have been a lot more had he not been Malay. However, further clarification showed that his point was not related to racism but more about the fact that the Malay language and his religion restricted him from entertaining the company's China clients.

It was noteworthy that none of the participants challenged the data that was presented. It was as if the data merely confirmed what they had known all these years. However, Suhaidah offered an alternative explanation to account for the economic situation of Singaporean Malays and their educational performance. She attributed the reason for the larger proportion of low-income, lowly-educated Malay households to an old policy of not conscripting male Malays in the early years. Consequently, many male Malays were unable to get jobs because most employers required a certificate of service from males who had served National Service in the army. This led to many jobless Malays turning to smoking marijuana. And as the males in the households were unable to get a job, the females had to quit school to work to supplement the family income.

> "Do you want to know why Malays have the lowest income? During Goh Keng Swee's time, no Malays were enlisted for National Service (NS). Remember? Why?! Back then, if you wanted to apply for an office boy job or any other job, you must serve NS, complete NS, produce your NS cert, then you can go for a job. You know all those young Malays who cannot find a job, you know what they do? They smoked marijuana and ganja. I saw them. I asked "Why are all these Malay boys in the kampongs all rolling ganja? Want to go for office boy job cannot. No NS. That's why because of this, Malays started on a weaker footing. Because of this all the parents and the sisters had to leave school to work and to support the young Malay men" (Suhaidah).

Generally, the participants' response suggested that they acknowledged the value of a good education and accepted the reality that a higher educational qualification would result in a higher starting salary. For these reasons, some participants even saw it as their responsibility to ensure that their children had a good education.

> "In 1983, my starting salary at a Japanese manufacturing company was S$1,100. My friends who had only 'O' levels drew only about S$500 – S$600 monthly salary, it was quite low lah" (Borhan)

> "Compared to relatives from my father's side of the family, I think our family fared slightly better because we were the only ones with university and polytechnic graduates. Most of my father's siblings have just 'O' levels or primary school education and their children are mostly graduates from ITE. They weren't able to help my grandparents out financially, unlike my father and I" (Siti).

> "My son has an 18 month old daughter that he sends to Cherries Playschool. It costs over $1,000 a month and after subsidies it still cost over $800. You know why he can send the daughter to this school? Because he got money. They got money, they are graduates. Money no issue. No money no talk" (Suhaidah).

> "It would be good if my psychology degree could help boost my career directly by helping me get a higher position and better salary, even if doesn't, the knowledge I got helped me in my daily life, at work and in my relationships… I would want my children to have the best and would like them to excel in their education. I would leave their study interest to them. But I would think when they are young the parents would have to play a part to help them do well in our education system" (Halim).

Arising from her experience working in childcare centers, Siti strongly believed in the value of early childhood education from a child development perspective. Yet, she was also cognizant that enrichment classes would ultimately provide the child with a competitive edge in a meritocratic education system.

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> "It is important to educate children at a very young age because they are able to absorb new things quickly and start learning early. I would want to send my children for enrichment classes to enhance their motor skills or even to a Montessori where there is more personal coaching and lessons are more hands-on and interactive. As children grow, these classes will give them an advantage over time. Even if the children are just moderate performers, at least they are still socializing with their friends in school and they will learn something from their experiences" (Siti).

When asked if they felt any resentment towards other races, namely the Chinese and Indians, who fared relatively better than Singaporean Malays, all the participants replied that they weren't. Instead, one participant expressed concern that these trends may cause other races to view Malays as a lower class citizen. Rather

than blame others for the Malays' predicament, they reflected on how low-income Malay households and the larger Malay community had to bear some responsibility for the situation.

3.4 Income Inequality and the Meritocratic Education System

During the focus group discussions, when the participants were presented with how income inequality provided unequal starting points for some in the pursuit of academic performance, it was noteworthy that this fact drew a rather muted response from the participants. Even when I provided examples of the unequal conditions (e.g. extracurricular tuition and developmental support that could be afforded), and asked if they felt this was fair, there was hardly any response from the participants.

Despite the weaknesses of a meritocracy that neglected unequal starting points, participants still expressed unanimous support for the national education system which they claimed was fair and provided the means to achieve social mobility. Some even went on to add that one had only himself to blame if he did not do well academically. While Halim was the only participant that was fully cognizant of the flaws of meritocracy, he appears to be resigned to the fact that it was a rat race that he could not ignore.

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> "Meritocracy is good but you would need to level the playing field for fairer competition. But I have to admit, I would still pump resources to give my children the best conditions, the best environment for learning. I would have wanted my parents to do that. It is strange that we inevitably get caught up in the rat race because if I don't participate, it will affect my child's progress and he will lose out. Not much of a choice" (Halim).

However, Siti opined that while educational qualifications featured significantly in determining one's starting income, low education need not necessarily mean a life of low income. She strongly believed in the value of continual learning, to upgrade oneself and to be better. However, to accomplish this, she said that one had to want it bad enough.

> "I think in a way it is not just education that determines the salary one earns. It is also about whether one chooses to constantly upgrade himself or to seek opportunities at work to do more. My dad started as a technician and gradually became a section manager by climbing upwards. It doesn't matter whether you have low pay or high pay. All that matters is yourself, whether you want to upgrade yourself and want to be better. It doesn't matter how long it takes, if you want to improve your family situation, you will have to work harder or to upgrade yourself. It all boils down to the mentality – do you want it bad enough or are you contented to just remain where you are" (Siti).

However, several members claimed that the practice of meritocracy was less apparent in job application and performance appraisal processes. While racial or religious reasons were never explicitly cited as causes for rejection, some participants maintained that employers turned down their applications or discouraged them from applying for certain jobs because of those reasons. Several participants brought up the issues of how Malays were not conscripted for national service during the early years of Singapore's independence nor held senior posts in the military. Participants felt that such policies not only appeared to question Singaporean Malays loyalty to the country, they also sent the wrong signal to private sector employers when considering prospective job applicants and to the wider society as a whole that Malays could not be trusted. "There will always be racism. The best way to stop racism is not to confront it and to contribute to it. There is no line dividing the races, if you think there is a line, the line appears and it becomes a reality" (Halim).

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Notwithstanding the above, every participant strongly agreed that the situation has improved significantly and cited how there were now two full-fledged Malay Cabinet Ministers and more Malays were holding senior positions in the armed forces.

3.5 Importance of Parental Support and Supervision

Participants were asked what the most important factor was that determined how children from low-income Malay households fared academically. It was noteworthy that every participant rated family support as the most important; more important than financial help from the government and community assistance.

> "In Singapore we are really lucky, if you don't have money, the school will provide school fees, free uniform, free textbooks. Divorcees don't need to pay for text books. All the basic things are there. All that is needed is the family must be committed to improve and change. There's a limit to what outsiders can do" (Borhan).

> "When I work, I must save money for my children in case they want to go to university. It is important to save money for their education. So when it came to my son, I bought an insurance policy too. And when it was time for him to go to university, I surrendered my policy and received $20,000 to fund his university education" (Suhaidah).

> "Though my parents were not able to help us much in school work, our parents were quite supportive and didn't restrict us much in terms of what we wanted to do or study" (Halim).

> "Family support is the most important for low-income family. Because if your parents are not encouraging you, or is not doing anything or are just plain lazy, then the children will follow suit. It all boils down to the parents. It's a bit sad la, but we all know that the Malays are always at the bottom" (Siti).

Borhan recalled how his mother understood the value of education and made sure that he did well in school. When asked what differentiated him from his friends who didn't fare well academically, he pointed to the level of parental control. He cited how his mum would constantly encourage him to study hard, supervise his work closely after she came back from work in the afternoon and even engaged private tutors to coach him in his weak subjects of math and science.

> "In my kampong in Kembangan, I lived in a terrace house while my friends lived in kampongs. I could see how the other Malay families were; they were mostly not educated and my friends were usually alone at home. For me, my mother taught in the morning session and she would be back in the afternoon. It was very easy for her to control us. Every evening after prayers, all of us had to sit around the dining table to revise our work. If we needed help, our mother would engage a private tutor to give us tuition. If one of us did badly, she would start to nag. "Your father has passed away, how would you survive without education?" She would keep on nagging and putting into our minds that education was important, that we must pass our examinations and we must do well. Although her naggings frustrated us a lot, looking back we understood now that she was right all along.

> Every evening at 5p.m., every one of us would be playing soccer without fail until it was time for evening prayers. However, during the examination period, my mother would strictly forbid me to go out and play soccer with my friends. My friends' parents allowed them to go out to play whenever they wanted. Their parents didn't really bother. This was the key difference between my kampong friends and I.
>
> If the parents are focused on what they want their children to be and really control and discipline their children, the end result will be better. It doesn't mean that if the parents are only 'O' level holders, their children cannot make it to university. This is not limited by the parents' education background" (Borhan).

In the broader context, Siti emphasized the importance of the time parents spend with children by claiming that no amount of enrichment classes could substitute the value of such parent-child interaction. Siti added that a lack of financial resources should not prevent parents from finding ways to spend time with their children. While there was no direct reference to low-income households, Siti appeared to also imply that the lack of income was not a good reason for parents to not spend time with their children as part of the latter's development. Borhan appeared to echo Siti's views that parents needed to sacrifice their personal time to spend it in positive interaction with their children.

> "While it is possible that my child may be disadvantaged if there are classes that I can't afford to send him to, I can still replace such classes by spending time with my child by doing something at home. I don't have to spend so much money and I can prepare my own teaching aid because I have some experience. Actually, it is more important for parents to spend time with their children and to teach them personally rather than to send their children for so many classes" (Siti).
>
> "Take the example of my wife's cousin who was a divorcee with a child. The teacher already informed the mother that the child was a dreamer and a slow-learner. What the mother needed to do was to make a big sacrifice; spend less time outside with her friends and spend more time with her child and work out what was needed to be done. But the mother claimed she was tired after work. However, I saw her Facebook postings of her going out with her friends after work! My wife and I did it the hard way too. We could have had a double-digit salary, but my wife had to sacrifice and stay at home and we lived within our means. Today we are able to see the fruits of our sacrifice" (Borhan).

While Halim acknowledged the importance of family and parental influence, he identified friends as exerting the biggest influence on a teenager's ability to do well in school.

> "Maybe it is family or parental influence, but I think the biggest influence would be friends. The friends that you hang out with play an important role, especially during secondary school. Your friends are more influential than your parents! This is the crucial part when you going through 'O' levels, where you starting thinking about your future. And if you don't pass your 'O' levels, you would not be motivated to keep on pushing forward. You would just be contented to remain where you are with your like-minded friends.
>
> Most of the time, I was lucky enough to have good, like-minded, studious friends. My friends were of mixed races, Chinese Malay Indian. I was lucky to have these competitive friends. During secondary school, we all studied together. There was a positive study environment because we all believed that studying was good for us as we could see a brighter future if we did this" (Halim).

3.5 What Malay Households with Low-Income Really Needed

It was interesting to note that even though the focus of the research was on how low-income households suffered due to the impact of income inequality, none of the participants even suggested financial help as a sustainable solution to improve the situation. Given that the government has already taken care of the children's basic education expenses, Borhan believed that the best way to help low-income Malay households overcome poverty is to equip them with skills so that they can gradually upgrade themselves and earn a higher income.

> "The schools have already done a good job in first identifying students from low-income households and providing them with support. My neighbors informed me that their children received free textbooks and uniforms and if they performed well, they received bursaries too. For the low-income households, the best way that the government can do is to help them upgrade themselves with skills. A welfare system of just giving money is not so good. By equipping them with skills and upgrading their jobs from a general worker to a supervisor it allows them to earn more money over time" (Borhan).

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The participants appeared to be very certain that low-income, lowly-educated Malay households needed counseling on the value of education, family planning and financial planning.

> "You know the low-income families; their 'pattern' is usually to get married early. That is fine except that they are not ready; they are not even on a stable job. And then they can have kids like one year once. It's crazy that you cannot afford a place for yourself and you keep having kids! And I think to myself "What were you guys thinking?!" Maybe they are not well educated and lack awareness in family planning. I'd rather plan nicely rather than have too many that I cannot manage" (Siti).
>
> "The problem with the less educated members of our Malay society is that after marriage they lack family planning and a vision for the future that they want for themselves and their children. When you ask them what their hopes are for their children, they would usually reply that they hope their children turn out to be good people. They do not really have a vision of their children attending university.
>
> Mendaki currently provides weekly tuition services. That's a good thing, but they should start a program targeted at parents whose children are facing challenges in school. Rather than spend more time on the elite by creating opportunities for interaction with other elite Malays in societies, Mendaki should work closely with the primary schools to help the child and the parents set short term and long term goals" (Borhan).

3.6 Low Parental Expectations

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Participants opined that children from low-income Malay households tended to face strong parental influence to be contented with what they had achieved in terms of educational qualification, income and employment. After all, these parents had no need for education, were equipped with skills that earned them an income that while low, was "still ok" and still allowed them to "survive".

> "Most of my friends are 'O' level holders and their children are in Polytechnics and ITEs. None are in NUS[3]. My friends do not have as high expectations as I do of my children. Some of them try to push and encourage their children in education, but they do not set a target. Sometimes when I am

[3] National University of Singapore

> talking with my friends, they would say "Aiyah, never mind lah, if they can study, let them study. If they cannot study, you cannot force them" (Borhan).

Borhan gave the example of how some Malay students may choose the "easier route" of pursuing a technical vocation in an ITE because they lacked confidence even though they qualified for a polytechnic or junior college. He opined that parents should challenge their children to push themselves rather than "take the easy way out".

> "For most of the Malays, their parents are lowly-educated. They did not stress to their children that education is important. The children of these lowly-educated Malays just don't want to study, don't want to focus on their education. They prefer another way, they just want the easier route, the safer route. They lacked confidence" (Borhan).

However, Borhan held a different view. Borhan's son is in the University and his daughter had graduated with a diploma. He felt very strongly that it was important for parents to set high expectations of their children. He claimed that he had ever told his children that his minimum expectation of them was to attain a diploma. Any less and he would have considered himself a failure given the resources that he had provided his children to work with.

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> "You have to force them! By hook or by crook they have to get a diploma. In today's job market, the minimum requirement everywhere is a diploma. During my time, there were only two polytechnics in Singapore. Qualifying for a polytechnic was already a great achievement especially when there were only about 40 Malays in the whole Polytechnic. For my daughter who was a slow learner and had low self-esteem, I had to work out how I could help her. I treated it as a test from God. Either I let her be or I spend more time with her, talk to her slowly, and encourage her. I told both my children "I am a diploma holder, your mother is an 'A'-level holder, if you get lower than me, it means I am a failure. I did not do my job well. Minimum you must get a diploma" (Borhan).

Borhan pointed to how he had benefited much from attending talks by Mr. Mansor Sukaimi on the value of education and the parents' role in helping their children do better in school

> "My wife and I went for self-enrichment classes on the importance of child education. The classes were conducted by ex-MP Mansor Sukaimi and it covered topics like how to raise a child, pre-birth preparations, motivating your child to do better, how to teach using flashcards and why it was important to start educating our child early. We would learn from his advice on how to upgrade our child and to bring the best out of him. For example, we needed to prepare our child to the level that when he attended Primary One, he must already be able to read. We were also advised on what level of results signaled that the child was struggling in Primary One and Two at school and what was needed to be done. How did I know these things? I attended classes, so I was very clear. There are many Malay broken families who did not attend the self-help classes for childhood management. They worked, sent their children for tuition but do not sacrifice their time and come back home to look after their children" (Borhan).

3.7 The 'Lazy Malay'

"My son is Malay, so he is lazy. You know, after he graduated from University, I told him to take his Masters because I worked and I saved money for him. But he said "No, no, no, I got degree enough". You know la, Malay la, Malay concept. Orang Melayu malas (the lazy Malay)" (Suhaidah).

Suhaidah referred to the tendency of Malays to finding contentment in their life as "orang Melayu malas"; translated it meant 'the lazy Malay'. Suhaidah is not alone in singling out the Malays for being lazy. Such a view was shared by almost all the participants that I interviewed. Siti similarly accused segments of the low-income Malay households of having lazy attitudes.

"These issues of broken families with big households involved in drug abuse have been happening for quite some time already. When we hear such news, we think to ourselves, "Confirm Malay, confirm Malay" It's always like that. It is culture already. I am not stereotyping, but sometimes I just can't help but to say "Aiya all these Malays ar… Why are they doing this?!"

> Sometimes they are just lazy, like plain lazy, just don't want to work. They are just not disciplined enough. I don't know what they were thinking. The problem is with themselves, they just don't want to do anything about it. They don't save and they just spend as and when they wish. Maybe they are not educated enough or they don't know what family planning is, or they don't know what is happening outside. The kids are the victims. That's a bit sad" (Siti).

Halim's following comment suggests that to him, there was only a fine line separating the observation of Malay laziness and the contentment mindset.

> "There is a saying the Malays like to 'relax one corner'. I am a Malay and to me, the Malays are usually contented with where they are in life and are ok with it. Such mindsets came from the older generation. Maybe they were influenced by an environment where the Malays were not known to be successful, where they were just average or below average and yet they were doing ok. Maybe they thought it was their destiny and it was their fate to be like this. So they stuck to this mindset of contentment since they were still doing ok, still surviving even with low-income and were not suffering much.
>
> But when you think about the current situation that we Malays are in, it is a vicious cycle. The next generation will be caught up in the vicious cycle with the same mindset that they were taught as a child. "It's ok, if education doesn't work out, just work for my uncle, my auntie, just work in a stall, just work for movers." It's typical of them, you know?
>
> It is not religion that shapes such behavior. It arises when you hang out with your own race too much. The cancer is when you hang out with too many of the same like-minded people. That's where the vicious cycle continues. If you keep on hanging out with people who think the same way, eventually you think it is the only way.
>
> To break out of this cycle, you need to hang out with other kinds of people, other races, people who are competitive, who want to be successful, who want to study. You will feel inspired and you will want to break away from your current situation. It is a mindset issue" (Halim).

While it was significant that participants were critical of their own race, it was even more noteworthy that they expressed how other races' cultures appeared superior in certain aspects compared to the Malays. For instance, Suhaidah appeared to beam with pride when she claimed that her son, who was a university graduate, had

few Malay friends and had more Chinese and Indian friends who had a positive influence on her son's development.

"There is a different mindset between Malay and Chinese. My eldest son's friends are mostly Chinese and Indian. They are very good in Maths. When they are surrounded by good people, they study hard. He doesn't have so many Malay friends. You mix with a gangster you become a gangster" (Suhaidah).

Suhaida was not alone with this view. Halim claimed that his parents were quite supportive but were unable to coach him in his studies as they were lowly-educated. However, he claimed that he was lucky enough to have like-minded Malay friends and friends from other races who were competitive and constantly challenged each other to do better academically. He observed that Chinese were "generally more studious". In contrast, he noted that Malays tended not to take studies so seriously, liked to "relax one corner" and were generally lazy. While he acknowledged the importance of family and parental influence, he opined that as a teen, friends exerted the most influence as he spent the most time with them and "teenagers usually don't listen to their parents".

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"It is true, I agree that most of the time the Chinese were more studious. Most of my Malay friends would rather be playing soccer or doing something else other than studying. Being lazy is like a past time for them. Just relaxing. They don't take studies that seriously" (Halim). Suhaidah commented that such an un-ambitious attitude to life contrasted significantly with other races who sought to continuously improve themselves, to plan ahead (to which she pointed to the fact that few Malays bought insurance) and to work towards a goal.

> "I bought insurance from my sister's NUS friend, Hamzah. Hamzah's mother is Chinese and his father is Malay. One day, Hamzah told me, "Kakak (Sister), orang Malay never buy insurance. When the children want to go to university, they have no money to do so. You know, my mother is Chinese and she is so different from my father you know?! My mother's focus was to make money

> and save money so that in future if I wanted to go university, I could use the money. And true enough, I was able to graduate from university with the money funded by the insurance policies that my mother had bought. But it was not just me, all five children in my family graduated from NUS. It was all because of my mother because she is Chinese. My father is Malay, his attitude is so different, so different from my mother you know?!"
>
> My friend Hamzah even condemned his father, he said "My father Malay, malas (lazy) you know! But my mother, very hardworking!" In the end, Hamzah also married a Chinese wife and he said her attitude was the same as his mother; they both saved money for their children.
>
> But it is true, different attitude, different way of thinking. I am not gossiping about my father, but I am just telling you the truth about what is happening in my family. My own mother is a Chinese from China and she is very hardworking, very good in saving money and thinks 'in advance'. My mother says "Buy house, buy private", but my father says "Never mind. We stay here". Then my mother went all out to buy a new place, now we stay in a nice apartment. I am not condemning the race, but the mindset is different. It's true, the mindset is different. That's why they say "Malay lazy", I agree. Because I see there are two different sets of stories for the Chinese and the Malays" (Suhaidah).

Halim pointed out that low-income Malays needed to make a conscious decision to climb up the ladder of success or to give in to contentment because it required less effort.

"The Malays are at the bottom of the income hierarchy. Either you stay there and be angry with the ones above, or you want to be part of the group and go up the ladder. Most of the Malays just want to stay there. It is easier to be angry or to blame others in the higher hierarchy than to climb up" (Halim).

3.8 Rezeki

Several participants claimed that the less-educated Malays often cited 'rezeki' (the belief in the predetermination of man's economic destiny) as a reason for their current situation and consequently neither worked very hard nor had a goal, be it in their education or career. One participant described it as "It was their destiny and fate

to be like this.”. One participant even attributed such a misinterpretation of ‘rezeki’ to a lack of religious understanding.

> “Islam teaches us that it is our responsibility to work hard. When you have done so, ‘rezeki’, such as your promotion and your wealth, will be decided and arranged by God. However, the older generations of Muslims, like my mother’s and grandmother’s generations, misunderstood the meaning of ‘rezeki’ and passed it down to subsequent generations. These older generations held on to the wrong concept of ‘rezeki’ and believed that since everything was ‘fated’ (pre-ordained) by the law of God, and since they had already worked, they were given such lowly work, they were resigned to their fates.
>
> Our old generations had this mindset and our religious scholars tried to change this wrong mindset. Even though ‘rezeki’ is granted by God, you cannot just sit down there and pray for money. You have to work and God will give you the ‘rezeki’. But those who were less-educated always adopted this wrong concept of ‘rezeki’ as an explanation for their current predicament. But they never worked very hard, they never really studied.”
> Borhan
>
> “Actually, our religion encourages us to study to do well. There is no way that our religion discourages such goals. If you see the educated Malays, they practice Islam. Based on my observations, the less educated ones do not practice Islam; they are Muslims, but they don’t have any faith. So I don’t think they know much about our religion. Nothing in Islam tells us to be contented and not strive to be better. While one should be contented with the rezeki granted by God. Rezeki is always encouraging improvement. We believe that if we pray and do what GOD says, then our rezeki will be more. So I think that if we practice and have faith, our religion is not against anything, negative, it is always positive. Maybe they are not practicing it and they don’t go for classes or to the mosque, so they don’t know what is good. Like you are not supposed to be lazy and you’re not even supposed to go against the government. The mosque teaches you these things” (Siti).

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Chapter IV Analysis

4.1 Introduction

People generally accept that a certain degree of income inequality exists in society as it is unrealistic to expect everyone to be paid the same. For some, such acceptance may stem from a sense of resignation that it is one's fate and to accept the cards that life has dealt. Yet for others, differences in income and wealth are usually the most conspicuous form of inequality that breeds envy and resentment.

The primary objective of my research was to understand how Singaporean Malays felt when they were shown how income inequality affected the Malays' academic performance relative to other races, how the meritocratic education system exacerbated this inequality. How would they perceive the reality that the odds appeared to be systemically stacked against them? Besides, analyzing what the participants had said in their responses, I felt that it was equally important to analyze what was *not* said.

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Before my discussions and interviews with my Singaporean Malay participants, my hunch was that they would direct their dissatisfaction outwards and express strong views against either the government, the system or other races for the situation that they were in. I was clearly wrong.

4.2 On the Economic Situation

The statistics presented to the participants focused primarily on the economic and educational performance of Singaporean Malays in post independent Singapore (i.e. 1965). None of the participants highlighted how colonialism in Southeast Asia completely monopolized international trade in the Indonesian Archipelago and

effectively wiped out the indigenous Malay trading class. This moment of history was important because it had significantly shaped Singaporean Malays' economic status for a long time and explained their relative position to the other races in society.

Studies suggested that the relative decline of the Malay economic position to the Chinese could be attributed to the differences in the extent of Chinese and Malay households' participation in entrepreneurship and women's employment (Li, 1990). The conspicuous absence of indigenous traders led to few Malay entrepreneurs in Singapore. At a time when racial discrimination was rife, Chinese entrepreneurs chose to employ members of their own race than Malays. Male Malay workers were most affected as most of the jobs created in the 1960s and 1970s were for unskilled female labour in the manufacturing sector.

Even though none of the participants expressed any animosity against the government or other races, it is still important for Singaporean Malays to understand the genesis of their past economic situation relative to other races. It puts in perspective how the society that the Singaporean government inherited from the British was already a highly unequal one. Understanding this will prevent and even correct any misperception that Singaporean Malays' economic position relative to the other races has started since Singapore's independence. While it remains arguable whether their relative position compared to the other races has worsened, it is a fact that their socio-economic situation has improved significantly over time.

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4.3 On Education Performance

When I showed participants statistics on academic performance by ethnicity, none of them suggested how one of the reasons for Singaporean Malays tendency to perform poorer than Chinese in education at each age cohort could be traced to the national policy to adopt English as a national language (Li, 1990). Li (1990) pointed out that this switch to the English language posed significant challenges because almost half of all Malay students were still educated in the Malay stream in 1965.

Those who qualified for secondary and tertiary education before such education was available in the Malay language had to switch to the English stream. And even when such higher levels of education were available in Malay, there was a shortfall of trained teachers and Malay textbooks (Li, 1990). These challenges resulted in the poor results of Singaporean Malay students studying in the Malay language at upper secondary level.

It was noteworthy that some participants had appeared to express with some pride that their own children, graduates from Singapore's universities, had more Chinese and Indian friends and few Malay friends. This suggested that from the participants' perspective, low income alone was not the only factor that hindered good academic performance. But more importantly, the remarks also suggested that participants viewed mingling with Malay peers as detrimental to their children's development while interaction with other races exerted a positive influence.

Such a view was consistent with past research findings that many Malays believed that the Chinese were more diligent and serious in their studies and were better than Malays academically (Li, 1990). These beliefs manifested itself in how Malay parents had attempted to limit their children's interaction with Malay peers. For instance, choosing Chinese-majority schools with few Malays, hoping that their children would pick up positive study traits from the Chinese while also avoiding Malay company. It was not just non-studious Malay children who must be avoided but Malay children in general. These actions suggested that Singaporean Malays' attributed the reason for their students' poor academic results as *emanating* from *within the Malay community* (Li, 1990).

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4.4 The Malay Culture and the Myth of Malay Laziness

The comments regarding the "Malay culture" of finding contentment and the citing of "Malay laziness" to account for an apparent lack of ambition originated from racial stereotypes first conceived by the British to legitimize Singapore's colonization

(Alatas, 1977). These negative stereotypes remain to this day. On the alleged racial discrimination that participants experienced, past studies affirmed how Chinese employers racially discriminated against the Malays in sectors of recruitment, salaries, working conditions, training opportunities and job advancement.

Such discrimination most likely stemmed from the same negative stereotypes from the colonial era – that Malays were unambitious, lazy and uninterested in material gain (Li, 1990). Given that there were more Chinese entrepreneurs than Malay, these negative stereotypes led to racial discrimination and further restricted economic opportunities for Singaporean Malays, widening the economic gap between both races (Li, 1990).

Consequently, many Singaporean Malay workers chose to stay with the same employer for most of their working careers because they were convinced racial prejudice would hinder their chances of finding another job. This may have further fueled the perception that Singaporean Malays lacked of ambition (Li, 1990). It is thus important to set the record straight that there is no evidence to suggest that Chinese workers are more materialistic, hard-working, or ambitious than Malay workers (Li, 1990).

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Another significant impact of these negative stereotypes is that it runs the risk of becoming accepted as a 'norm'. Hence, what was most intriguing about the participants' remarks of "*orang Melayu malas"* (or the "lazy Malay") and the Malay culture of contentment and low determination to succeed was that it was made by a Singaporean Malay and not a member of another race.

Malay academics and elites had written about how Malays' educational and economic prospects were being hampered by their own inappropriate cultural values (Li, 1990). One Malay publication identified low incomes, large families, ineffective parental guidance as factors that impeded Malay children's education. However, these said challenges highlighted by the publication above weren't peculiar to the Malay community alone as a significant proportion of Chinese children in similar cohorts

had also quit school with no more than primary education (Li, 1990). Li added that while there were differences in the degree of emphasis on education, there "were no absolute differences that suggested that Malay culture was uniquely unsuited for educational achievement while Chinese culture was ideally suited" (Li, 1990). Furthermore, Li (1990) added that individual Malays never attributed cultural deficiency as a reason for their low education or low incomes. Instead, they attribute their fates to personal factors (e.g. dislike of school, negative peer influence and the desire to work). Li pointed out that these reasons were also cited by Chinese youths for dropping out of school.

Notwithstanding the above, the Malay elites continued to hold on to their views on certain negative aspects of Malay culture and continued to urge Malays to change their attitudes especially on education, be more disciplined and value work. Over time, the Malay cultural impediment, through repetition and elaboration by the Malay elite, became established as an orthodoxy within the Malay community (Li, 1990).

The problem with a culture-deficient orthodoxy is that it obscures the real socio-economic problems that Singaporean Malays face (Li, 1990). For instance, Li pointed out that many Malays perceived that mission school students succeeded because of the 'Chinese-ness' of these schools that created the conditions for success and not the students' backgrounds. Conversely, these Malays perceived the over-representation of Malays in poor schools and the influence of Malay peers for the failures of Malay students who attended these schools. Such orthodoxy translates into lower professional and academic expectations of adults and children alike and ends up being a self-fulfilling prophecy.

On participants' comments regarding how low-income Malays cited 'rezeki' as a reason for their plight, Bedlington (1971) argued that such an ideology resulted in resignation and a "'lack of will to go on striving'". While none of Li's (1990) interviews with businessmen, potential entrepreneurs, or workers recorded anyone explain their economic lot by citing rezeki, my findings suggest something different.

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While successful Malays may attribute their success to their merit earned, low-income Malays who had not fared well may instead attribute their economic lot to rezeki. Perhaps more research can be carried to verify this.

So why would members of the Singaporean Malay community subscribe to a cultural-deficient orthodoxy when evidence pointed to the contrary and there are negative implications for this? The next section offers a clue.

4.5 On the Relationship Between Income Inequality and Education

After touching on the separate issues of economic situation and education of Singaporean Malays, I briefed participants on the adverse impact of low-income on Malay students' academic performance. Two key observations stood out. Firstly, after having been briefed on how Singaporean Malays as a group were disproportionately more disadvantaged by a meritocratic education system, there appeared to be a silent acquiescence. None of the participants remarked that the system was unfair. In fact, all the participants expressed that they remained unanimously in support for the national education system. Secondly, and even more remarkably in the light of the inequalities that they had just been briefed on, some participants even went on to add that those who failed had only themselves to blame.

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Once again, I could not rule out the possibility that their response, or rather the lack of one, reflected a low cognition of the relationship between low income and poor educational performance. Yet, the niggling question remained – why didn't any of them defend Malays' relatively poorer showing by pointing out how the Malays' economic position suffered during colonialism? Or how the national emphasis on the English language had handicapped Singaporean Malays educational performance since independence. I could attribute this to the participants' lack of awareness about these historical developments. Yet their subsequent comments gradually convinced me otherwise; that there was an underlying reason for their staunch support of the nation's meritocratic education system.

4.6 The ‘Dark Side’ of Meritocracy

Ordinarily, when participants continued to view the meritocratic education system as fair despite its limitations, we could attribute this persistent belief to the intuitive appeal of meritocracy’s egalitarian qualities. We may even attribute their trust in meritocracy to *how* meritocracy in the country’s education system was seen to be practiced; like how there was a close visible coupling of effort, assessment of merit and outcome. However, from the preceding paragraphs, another narrative has emerged that offers insight into the participants’ unequivocal support for the meritocratic education system.

Thus far, we have seen how participants were fully aware that Malays ranked below other races for income and education. Participants claimed they were aware about this, none challenged these findings and other than the non-conscription of Malays post-independence, no other explanation was offered on how past incidents or policies could have disadvantaged Singaporean Malays and contributed to their position. On the contrary, participants alluded that interaction with peers from other races benefited their children’s development while having fewer Malay friends reduced the likelihood of negative influence. Participants’ even attributed the underperformance of low-income Malays to the debilitating effects of certain aspects of “Malay culture” and “Malay laziness”. This suggested that this pervasive culture-deficient orthodoxy has perhaps influenced the participants’ mindsets.

Participants’ steadfast support for an arguably flawed meritocratic education system and the belief that those who failed had only themselves to blame were consistent with how the ideology of meritocracy could be leveraged by winners of the ‘meritocratic system’ to legitimize the unequal distribution of rewards [(Li, 1990), (Tan, 2008)]. In this case, the participants’ response appeared to reflect the perception that they had deserved their merit by working hard and overcoming the cultural impediments to Malay progress.

4.7 A New Hope

Despite meritocracy's shortcomings, we should not treat meritocracy as a dirty word as it remains a core organizing principle in Singapore society. Critics may point to how the ideology of meritocracy is used by winners of the system to justify the unequal distribution of rewards for them. However, we would need to balance idealism with pragmatism. Unless there is a more equitable and practical way to distribute scarce resources, we should not simply dismiss meritocracy. In this case, we should look at what the government has done and put in place to ensure that every Singaporean, regardless of race, language or religion, can progress together.

The government is cognizant about the limitations of meritocracy and has committed to build an open and *compassionate* meritocracy that seeks to maximize equality of opportunity while reducing the impact of inequality of outcomes (Lee, 2013). It has committed to: (i) introduce measures to equalize conditions by helping those less privileged get to a good starting point, (ii) provide many different tracks to success, keep social mobility fluid so that anyone can rise regardless of background; and (iii) reducing the impact of inequality of outcomes by giving more to help whose who are struggling and encouraging those who did well to contribute to society by helping others to succeed.

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There also appears to be a deeper connection between the belief in meritocracy and a growing sense of national identity. When several participants expressed disappointment in how they were discriminated because of their race during their job applications, they spoke about how Singaporeans should be 'more integrated' after 'SG50' (the 2015 national celebrations commemorating Singapore's 50th year of independence). This comment offers a key insight. It suggested that the desire for fairness stems from a growing national identity within the Malay community not to be viewed by their race or their religion, but instead as a Singaporean.

Turner (1986) asserted that the idea of equality could be used as a measure of modernity. The modernization process involved transitioning from a traditional society that accepted social inequality as natural to a modern society that focused on achievement and social mobility based on merit. Hence, Turner asserted that political egalitarianism was a fundamentally modern principle associated with the development of the nation-state. Some would even argue that the prolonged presence of social inequality in Singapore since colonial days may have led to the perception that inequality was natural and inevitable. Hence, the earlier generations of Singaporean Malays may have accepted the class divide brought about by income inequality five decades ago. However, it was unlikely that current or future generations of Malay would accept inequality unless they were outcomes determined by talent and skill.

In this regard, a meritocratic system where everyone has an opportunity to succeed, where the best is selected, *regardless of who that person is* has the potential to erase racial divides, motivate one to overcome the culture-deficient mindset, to achieve their dreams. For those who succeed, this process reinforces a sense of national identity. Hence the challenge for the government is not to improve the position of a race relative to other races, but to ensure that the lives of Singaporean Malays continues to improve over the long term.

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4.8 Culture Deficient Orthodoxy and Meritocracy May Tamper Envy and Resentment for Now…

Much of the available literature pointed out that income inequality exploited and oppressed the disadvantaged population and led to social problems. In Singapore's context, some may suggest that the oppressed and disadvantaged appeared to be the Malays who not only had the lowest income and were over-represented in the low-income stratum. The conspicuous gap between the Malay 'have-nots' and the Chinese 'haves' would further reinforce such a view. And as

proportionately more Malays faced low income challenges, the meritocratic education system meant that seemed to entrench Malays in their existing social-economic strata they were more likely to perform poorer academically, employed in low paying jobs and remain in the low-income trap. Thus, before my focus group discussions and interviews, I thought Singaporean Malays would perceive that they were being methodically marginalized by the Chinese majority.

However, based on the response of my participants, it appears that the culture-deficient orthodoxy may have shaped the Malay community's perception (at least for the middle and high income households) that the causes that hindered progress for low-income Malay households came from within the community and were not exogenous. And the ideology of meritocracy presents low-income Malay households with a way out of their economic situation – to be more ambitious and to work harder to overcome the cultural challenges that impeded their progress.

Based on my findings, it would also appear that the Malay culture helps reduce racial tensions. The income inequality-driven envy and resentment arising from the Singaporean Malay community against other races is being mitigated by a pervasive culture-deficient orthodoxy. However, it is unlikely that such an orthodoxy will continue to wield similar influence in future as Singaporean Malays' racial identity appears to be gradually displaced by a strengthening national identity that demands for greater equity in fruits of Singapore's development. The government will need to seize the opportunity that such a shift presents while continuing its efforts to level the playing field for all to reduce income inequality.

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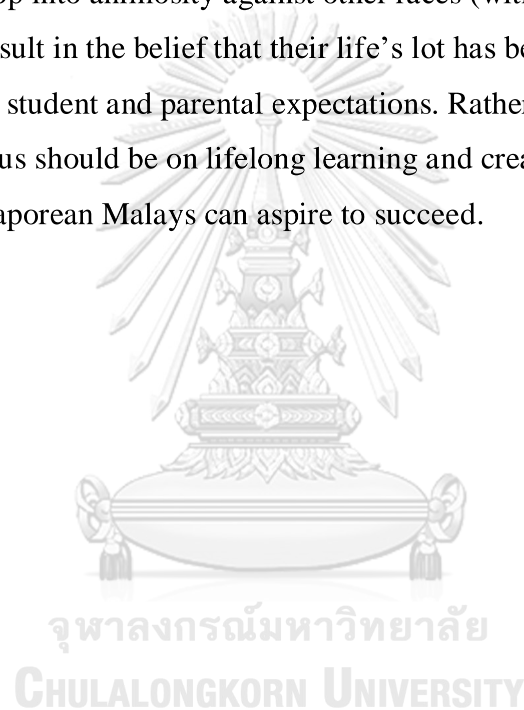
4.9 Conclusion

Based on what we have gathered so far, it would appear that Singaporean Malays who had 'made it' in life see themselves as having overcome the cultural

impediments to education and their career, earned merit and thus deserved their lot in life. Does meritocracy require such culture-deficient orthodoxy for it to legitimize the ideology as a principle of governance or even as justification for the unequal distribution of rewards? The answer is clearly no since there is no evidence that Malay culture impedes progress.

Does a culture-deficient orthodoxy motivate one to excel by playing on racial pride? My view is it could, but if such motivations are not managed properly, they could either develop into animosity against other races (with even more serious implications) or result in the belief that their life's lot has been predetermined and lead to even lower student and parental expectations. Rather than focus on racial disparities, the focus should be on lifelong learning and creating opportunities and goals that all Singaporean Malays can aspire to succeed.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Chapter V Recommendations & Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

The findings from this study suggest that middle income Singaporean Malay households do not appear to have very strong negative views regarding their race's relative standing in the income and education hierarchies. Their view is that low-income Malays are where they are because they were easily contented, lazy and were unable to overcome the cultural challenges that impeded progress. It would be useful to study whether low-income Malay households hold similar views on income inequality and its impact on their education. Another useful study is to investigate whether Malays generally attribute economic success to merit earned, failures to rezeki, and whether there are differences between middle income and low-income groups.

The subsequent sections provide some policy considerations to address the issue of culture-deficit mindsets, to provide low-income households with a better head start and to ensure a better ethnic mix in the country's elite schools.

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5.2 Comparison of ethnic-based education statistics

We should be mindful how ethnic-based statistics comparing educational performance are being used on its own. Data on socio-economic levels should also be overlaid across such statistics to provide greater context. Otherwise, it may convey the wrong impression that (i) only the Malays were facing problems with poor academic performance; (ii) the cause of the problem came primarily from within the Malay community. Not only would this risk further reinforcing culture-deficient mindsets in Singaporean Malays and negative stereotypes of Malays in the other races, it may also obscure the root causes of the problem.

5.3 Mendaki and Community-based assistance

The responsibility of tackling a culture-deficient mindset rests with Mendaki and the Malay community. In seeking to address the challenges that impede Malay progress, it is important that Mendaki or any community-based groups do not start on the basis of viewing it as a 'Malay problem' internal to the community. While the target group are Malays, they should not focus on alleged cultural deficiencies but instead tackle the root socio-economic problems and policies that increase the income inequality gap that affect all races.

5.4. Greater Upstream Intervention

Studies have shown that funding for tertiary education continues to be highest even though there is an under-representation of students from low-income households. These students may have been disadvantaged by their family background and had not been able to progress beyond the lower levels of education into tertiary education. Perhaps more can be done to level the playing field by channeling more resources upstream (e.g. at pre-schools and primary schools) to provide a better start for a larger spectrum of families in need.

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Is the government prepared to extend its ethnic integration policy that it has so successfully applied to public housing into its enrollment for all primary and secondary school system? The benefits of such an ethnic integration initiative would not be dissimilar to its application in public housing. It would ensure that every elite school would set aside a certain quota of places for the Malays or the other minority races.

Some may argue that such action runs contrary to the ideology of meritocracy and that the benefits may not necessarily trickle down to the low-income minority races because the ones who qualify may have enjoyed a better starting position. These

are implementation issues that can be worked out downstream such that the system remains meaningful by recognizing unequal backgrounds of the students, setting aside a proportion of the year's cohort for good students from minority races who would otherwise not have qualified for such schools.

5.5 Conclusion

The first step to helping low-income Malay households is to acknowledge that it is a cause for concern and to address it. While I have qualified earlier that these findings represent only the samples interviewed and not the overall Singaporean Malay community, the views from the participants offer valuable insight on how the issue can be tackled.

The government, the Malay community (e.g. Mendaki) and the family each play key roles as pillars of support (financial aid, counseling and moral support) for low-income Malay households. Perhaps the next step may be to explore how all parties, including the affected households, can work together to co-create solutions that provide timelier, coordinated, holistic aid.

It appears that there is a growing sense of national identity among participants. If this observation is reflective of the larger Malay community, then it is a strong signal that the government's efforts in forging a national identity (at least among the Malay community) have gathered momentum. The ideology of meritocracy, where the best is selected regardless of race, remains a key tool that the government should continue to leverage to forge a stronger national identity.

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