

*Perspective*

## Meritocracy: A new form of class domination

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### DESCRIPTION

Meritocracy is an ideology of social justice that is based on the notion of equality of opportunity. It suggests that social justice can be achieved if everyone has an equal opportunity to compete for social resources based on merit rather than inheritance or wealth. This definition is now widely accepted as the essence of meritocracy, devoid of satirical and critical intent, as Theresa May vividly described, ‘what matters is your talent and hard work, not where you were born, who your parents are or your accent.’

Unequal results are translated and explained as differences in “individual ability.” However, merit is not an inherent personal quality, but a set of socially constructed capabilities, supported by capital of various kinds, which ensures that social groups with wealth and heritage, as well as appropriate cultural knowledge and social relations, can respond to educational needs to assert or reproduce social and economic advantage. Many studies have criticized the illusion of social justice based on meritocracy, pointing to the many ways in which structural inequality is masked or diminished by the notion of equality of opportunity.

This study is based on meritocracy in action in the Chinese education system, in which access to elite schools and elite universities is based almost exclusively on examination performance. Three rounds of life history interviews were conducted with 17 working-class students at four elite universities in China: Fudan University, Peking University, Shanghai Jiaotong University, and Tsinghua University. Some on-site observations and documents were also collected. Participants were recruited from final-year undergraduate students who received National Student Loans (need-based loans for low-income university students), and we verified

their parents’ occupation, income and education levels, place of birth, and self-identification in interviews.

On the one hand, the meritocracy system allows these successful working-class people to “escape” their working-class background, but it also differentiates them from middle-class students in terms of the opportunities and lifestyles they have. As this paper suggests, the educational experience of these ‘exceptional’ students is based on a synthetic habitus that is both flexible and fragile, a history less habitus whose dispositions are narrowly defined by hard work, striving and giving up. What they bring with them is a set of cultural absences and opportunities missed for opportunity. Their class origins, in a special form of meritocratic will, will come back to haunt them at university. Their acquired dispositions are ill-adapted to the social and cultural diversity and complexity of university life. Their differences, limitations and weaknesses will become apparent in their everyday life at university. These are class injuries and forms of symbolic domination that are in some respects self-inflicted, but they are also the consequence and effect of meritocratic play in action and its illusion. Class rule does not transcend these working-class exceptions, but operates on them in a new and subtle form achieved through meritocratic discipline. The meritocratic skills and competencies they acquire leave these working-class survivors ill-equipped in some respects to take advantage of what an elite university has to offer. Indeed, as a reward for delayed gratification for many, an elite university offers few gratifications. In a sense they are in the university, but they are not in the university. The extension of the participatory agenda is based on the assumption that the challenge is to bring (non-traditional) working-class students into university and thereby open them up to new life experiences, perspectives, values and dialogue.

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