Discursive representations of refugees on the national and global arenas depict them as deviations and threats to the system of territorial states. Contrary to these depictions, I argue that refugees can be active agents of empowerment. Through anthropological fieldwork, I examine the movement of Burmese refugee youth from their camp in Mae Hong Son, Thailand to other parts of Thailand and even back into Burma. These movements constitute a resistance against the policies and discourses of the Thai authorities and Burmese military government. By overcoming barriers to their mobility, Karenni youth hence embody new forms of political agency and subjectivity.

Discursive representations of refugees on the national and global arenas are centred on how they are “aberrations” from the system of territorial states and consequently depict them as “threats”, “problems”, and “victims” (Grundy Warr and Wong 2002, 112). Contrary to these depictions, this paper argues that refugees can be active agents of empowerment. They are involved in the dynamic process of negotiating and coping with displacement and are capable of affecting changes on not only the interstitial spaces of the camp but also the surrounding borderscapes. Central to my argument is that refugees are fundamentally political agents who resist the dominant logic of sovereignty and its processes of inclusion and exclusion.

Yet this paper also acknowledges that there are multifarious refugee experiences and that individual refugee experiences are strongly mediated by markers such as age, gender, and ethnicity. I specifically focus on Karenni youth aged 18-25 living in Ban Mai Nai Soi (BMNS), a refugee camp in Mae Hong Son Province, Thailand. Trapped in a Protracted Refugee Situation, many have lived most of their lives or were even born in the artificial environment of the refugee camp. In my paper, I examine sovereign discourses that simultaneously control and exclude Karenni refugees. I then contrast these discourses with the movement of refugee youth from BMNS to other parts of Thailand and their journeys into Karenni state. I argue that these movements constitute a resistance against the policies and hegemonic discourses of the Thai authorities and Burmese military government. By overcoming barriers to their mobility, Karenni youth hence embody new forms of political agency and subjectivity.

Fieldwork Methodology

This paper is based on both secondary research and fieldwork conducted in June 2011. During my fieldwork, I lived at Dohkita, a small village located on the fringe of the BMNS refugee camp and within close proximity to numerous CBOs. I also entered the refugee camp on two occasions. Thus, I had the chance to visit several schools, homes and even observed the freshmen opening ceremony of the Karenni Community College (KnCC).

My fieldwork research is hence based on discussions with youths and leaders from student organisations and educational institutions such as the Karenni Student Union (KSU), KnCC, and the Karenni Social Development Centre (KSDC). Additionally, I also spoke to youth employed in CBOs such as the Karenni Women’s Organisation (KnWO), Karenni Evergreen (KEG) and Karenni Social Welfare and Development Centre (KSWDC). These discussions were in English and ranged from semi-structured interviews and focus group sessions, to informal chitchat sessions.

Most of the schools and CBOs I visited are closely affiliated to the political organization of the Karenni, the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP). Furthermore, the youth I interviewed were pursuing or had successfully obtained post-high school level qualifications. Relative to their peers, my interviewees were thus of a certain academic calibre and outlook. Significantly, several were being groomed for future refugee leadership.

While this raises questions of their representativeness of the larger Karenni youth population, I argue that this specific category of youth offers new insights into how refugees circumvent legal-spatial boundaries and exercise their agency. By engaging in serious analysis, I embark on an interesting endeavour to understand how these refugees demonstrate intelligence, resourcefulness, and activism in such extenuating circumstances. I hence do not try to generalize the experiences of all refugee youth, but examine how the youths I interviewed embody mobility and political resistance. Further research should be conducted on how different categories of refugee youth (example: male/female, lower/higher-educated, youth of different socioeconomic status) cope with life in exile.

“Doubly Caught in the Territorial Trap”: Sovereign Discourses and Karenni Refugees in Thailand

While the citizen remains rooted in territorial space, the refugee is seen as uprooted, displaced, forced out, or self-displaced from the community of citizens. This is the refugee’s identity – his ascribed identity. The refugee is one who lacks affinity with the
national community (Soguk 1999, 10).

The international system of mutually exclusive territorial states demarcates the boundaries between citizens and non-citizens as well as the realms of the political, the national, and international (Walker 1993). This section examines how these sovereign discourses have led to refugees occupying a peculiar position within the international political system. Forced out of their homelands and isolated within their host country, they effectively live in “spaces of exclusion” (Rajaram and Grundy-Warr 2004, 55). For Karenni refugees living in the BMNS refugee camp, their present circumstances are inextricably tied to conflicting and overlapping discourses of sovereignty that are present within Burma, Thailand, and the international relief community.

Many refugee communities, including the Karenni, become displaced precisely because of their “marginality in the context of a particular national or regional political discourse” (Dudley 2010, 49). Karenni activists constantly refer to an agreement between the Burman monarch and the British government that formally recognised the independence of the four Western Karenni sub-states (Grundy Warr and Wong 2002). Yet, despite these assertions, Karenni State was incorporated into the Union of Burma as part of the 1947 Constitution. Hence, opponents of the Burmese military regime, especially the KNPP maintain that they are a sovereign nation illegally occupied by the Tatmadaw.

Since Burma achieved independence in 1948, there has been protracted military conflict inside Karenni State with various armed groups, the KNPP and the Tamadaw, “vying for control of territories, resources and people” (Dudley 2010, 17). The Tatmadaw’s efforts to “preserve the union” and “expand (its) authority to all parts of the national geo-body” (Grundy-Warr and Wong 2002, 99) has resulted in dramatic consequences for the civilian population. The threat of forced relocations by the Tatmadaw, being caught in the crossfire, ensuing problems of food and livelihood insecurity are some of the reasons that compel migrants to cross into Thailand. Therefore, the flight of refugees is a direct culmination of this complex geopolitical landscape of militarily contested sovereignties, fragile ceasefire, and ethnic resistance.

While Karenni refugees are not targets of state violence in Thailand, they are subject to discursive representations that recast them as “transmitters of anarchy into the domestic sphere” (Grundy-Warr and Wong 2002, 112). State agencies and the mass media label them as “non-citizens”, “stateless”, “persons without documentation”, “outsiders”, and even “aliens” (Grundy Warr 2004, 230). As encapsulated in the following quote, the refugee is represented as “andharai” (dangerous) – a threat to the space of the citizen and the sovereignty of the state:

The influx of displaced persons has entailed huge costs[s] for Thailand in terms of administration and personnel, environmental degradation, deforestation and epidemic control and the displacement affected Thai villages as well as the psychological impact on the local population (UNHCR 2000, 6-7).

While some critics have contested these representations, these discourses have dramatic implications for the 160,000 refugees in the 10 camps along the Thailand-Burma border, 24,000 of whom are Karenni refugees in the Mae Hong Son Province (TBBC 2008). In order to manage the “threats” that these refugees pose, the camps are increasingly subject to great control and surveillance by the Royal Thai Government (RTG). Since the late 1990s, the Ministry of Interior (MOI) has been tasked with the running of all camps and a local MOI district officer (Palat) is assigned as Camp Commander for each Camp. Additionally, in 1998, the RTG formally requested the involvement of the United Nations Human Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in the areas of refugee status determination and registration (Lang 2002).

In order to exert greater control over the refugee population, five open Karenni settlements were consolidated by the RTG into two larger, isolated camps in 1995 (Thai-Burma Border Consortium 2010). Commonly termed the “warehousing of refugees”, encampment restricts refugee movement and has economic, psychosocial and human rights implications (Loescher et al. 2007, 3). Cut off from the broader domains of Thai society and unable to engage in income-generating activities outside the camp, Karenni refugees have become more reliant on foreign NGO assistance, fuelling narratives of refugees as helpless victims.

Complicating the situation are efforts by the international humanitarian community to “find a solution” to the “problem” of the protracted displacement of refugees in Thailand (Grundy-Warr 2004, 230). Most prominently, the UNHCR has been undertaking the world’s largest refugee resettlement programme, purportedly, the “only safe and viable durable solution” when “refugees cannot go home or are unwilling to do so because they face continued persecution” (UNHCR 2010). Statistics indicate that in the year 2010, 11,400 individual refugees left for third countries from Thailand (UNHCR 2010). While resettlement may facilitate the ‘proper’ transfer of refugees back into the territorial framework, it has dramatic implications for the Karenni refugee community in Thailand as they lose their most skilled human resources.

Thus whether at “home” in Burma, in Thailand,
or even amongst relief organisations, dominant representations of refugees turn refugees into “voiceless pawns in the wider geopolitical chessboard and machinations of sovereign states” (Rajaram and Grundy-Warr 2004, 57). Unable to return safely to their home country and not welcomed by the host state, they are hence “doubly caught in the territorial trap” (ibid.). This condition of liminality is further characterised by a state of “temporary permanence” (Chatty 2010, 322). While Karenni refugees are administratively categorised as “displaced persons” living in “temporary camps”, they are ironically caught in one of the longest Protracted Refugee Situations in the world.

The following sections of this paper however demonstrate that refugees do not passively accept this state of limbo. In fact, my paper demonstrates that they seek to overcome this liminality by going back inside Karenni state to provide assistance and training, and travelling outside to other parts of Thailand to further their education. From their position of statelessness they thus function as agents of empowerment for their community, defying the very sovereign discourses that have restricted their agency and mobility.

Karenni Refugee Youth: Mobility, Agency and Empowerment

Refugee youth have been largely neglected in the literature, with most studies on refugees focusing on adults or young children. The existing literature on refugee youth is informed by psychosocial and psychological perspectives (Chatty 2010). This section focuses on a particular group of older refugee youth, aged 18-25, as political subjects and agents. Young people do not just passively accept political policies, practices, and discourses (Skelton 2009). Instead they actively interrogate structures of power and wield political power through their “practices, resistance, strategies and challenges” (Skelton 2009, 146). Consistent with other young people in non-refugee situations, I argue that these Karenni refugee youth are political actors who not only interrogate the restrictive policies and discourses that impede their agency but also mobilise unique strategies to surmount them.

To illustrate this, I begin with a story about Nan E San, aged 25. After graduating from the Social Development Centre in 2004, Nan E San worked at the Camp Justice Department and Karenni Education Department in BMNS refugee camp. In 2007, she left the camp to study at the Earth Right’s International School (Burma) based in Chiang Mai. For a year, she trained alongside other young human rights and environmental activists from different ethnic backgrounds. Subsequently she worked with the Burmese Women’s Union in Mae Sot from 2008 to 2009. Apart from working on a project about violence against women, she helped run a library that aimed to increase migrant women’s awareness of their human and labour rights.

Armed with greater skills and knowledge, she went into Pasaung Township in Karenni State for two months to conduct training on human rights and environmental awareness. Upon her return to the refugee camp, she taught various subjects such as human rights, rule of law and proposal writing at the Social Development Centre from 2009 to 2010. She recently went to Bangkok to participate in the ALTSEAN Burma Internship program organised by the Alternative ASEAN network on Burma in Bangkok. Having just returned from her six-month internship, she will train young Karenni refugees at the Social Development Centre for another year (N. San, personal communication, June 21 2011).

Nan E San’s story is interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly, she crosses legal-spatial boundaries. Not only does she venture outside the boundaries of the camp – going as far as Chiang Mai, Mae Sot and Bangkok – but she has also entered inside Karenni State. She also subverts conventional narratives of the refugee as a passive victim. She actively seeks opportunities to upgrade herself and to learn relevant skills in the areas of advocacy and human rights. She further put these skills to use by working with a community-based organisation that is dedicated to migrant women’s rights and subsequently trained other youth from the BMNS refugee camp and villagers from inside Karenni state. Hence, not only is she actively involved in circumventing barriers to her mobility but also through her journeys she becomes an agent of empowerment for the Karenni community and other displaced/migrant persons from Burma. While her stint in Karenni State may have only been for two months, she was still a refugee, a stateless person, providing assistance and training to citizens inside Karenni state. This in turn subverts citizen/refugee hierarchies that dominate the national and international spheres.

In this section, I am thus not only concerned with what young Karenni refugee youth do at their destination points, but the very process of travelling. The journeys that Karenni refugee youth undertake are not only routes to future empowerment; they are also empowerment in themselves. Cut off from their homeland in Karenni State (inside) and the broader domains of Thai society (outside), refugees are often characterised by their condition of liminality. Yet the movement of refugee youth connects them to both the inside and outside, hence allowing them to at least temporarily escape this liminality. As I argue in this section, Karenni refugee youth are thus engaged in defying the discourses of sovereignty that had previously excluded them from the national geo-bodies of Thailand and Burma (Myanmar) respectively.
How do these refugees circumvent the legal-spatial boundaries, especially when they lack formal documentation? Nan E San was not very forthcoming about how she made her journey to different parts of Thailand. However, she briefly mentioned that she relied on personal connections and that she paid bribes to several Thai authorities at border checkpoints. Ta Reh, aged 23, who studied at the Peace State and Law Academy in Mae Sot run by the Burma Lawyer’s Council (BLC) also revealed similar strategies:

To travel to study in there, it is very difficult for us because we have not any travel documents. However, we went by illegal through our leader’s (of SDC) car pick up to Mae Sot. They arrange travel for us with BLC School. I walked to Nai Soi and they come to take us in Nai Soi to Mae Sot. On the other hand, we just stay at school when we arrange in there. We cannot go out while we were living in Mae Sot. I mean we always do it by illegal for our travel and study (T. Reh, personal communication, 22 June 2011)

Evidently, the journey to other provinces in Thailand is difficult and, as Ta Reh emphasized, illegal. There are hence serious risks that Ta Reh, Nan E San and others face if they were to be caught such as arrest, detention or refoulement. Because they lack the protection and entitlements of a Thai citizen, they are also vulnerable to extortion and exploitation. Even when they do surmount the barriers of the refugee camp, they are still not entirely ‘free’, as seen by Ta Reh’s restricted mobility at Mae Sot. Nonetheless, by overcoming the boundaries of the camp and journeying across Thailand, they resist the RTG’s policy of encampment. Through their movement, Karenni refugee youth hence embody resistance to the “spaces of exclusion” carved out by the Thai sovereign state.

Likewise, the journey inside Karenni State is also fraught with difficulties. While many of them make the journey with the assistance of the KNPP army, several interviewees emphasized that it can be dangerous because of the mine-infested landscape (T Reh; L. Reh, personal communication, June 2011). The KNPP has lost several strongholds to the Burmese military in recent years, also making the journey riskier. Interestingly, Karenni refugee youth have played a role in overcoming the difficult terrain. Speaking to Li Reh, aged 24, from the Karenni Social Welfare and Development Centre, I learnt that they rely on maps created through Geographic Positioning System during their travels into Karenni State. They were trained to use these technologies by Thai-Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) and its partner agencies. This technology also comes in handy during the KSWDC’s relief and fact-finding operations inside Karenni State (L. Reh, personal communication, 24 June, 2011).

Navigating the military-contested landscape of Karenni State, Karenni refugee youth defy the Burmese national discourses that had relegated them to the margins. Mobilising various strategies to enter the very places from which they have been excluded, Karenni refugee youth thus resist the dominant discourses of sovereignty by both the Thai and Burmese states. Their very movement across these spaces are thus necessarily political, making them active political agents.

Having thus demonstrated how the journey itself is a political act of resistance, I would now like to examine why refugee youth make their journeys and what they do at their destination points, linking them to resistance against dominant discourses of sovereignty and control. Firstly, one could argue that travelling outside to other parts of Thailand is a means for Karenni refugee youth to overcome barriers to higher education. The nature of education, citizenship, and the nation-state “poses a series of incompatibilities”, resulting in minimal support for higher education for refugees (Zeus 2011, 258). To the RTG, higher education in refugee situations potentially threatens the national geo-body. Provision of higher education may mobilize and politicize the refugees, hence resulting in instability at the borderlands (Zeus 2011).

Additionally, amongst the international relief community, the “macho philosophy” continues to predominate that higher education is a “luxury” and that humanitarian aid to the refugees should focus on short-term life saving measures as opposed to long-term developmental efforts (Zeus 2011). All this has resulted in limited support by the Thai authorities and even certain members of the international relief community for higher education in refugee camps in Thailand. This corresponded with the numerous interviews that I had with Karenni refugee youth. Many of them strived to study at the university but faced obstacles such as a lack of accredited qualifications and a scarcity of scholarships (L. Myar; H. Myar; D. Maung; T. Reh; personal communication, June 2011). Others told me of the limitations facing higher-level educational programmes within the BMNS camp such as a lack of funding that led to the merger of two schools, the Karenni Post Ten School (KnPT) and the Karenni Leadership and Management Course (KLMC). Due to the resettlement programme, and the departure of skilled teachers, these schools also face a shortage of human resources.

By travelling outside to study in programmes designed especially for migrants, displaced persons and visiting activists from Burma, Karenni refugee youths surmount some of the barriers to education that they faced in the camp. Most of these programmes are based along the Thailand-Burma border and some are in Chiang Mai. Amongst others, these include the Peace Law and State Academy (run by the Burma Lawyer’s
Council), Earth Rights School Burma (run by Earth Rights International), Foreign Affairs Training (run by the National Council of the Union of Burma), Wide Horizon Programme and English Immersion Programmes (run by World Education), and the Australian Catholic University Refugee Programme. The majority of these programmes are dedicated to human rights and advocacy, and upon completion, participants receive a diploma. Hence, by travelling for the purpose of higher education, Karenni refugee youth also defy the conventional logic of sovereignty that only citizens of a state can access higher education.

Adding to the multi-layered significance of travelling outside is the fact that Karenni refugees are actively involved in reconstituting the borderlands. Political activism is a life-threatening pursuit in Burma and encampment in BMNS restricts the political agency of Karenni refugee youth. Yet, many of these programmes offered along the Thailand-Burma border are specifically designed to equip participants with theoretical and practical knowledge that will enable them to contribute to community development and future advocacy work. Apart from being trained in specific skills and knowledge, these are excellent opportunities for Karenni refugee youth to network and gain access to information. They use the internet and other facilities, and also meet other young activists from different ethnic backgrounds as well as locals and foreigners from Non-Governmental Organisations (T. Reh [Karenni Refugee], personal communication, 22 June 2011). Hence, by moving to other parts of Thailand, especially along the Thai-Burma border, Karenni refugee youth seek “new ways, new paths, or new lines of flight” (O’Kane 2010) to access political space. In the process, they recapture their bodies and agencies from the sovereign power regimes that control them. By engaging in programmes devoted to political activism, they also contribute to the remoulding of the border as active sites of contestation and resistance.

Likewise, travelling inside to Karenni State is an act of empowerment and resistance on multiple levels. Based on my interviews, the Karenni refugee youth who travelled inside Karenni State with their local CBOs did so for four purposes: capacity-building, provision of relief for Internally-Displaced Persons, small-scale development projects, and fact-finding. I share some examples:

Li Reh, aged 24, conducts mine-risk training inside Karenni State. The latest human rights report that he helped collate examines how the military government confiscated the land of villagers for military training in Pruso Township. His young colleagues at the KSWDC are also engaged in small-scale development projects such as electricity in Pruso Township and provide food and fuel for internally-displaced persons. Ah Mutu, aged 23, from Karenni Evergreen went back to her village in Pausung Township to conduct training on the impacts of rotational farming. Additionally, refugee youth who work with Karenni Woman's Organisation are involved in the running and support of small nurseries for children in Karenni State (L. Reh, personal communication, 24 June, 2011).

Hence, amongst young Karenni refugees who travelled inside Karenni State, there are multi-varied experiences. Yet, speaking to the youth, a common thread that binds them together is their motivations behind volunteering to make the risky journey inside. As Li Reh told me:

“I love my country, my people, and my culture. I want to be useful to the Karenni people. Life is safer here but the people inside suffer because of human rights abuse. By training them, I give back my knowledge to the inside. That’s why I go back 3 or 4 times (T. Reh, personal communication, 22 June, 2011).”

Crucially, travelling inside is not only a form of empowerment for the recipient of the aid/training but also for the giver. Delivering assistance to their own people within the imagined boundaries of their constructed homeland, Karenni refugee youth feel an immense sense of satisfaction. This desire to be “useful” was similarly echoed by the other interviewees, reflecting how notions of helping one's community are intricately tied to feelings of potency (L. Myar; N. San; D. Maung; personal communication, June 2011). All the interviewees were cognizant that the “inside” is more dangerous and unstable than the spaces of the refugee camp, creating an irony that they were ‘better off’ even though they were refugees who lived in an “in-between” space. Thus through the process of travelling “inside” and delivering assistance, Karenni refugee youth invert citizen/refugee hierarchies and defy discourses that have depicted refugees as passive victims.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have demonstrated that Karenni refugee youth are also political actors. By travelling inside Karenni State and outside to other parts of Thailand, they not only seek to overcome the liminality of the refugee camp but also defy state discourses of sovereignty that have deprived them of agency and mobility. Admirably, these youth demonstrate courage and resourcefulness in seeking out political spaces and becoming agents of empowerment for the Karenni community. While these are certainly noteworthy achievements, further research should examine the significance of their contributions to the larger Karenni refugee community in Thailand. More insight is also needed on whether these youths, who are trained in community engagement and advocacy, will make
a significant impact on the cross-border resistance movement and contribute to peace building.

However, during my short stay, I recognised some contributions that Karenni refugee youth have made and potentially can make. Karenni refugees who went outside to further their education have returned to the BMNS camp to play a role in community development. For example, the Karenni Social Development Centre, which trains young Karenni refugee youth in Human Rights, Environment and Law, was set up by four alumni of Earths Right School Burma in 2004 (SDC Thailand, 2010). Other alumni of such programmes have gone on to work in camp administration and CBOs, playing an active role in liaising with international NGOs and other donors. Karenni refugee youth also leverage on new media – uploading videos and photos, creating blogs, manning their CBOs’ websites, and documenting human rights abuses and their experiences in the refugee camp.

While they may be just a small group, Karenni refugee youth can organise themselves at a sophisticated level, offering services to both people in exile and in Karenni State, and engaging globally with a variety of actors. Participating in transnational activities in various ways, this group of youth can critically raise awareness of issues that have been neglected by the international community. Their ability to make a significant impact on the lives of the Karenni lies in strategic choices, expanding their network, and raising their profile amongst international advocacy groups. Thus, their current and potential impact on the refugee community in Thailand, as well as back home, should not be underestimated.
Bibliography


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Questioning Meritocracy in Singapore

Nur Elysa Sapari

The meritocratic system in Singapore falsely but effectively denies the influence of non-merit factors such as family background, networks and connections, and ethnicity on individual prospects of social mobility. This denial, coupled with continued failure to adequately remedy the differential influence of non-merit factors on prospects for individuals from different segments of society, has led ironically to the implicit privileging of certain non-merit attributes over others in societal selection processes. In practice, the government’s deliberate focus on meritocracy’s elitist selection mechanism over the principle’s egalitarian underpinning has turned the system here into an ‘ideology of inequality’. Increasing visibility of the system’s uneven effects has catalysed a renegotiation on this matter between the ruling and the ruled in Singaporean society.

Singapore extols the virtues of meritocracy arguably more than any other country. Embedded within the purportedly non-ideological concept of pragmatism, meritocracy underlines the system of societal selection and advancement in the country. The meritocratic system in Singapore falsely but effectively denies the influence of non-merit factors such as family background, networks and connections, and ethnicity on individual prospects for social mobility. Further exacerbating the situation is a failure to adequately remedy the differential influence of non-merit factors on prospects for individuals from different segments of society. Ironically, this has resulted in the privileging, albeit implicitly, of certain non-merit attributes over others in societal selection processes. In practice, the government’s deliberate focus on meritocracy’s elitist selection mechanism over the principle’s egalitarian underpinning has produced a supposedly just stratification of society. Heightened visibility of the system’s uneven effects along non-merit factors has catalysed a renegotiation on this matter between the government and the people. The principle of meritocracy and its practice in Singapore needs to be better understood in order to affect constructive criticism for policy options. Based on a study of the meritocratic system as practiced in Singapore today, this paper aims to serve as a resource for the rethinking of meritocracy in Singapore.

National Context

The practice of meritocracy in Singapore is intrinsically tied to the government’s nation-building project and construction of the country’s official history. Since independence, Singapore has been dominated by one political party, the People’s Action Party (PAP). Singapore’s official history is a product of the PAP government’s national construction project. Singapore’s first and longest-serving Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew’s personal memoirs, The Singapore Story, further embeds the idea of his (and a select group of first generation leaders’) version of events as being one and the same as Singapore’s official history (Barr and Skrbis 2008, 18). In public schools, National Education and History textbooks help establish and maintain this narrative of Singapore in the public imagination. Social engineering is conducted through government policies and tight control over the mainstream media. In short, Singaporeans are socialized throughout their lives to play their respective parts in perpetuating ‘The Singapore Story’ (Barr and Skrbis 2008, 35). An integral part of national construction has been about successfully controlling and ingraining a governing ideology into the psyches of Singaporeans. Pragmatism is repeatedly espoused for survival and overcoming Singapore’s vulnerable position as a small island-state without natural resources. Pragmatism is widely accepted as the foundational basis of public policies, empowering the leaders to make apparently incontestable policy decisions justified by a siege mentality. Moreover, pragmatism has been extolled as a non-ideological concept when it is an ideology in itself. Denying pragmatism as an ideology serves the purpose of encouraging a de-politicized acceptance of the concept by the population.

As a function of pragmatism, meritocracy in Singapore’s national discourse is generally uncontested and regularly forwarded as the only viable principle for managing the country’s scarcity of resources in order to achieve optimal socio-economic performance (MFA 2008; 2010; 2011). Introduced in 1951 by the British colonial government through the creation of the Public Service Commission (PSC), Singapore’s form of meritocracy is based on the 1854 British Northcote-Trevelyan Report, which formed the foundation for merit-based recruitment to the British civil service. Subsequently, however, such meritocracy has been extended beyond civil service recruitment into a phenomenon termed “masoch-meritocracy” (Vogel 1989, 1053). Meritocracy in Singapore both horizontally and vertically permeates the societal selection mechanism. Horizontally, it is not just bureaucrats but also politicians who are deemed as requiring screening through selection processes. Vertically, this process of selection spans almost the entire lifetime of Singaporeans, from the outset of formal education in primary school to their lives as working adults. Meritocracy continues to serve as an ideological resource and the PAP government’s central resource for both recruiting ‘talented’ individuals into public service and providing a blueprint to guide the