Shamus Rahman Khan, in the *Privilege*, delineated a panorama of one elite high school, St. Paul’s, in the United States. He tried to explain four questions in this book: (1) what the difference between new elite and traditional elite is, (2) how the elites’ characteristics were cultivated, (3) how the hierarchy inside elite school was formed, and (4) why diversity did not bring equality.

The text was well organized to answer those questions above. Khan, in the first chapter, introduced the history of St. Paul’s School in which “the new elites” were cultivated, and “the old elites” in the history of the United States. He claimed a hypothesis that the transition from the old elites to the new elites was more accessible to all the society, and wealth diversity in elite group does not result in equality. In the later lead to new inequality, since, according to Khan and the concept from Bourdieu (1984), the embodiment of the new elite is ease (p. 197), which was not possessed by those who were not elite before, but just step into elite groups by personal strivings. It is a brilliant part for Khan to bond his observation to the social structure of the United States.

In conclusion, Khan discussed the paradox of new elites culture in the United States, that is, the surface diversity in elite group does not result in equality. The reasons which lead to this paradox lie in the two macro-level social changes: collectivistic society was replaced by individualism society and democratic society displaced aristocratic society of the United States. The former gave rise to the diversity in new elite group, since it enables individuals through striving to rank among elite level, whereas the latter lead to new inequality, since, according to Khan and the concept from Bourdieu (1984), the embodiment of the new elite is ease (p. 197), which was not possessed by those who were not elite before, but just step into elite groups by personal strivings. It is a brilliant part for Khan to bond his observation to the social structure of the United States.

Khan, in his book, concentrated on the hidden inequality behind a seemingly “meritocracy” society. What distinguished the former from the latter lead to new inequality, since, according to Khan and the concept from Bourdieu (1984), the embodiment of the new elite is ease (p. 197), which was not possessed by those who were not elite before, but just step into elite groups by personal strivings. It is a brilliant part for Khan to bond his observation to the social structure of the United States.

In the *Privilege*, Khan also would like to delve into the transition of the elites groups. According to him, the distinction between elites and normal people has never been changed, even in a more open society. What has changed was merely the way in which they were distinguished from normal people. For him, these elites are capable of forming their own circle, which is very stable and exclusive. I am basically in agreement with this argument. A more open society means that the opportunities could be fairly distributed to more people but it also means a highly competitive society, and the competition inevitably bring about inequality. The major new
elites and the old elites are not two distinct generations, instead, they share the same blood lineage, so even if these new elites have to compete with more people today, their resources, which were inherited from their old elite parents, would help them out in the competition. However, the minor new elites, just like the black girl in St. Paul’s, could not be comfortable at school while they could get into St. Paul’s and get very high scores at school. Therefore, although the open society may be meritocratic nowadays, the elites group still remains aristocratic.

As an ethnographic research, Privilege includes large amounts of observations and interactions with the young elites. However, a crucial question the author did not address is that to what extent these teenage elites could represent their adult counterparts? The adolescent elite might be indifferent to high culture by now, but when they grow up and contact with other elites in formal occasions, the elites seemingly might no longer be indifferent to those culture symbols, then how could we be so sure that these young elites, by that time, will not fall into the old elites’ set pattern? In other words, while Khan endeavored to use his cases to illustrate that the students in St. Paul’s are the potential elites in the future, Privilege did not cast a strong argument on the transition from adolescent elites to real elites in the society and connecting the phenomenon in an elite school with the social fact in the whole society. However, while with this tiny imperfection, there is no doubt that Privilege, as a creative qualitative research on elite group in the United States, would be widely debated by scholars who are interested in this area.

References

