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Singapore

Confinement nanny trade turns professional to tackle diminishing job appeal



Through training and certification, 35-year-old Pearllyn Cheok has risen through the ranks to become an assistant trainer and now assists in teaching other potential confinement nannies.
(Photo: Jeremy Long)

SINGAPORE: Thirty-five-year-old Ms Pearllyn Cheok is childless, but her love for children has brought her into contact with more than 14 babies over the past two years. Since then, she has spent more time with new families in Singapore than at home in Kulai, Johor with her husband.

Hers is one of more than 4,000 Malaysian work permit applications which the Singapore authorities receive each year for employment as a confinement lady – a woman hired to provide care and guidance for a new mother and her newborn.

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They are usually hired as live-in help for 28 days, and are paid between S\$2,500 and S\$4,000 for their work. They are also given a red packet at the start and end of their stint for well wishes.

“So far, this work feels the most right to me. It’s hard work but also ‘heart’ work, meaning it requires a lot of love and care,” she said.




Ms Cheok is not your typical confinement lady, who is usually a woman in her 40s and 50s. She joined the vocation after stints as a consultant, clerk, salesperson and promoter in her early adult life.

Confinement ladies and agencies Channel NewsAsia spoke with say the workforce is ageing, and there is diminishing desire from young women like Ms Cheok to work as a confinement lady, especially Singaporeans.

Madam Peh Ah Moy, 59, a retired confinement lady, said that women generally do not want to leave their families and move in with another to work almost 24 hours a day. This is more

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so if they have little ones.

The work is even less inviting for a young woman because experience is highly valued in this occupation.

“There is demand for women like us, but it is hard to find because there are no standards to go by. You know how good a confinement nanny is through recommendations and testimonials, rather than going by a resume,” she said.

Compared to 16 years ago when she first started, Mdm Peh said the salary has grown from about S\$1,700 to more than S\$3,000 now.

Most confinement nannies who work in Singapore are from Malaysia. While there are Singaporean nannies, they are far and few in between. Madam Dorothy Tan, 41, left her job 10 years ago to join the profession and said that Singaporean nannies like her are rare and in demand. They are usually booked up months before the baby’s arrival.

“There are [Singaporeans], I know of a few but they take overseas assignments. You hardly find them. They’re all taken up at a very early stage [of the pregnancy],” said Mdm Tan.

SKILLS UPGRADE

While there have been courses and programmes made available by various organisations, there are no set standards agreed across the industry. However, some agencies have introduced various training programmes to create a baseline for their work.

For Ms Cheok, she wanted to become a confinement nanny after knowing that she could go for training and obtain certification.

“It’s better to have skills and know-how in one thing, because then you can use that to ensure better employment,” she said.

She joined a training programme jointly awarded by Thomson Medical Hospital’s Thomson Parentcraft and confinement nanny agency, Confinement Angels. As part of the programme, Ms Cheok had to undergo five days of coursework and a week of practical training which included baby care, hygiene standards, confinement meal planning, an understanding of traditional Chinese medicine and breastfeeding.



The training held by Confinement Angels uses the Thomson Parentcraft syllabus. Potential confinement nannies come from all over Malaysia to Kluang, Johor for about two weeks to live and learn together. (Photo: Fann Sim)

The training programme is one of the few available for women keen on learning about confinement work or receiving an audit on their existing skills.

The other, organised by the Women's Initiative for Ageing Successfully (WINGS), targets women above 40 years old who are seeking nanny skills to assist their children who are expecting a new child, or to work as confinement nannies to supplement their family's income.

WINGS told Channel NewsAsia that more than 400 Singaporean women and permanent residents have gone through the training programme, which involves trainers from Thomson Medical Hospital and KK Hospital, since its launch in 2009.

"We have seen a gradual increase over the years with the programme gaining more popularity," said Ms May Tan, programme organiser at WINGS.

Mr Gilbert Tan from Confinement Angels said he has seen demand for confinement nannies go up, especially with shrinking family size in Singapore.

"Most families only have one or two children and they want to give their baby the best. Some mothers may not know how to care for infants so we see more and more asking for such services," said Mr Tan.

The training programme also allowed Ms Cheok to better understand the needs of a Singaporean family, which is starkly different from what she is used to in Malaysia.

"If I had carried out the confinement nanny work in Singapore like I did in Malaysia, it wouldn't work out. I'll definitely fail," she said.

"In Malaysia, more attention is being paid to confinement foods rather than the mother and baby. This is because families and extended families tend to live close to each other and can help out," she said.

"In Singapore, caring for the baby is our topmost priority. Like feeding the baby during day feeds and night feeds, changing their diapers, and supporting the mother when they have problems breastfeeding," she added.

RIISING THROUGH THE RANKS

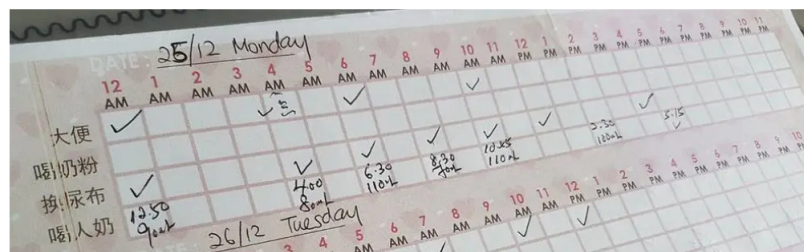
Ms Rachel Ang, 39, was promoted to be a trainer after working as a confinement nanny for almost two years.

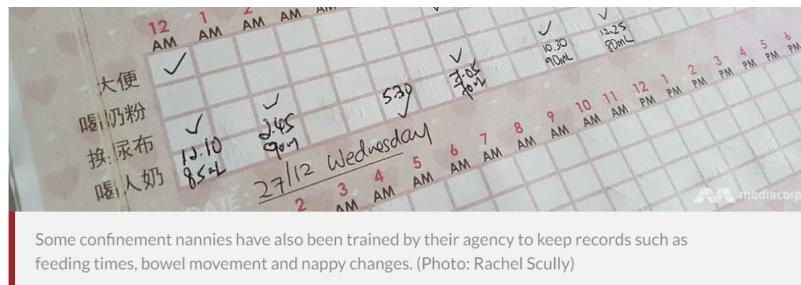
She was picked based on her personality, experience and customer feedback to attend a one-week training session with a Thomson Parentcraft Educator.

"Apart from the regular confinement nanny training, I also learnt how to manage a class and how to use positive reinforcement to encourage these women," said Ms Ang.

"For some of them, this is the first time they are leaving home. So it's important to manage this as well," she added.

The confinement nannies are also trained to take a more formal caregiving role, which includes responsibilities like jotting down information that may be useful for the parents and paediatricians.





Some confinement nannies have also been trained by their agency to keep records such as feeding times, bowel movement and nappy changes. (Photo: Rachel Scully)

Some agencies have given nannies a health booklet to record the feeding times, bowel movements, nappy changes and body temperature of the babies. The booklet also acts as a guide for parents after the nanny leaves the household.

One parent Ms Rachel Scully, who had a nanny from PEM Confinement Nanny, said that this proved to be important right from the very beginning.

"On the day I came home from the hospital, my baby had not pooped or peed at all and I had actually forgotten because I hardly slept in the hospital," she said.

"So (it was) lucky when the nanny came, she checked it out. She said: 'I've been in your home for a few hours and there have been no diaper changes.' It just dawned on me and my husband. Then she said that it could be a sign of dehydration," Ms Scully added.

The nanny suggested to try giving her baby formula milk just for one night, which solved the problem.

BOOMING MARKET GLOBALLY

Largely engaged by Chinese families, agencies and confinement nannies have started to see non-Chinese families engage them for their services.

Freelancer Nancy Tan has done confinement work for a German family, Chinese families in Perth, Australia and Indonesian-Muslim families.

She said she was recommended by an Indonesian family after she did confinement work for them and grew her clientele from there.

Another freelance confinement nanny, Madam Phua, 53, said clients abroad usually pay more. For example, performing confinement work for an Australian household can net her an extra S\$500.

The demand for postpartum nannies and professionalisation of the trade is not restricted to Singapore. In China, confinement nannies are regulated and state-certified. Some nannies are paid even better than mid-level executives, with some clients willing to pay up to S\$36,000 a month, according to a [New York Times](#) report in 2015.

Source: CNA/fs

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