

## Exactly Foundation – Residency #23 – *With and Without You*

by Geraldine Kang. February 2024, Singapore

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### **Word from the ‘Wart’<sup>1</sup>**

By Li Li Chung

Who feeds my son?

For me, Geraldine’s project *With and Without You* started with my interest in cookbooks on Singapore food. I discovered in the many cookbooks’ introduction, the authors’ inspiration came from memory of some matriarch (often the author’s mother or grandmother or aunts) pounding something smelling incredible in the kitchen for a phenomenal Peranakan dish. It was always a matriarch though once rarely, a grandfather who loved hawker food. So I asked my son what he remembered of me cooking for him. He said, “What cooking? You?”. It’s true, I didn’t. I didn’t do what my helper did and still do: “a range of domestic tasks carried out in private homes including cooking, cleaning, laundry, taking care of children and the elderly, and running errands”. I had worked for nearly two decades in a high-powered, MNC regional job, traveling as much as 70% of the whole time when my son was aged four till even after he finished NS and left home for US university. My son is right: what cooking?

As a single mom, I have always had household help although I did not grow up with one. There was no such thing in my childhood. My mother was always at home though she did have someone come wash laundry but my mother shopped, cooked, cleaned, sewed, tutored and kept us children fed and in line. My father was there at mealtimes and on weekends. One snide remark I remembered from my mother when she saw how I was working and outsourcing childcare to my helper: “I was always there to open the door for you when you came home from school”. I have to admit it was super hard to leave my five-year-old son when I left home for the airport on business trips especially long-haul ones to Australia, US or Europe. On a few occasions in those early days, I would leave my son a daily note and small gift that the helper gave him every day that I was away; and I called him every day. The worst was being away on weekends when we were both expected to be doing something together; weekdays could while away with school and homework.

More Singaporean women are working. Significantly noticeable is the huge jump in the employment rate of Singaporean women aged 25-64 in the last twenty years: 75% in 2021, up from 53% in 1994.<sup>2</sup>

I read that we have 1.43 million households in Singapore.

According to Singapore’s Ministry of Manpower (MOM - uncanny that that should be the moniker of the controlling government agency): as of 2022, we have 268,500 foreign domestic workers (FDW), one-fifth of all foreign workers (which is a whopping 1.6 million individuals).

Which means one in five Singapore households has a foreign helper.

Fifty percent of FDWs are from Indonesia, 33% or nearly 90,000 are Filipino, less than 15% from Myanmar.

MOM lists FDW eligibility as: female; aged 23 to 49/those aged 50+ can only renew their work permits

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<sup>1</sup> *Wart* is short for *Stalwart*, which Exactly Foundation’s first resident Kevin Lee suggested that for future residences, I should pen a statement as “Exactly Foundation *Stalwart*” – a label that sounds like too much adult responsibility.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7jflg5UNioA>. 1.03minute

till age 60; with minimum eight years of formal education; from Bangladesh, Cambodia, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Macau, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Taiwan and Thailand.<sup>3</sup> Never today have I known of a Singapore FDW from Korea or Taiwan.

Their numbers mean something to their country: 2% of Filipinos work abroad in some “elementary occupation” (which includes household work) or 2.33 million out of a total population of 109 million; nearly 1 million work in the Middle East; over 56% are female. In Singapore in recent post-Covid 2023, the number of Filipino “elementary occupation” migrant workers more than doubled so we have made up for lower numbers during Covid’s travel restrictions.<sup>4</sup>

Now, my son is 35. I started to have live-in household help when he was born. I count myself fortunate that in 35 years, I have only had six helpers and the current helper Violeta has been with me for more than 20 years, and the one before, Mercy, for nine years. All the earlier ones except one (who was fired) left due to my relocation to a different country. So actually, quite a stable record. And now my son feeds himself beautifully, in Canada. Like the 2023 *World Young Chef Young Waiter* winner, Ian Tan, said of his ideal eatery, “The details are hazy, but of two things certain: It will be omakase, with a guest list of *grandmothers and maids – ‘every chef’s first teachers’*”. (italics mine)<sup>5</sup>

But I still wonder ... especially about our foreign employment and immigration policies: why isn’t there a path for my helper of more than 20 years to be a permanent resident or citizen of Singapore? She has three university graduate, able, outstanding children and three grandchildren. Aren’t those good immigrant/citizenship profiles?

Or even a CPF-lite from the Singapore state to ensure her a pension and motivation to stay to help Singaporeans? And a kind gesture of thanks.

All up, she gave half her life to working in Singapore, allowing women citizens like me to leave home to contribute to the economy and boost household income. And a single mom like me to survive. *She’s invaluable.*

Here we are lamenting about Singapore’s dangerously low fertility rates and yet we have a possible solution to increasing young, hard-working, vibrant women with families to top up our population, no?

It’s not like we’re unfamiliar with immigrants; we all are.

I sincerely thank Geraldine Kang for her insights on migrant workers in our midst, which she has done quite a number of projects and interventions to exhibit their creativity and perseverance. Her Exactly project *With and Without You* brings out the joy and celebration on one hand but on the other, the challenges of including someone in one’s private living space that requires acceptance and patience. And that also pertains the other way around, for the helper to accept a foreigner in her space. Indeed, it is living with and without, all around.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.mom.gov.sg/passes-and-permits/work-permit-for-foreign-domestic-worker/eligibility-and-requirements/fdw-eligibility>

<sup>4</sup> latest data from Philippines Department of Migrant Workers (DMW). *Mama, come home: Can the Philippines bring back its migrant workers?* Mara Cepeda, *The Straits Times*, 6 April 2024.

<sup>5</sup> *‘Not cut and paste’: How Singaporean Ian Tan won the world young chef award.* Carmen Sin, *The Straits Times*, 11 April 2024.