



Private tutor Janice Chuah, 36, earns up to \$15,000 a month teaching maths to primary school pupils. ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE

Top private tutors raking in big bucks

Many in tuition-hungry Singapore say that incomes are up by at least 30%

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When Ms Janice Chuah first started her private tuition classes in January last year, she had only five pupils.

She earned \$1,000 a month. Her pupil base has since grown tenfold – and she now earns up to \$15,000 a month teaching maths to primary school pupils.

Ms Chuah, 36, who has won several awards from the Ministry of Education, had quit teaching in a primary school to become a private tutor. She wanted to spend more time with her three young boys, aged between three and nine.

She now puts in half her previous 40-hour work week while earning more than double her previous salary.

When she quit her job, she was prepared to give up a paid employee's perks like bonuses, medical benefits and annual leave.

"I was willing to initially sacrifice income for more flexibility," she said. "I've been lucky to marry work with passion, have

flexible hours, and earn a respectable income."

She has since also registered her own private education centre, employing five tutors. She hopes to list the company on the stock exchange some day. "The sky is the limit for me," she said, beaming.

Indeed, with parents in Singapore spending \$820 million on private tuition in 2008 – nearly double that a decade earlier – private tutors, especially those in the top league, are raking in big bucks.

Half a dozen well-established tutors The Sunday Times spoke to have all seen incomes rise by at least 30 per cent over the past couple of years.

It is a business that seems to be recession-proof, with some tutors earning upwards of \$1 million a year, said Mr Tong Yee, a former junior college teacher.

Mr Tong is one of the founders of School of Thought, an education consultancy that provides affordable tuition and which also aims to see private tuition done away with, as schools improve on their teaching methods.

"I reckon there are at least 10

top tutors who earn upwards of \$1 million a year," he said. He estimates that there could be another 25 earning more than \$200,000.

An economics tutor he knows, for instance, coaches 70 students during each weekly session. With six such sessions, he has at least 420 students. This person, Mr Tong said, earns around \$55,000 a month.

Such tutors rarely have to advertise; students mostly hear about them by word of mouth.

The Sunday Times understands that this discreet method – in which they typically get paid in cash – also means they are not on the taxman's radar.

But one super tutor who is not shy about his income is Mr Phang Yu Hon, 43, who teaches physics to upper secondary and junior college students.

Mr Phang, a former Mindef research engineer with a first-class honours degree in electrical engineering from the National University of Singapore, earned more than \$522,000 after expenses last year – or more than \$40,000 a month.

He declared all this and paid \$85,000 in taxes. This year, he ex-

pects to earn between \$600,000 and \$700,000.

When he began giving tuition full-time in 1997, he earned less than \$10,000 in his first year. "It was a big pay cut and people thought I was wasting my education," Mr Phang said. "But I liked to teach and wanted to control my own destiny."

From just eight students at the end of 1997, he now has 200. Fees for secondary school students start at \$320 a month; those in junior college pay \$340 upwards.

Ms Celine Loi's business is another success story. The maths tutor's income has doubled since she was featured in a Sunday Times piece on super tutors in 2008.

The NUS maths graduate declined to say exactly how much she earns, but her takings have increased by a "six-digit" figure in recent years.

Ms Loi, 35, claims that she is able to help weak students attain good grades in maths. She has around 160 students currently and another 40 on a wait list.

Mr Kelvin Ong, meanwhile, has carved out a niche – in tutoring children who want, or whose parents want them, to get into the Gifted Education Programme.

Mr Ong, 35, runs his own academic enrichment company AristoCare.

He takes in only 10 pupils every

\$10,000 FOR A HEAD START

Madam May Sheang spent \$10,000 last year just to ensure that her nine-year-old son Jason got a "head start" in life.

She paid \$850 a month for weekly classes at AristoCare education centre to ensure that her only child could make it into the Gifted Education Programme (GEP).

He did.

"The GEP will help him build a strong foundation for future academic excellence," said Madam Sheang, 45, a housewife.

The year-long preparatory course the boy attended helped him to think out of the box and improve his analytical skills, she added.

While some parents, like Madam Sheang, spent big bucks to help their academically bright offspring excel, others,

like human resource manager Brenda Ng, use tutors to help improve their children's poor grades.

Ms Ng's daughter Melissa Er, now 12, was failing in maths last November when she enrolled for classes with private tutor Janice Chuah.

There has since been a dramatic turnaround in the maths marks of the Primary 6 pupil who will take her Primary School Leaving Examination in two weeks' time.

She secured 70 per cent in the subject in her PSLE preliminary examinations.

"I think I failed my maths before because I didn't try hard enough," said Melissa. "I kept telling myself I couldn't do it and I absolutely hated maths. But I like the subject now and will try for an A*."

year, works just 32 hours a week, but earns 30 per cent more than what he did as a gifted education teacher at a well-known boys' school.

But he is quick to advise aspiring tutors that not everyone makes it to the top league, that they should consider the high stakes and "big stresses" involved.

"There are no bonuses," he said. "Unlike the schools, you can lose all your students if you don't deliver good results," he added.

Indeed, the vast majority of tutors here are unlikely to earn anywhere near six figures.

It is difficult to assess median incomes of private tutors, given the unregulated nature of the business. But at some private tuition centres,

the pay for full-time tutors starts at \$1,800 a month.

Untested tutors aiming for the top league have to prove themselves first, especially as appraisals in many tuition centres are linked to how students perform.

And many home tutors are dropped the moment students don't perform.

Ms Chuah said there is a "pre-conceived notion" that tutoring is easy work.

"To be a good teacher, I need to make the effort to understand what and why my students don't understand. I must have the patience to explain to them until they do, even for the zillionth time," she said. "And that's not easy at all."

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