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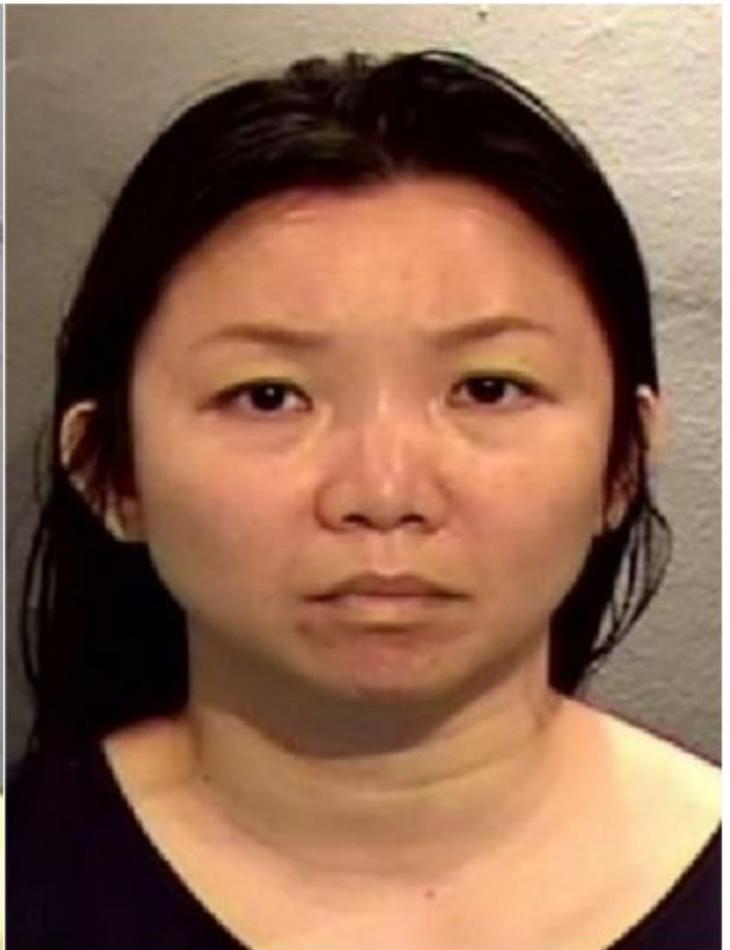


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Husband-wife masterminds of \$39.9 million SkillsFuture scam get 31 years' jail collectively



Ng Cheng Kwee was sentenced to more than 17 years in jail, while his wife, Lee Lai Leng, was given a 14-year jail sentence. PHOTOS: SINGAPORE POLICE FORCE



Hariz Baharudin

SINGAPORE - Two masterminds behind a \$39.9 million SkillsFuture scam, the largest fraud against a public institution here, have been sentenced to a jail term of more than 31 years combined for cheating, forgery and money laundering offences, among others.

Ng Cheng Kwee was sentenced to more than 17 years in jail, while his wife, Lee Lai Leng, was given a 14-year jail sentence on Monday (Aug 16), said the police.

The scam targeted SkillsFuture Singapore (SSG), which oversees an initiative aimed at promoting lifelong learning. The SSG scheme pays subsidies to Singapore businesses when they send an employee for skills training courses with registered training providers if certain conditions are met.

This subsidy reimburses some of the course fees and is paid either to the training provider or the business, depending on the claim method used.

The scammers used nine Singapore-registered firms that submitted 8,386 fraudulent course fee grant applications and a corresponding 8,391 claims to SSG between May and October 2017.

These submissions involved 25,141 employees purportedly working for six applicant entities. These "employees" purportedly attended training courses conducted by three training providers.

All nine were in fact shell companies that Ng, Lee and other co-conspirators had registered as applicant companies and training providers with SSG between January and July 2017.

To prevent their own names from appearing in the claims, they paid three people to act as nominee directors of the nine entities.

"The syndicate's scheme resulted in SSG disbursing approximately \$39.9 million of training grants in total to the corporate bank accounts of eight entities," said the police in a statement on Monday.

When SSG flagged some of the course fee grant applications and claims for manual checks, Ng and Lee submitted forged and/or falsified documents to SSG between May 2017 and August 2017.



"These documents include employment contracts and attendance records of training courses, which were never conducted," the police said.

Ng enlisted an acquaintance, a Vincent Peter, to arrange for someone to encash cheques from the corporate accounts of the nine entities in August and September 2017. The cheques had been pre-signed by the nominee directors.

Vincent Peter in turn approached Manickam Pragasam and Nathan Muniandy to encash the cheques.



Ng Cheng Kwee was arrested on Dec 4, 2017. ST PHOTO: WONG KWAI CHOW

The cash was placed in a safe at the flat of Lee's brother, Lee Chi Wai.

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Ng and Lee used some of the proceeds to purchase 11kg of gold.

Lee was arrested on Nov 2, 2017, while Ng was arrested a month later on Dec 4 when he returned from China.

The six men who were part of Ng and Lee's syndicate, including Lee's brother, were convicted in 2018 and 2019 and sentenced to jail terms ranging from 33 to 104 months.

Court proceedings against three other alleged members of the syndicate are ongoing.

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