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## Younger Hmong abandoning their agricultural traditions

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**FRESNO, Calif.** - There was a time when Fong Tching's four children worked the fields and accompanied him to the market to help sell strawberries, eggplants, sugar cane and 60 other crop varieties.

But one by one, the kids are leaving the family business, going to college to pursue more lucrative professions in pharmaceuticals and engineering.

"It's just me and my wife working 30 acres by ourselves," said Tching, 45, surveying a field of ripened berries.

Tching is a member of the Hmong ethnic minority group from Southeast Asia. His children are among the first generation of Hmong in the United States that are not farming.

While no one is tallying how many younger Hmong are abandoning tradition, leaders in the immigrant community and agriculture industry observers say the trend is striking.

It is a familiar pattern among immigrant farmers. The number of Japanese-American farm laborers who came to California in the early 1900s dwindled after World War II.

"They grew up and saw the toughness of farming, their parents working year-round, and they saw that hard labor don't necessarily pay off," said Manuel Cunha, president of Nisei Farmers League, a Fresno-based group founded by second-generation Japanese-American farmers.

For the Hmong, the same kind of shift means a loss of tradition that dates back centuries. The ethnic group subsisted on farming for generations, until many were recruited to fight communists alongside American forces during the Vietnam War.

After the communists seized control in 1975, about 200,000 Hmong fled Laos for the United States, settling primarily in California, Minnesota and Wisconsin. Roughly 30,000 live in the Fresno area, according to census figures.

Tching said he immediately rented farm land when he came to Fresno in 1988. On Fridays, he and his wife often work into the night packing vegetables, sleep for three hours, then make the three-hour drive to a farmers' market in the San Francisco Bay area.

"When I came here, I didn't have a chance to go to school. What I knew was farming, so that's what I did to raise my family," Tching said. "I don't blame them for not wanting this hard life."

Michael Yang, a Hmong, didn't follow his parents into the fields. Instead, Yang, who came to the United States when he was 9, went to college in Northern California and came back to Fresno as a farm adviser, rather than a laborer.

Hmong have struggled to learn new farming techniques and adhere to state regulations, said Yang, whose job at the University of California Cooperative Extension Service is to reach out to the roughly 1,000 Asian-owned family farms in Fresno County and help them better manage and market their crops.

The majority of Hmong who came to California's Central Valley farm on a small scale, Yang said, growing exotic crops such as Bok choy, Daikon radishes, bitter melon and yard-long Chinese string beans.

There is a growing demand for such vegetables. In 2004, "Oriental vegetables" accounted for \$15.7 million in sales, up from \$10.3 million the year before, according to the Fresno County agricultural commissioner's office.

Community leaders say they're glad to see young Hmong pursuing higher-paying jobs but are troubled that the next generation doesn't consider farming a professional option.

"They don't realize that they can expand their parents' business and operate it like a real company," said LoXing Kiatoykaysi, director of the Fresno-based Hmong American Community.

Kiatoykaysi plans to develop programs to encourage young Hmong to enter the field. And the U.S. Department of Agriculture offers five scholarships annually to Asian students who plan to study agriculture sciences in college, although few students apply, said Sharon Nance, a rural sociologist for the department.

Despite such efforts to recruit new farmers, Tzexa Lee, co-owner of Cherta Farms, said he believes few Hmong will follow his footsteps.

"It's sad we'll lose our traditions," he said. "But our kids will be better off."