

CALIFORNIA TODAY

A Closer Look at Fresno's Hmong Community

Wednesday: A new report examines challenges facing Southeast Asians and Pacific Islanders. Also: PG&E struggles to find a way out of bankruptcy.



By Jill Cowan

Published Nov. 20, 2019 Updated Nov. 21, 2019



Members of the Hmong Voice Culture & Traditions group performed during a parade to start the 2013 Hmong New Year at the Fresno Fairgrounds. Craig Kohlruess/The Fresno Bee, via Associated Press

Good morning.

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When Chia Youyee Vang heard about Sunday night's horrific shooting in Fresno, she pictured her brothers.

The authorities said gunmen sneaked into a backyard in the city's southeastern section and opened fire on a group of friends and family members gathered there. Four men, including the well-known singer Xy Lee, were killed. They were all members of Fresno's Hmong community. Six others were injured.

"They get together to watch Sunday Night Football, too," said Professor Vang, the director of the Hmong Diaspora Studies Program and a history professor at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. "It was so tragic because it was part of a normal routine in life — you're not hiding in the jungle, you're not in a war zone."

On Monday, Hmong leaders in Fresno told my colleagues that they were preparing to mark the new year.

"We are supposed to be celebrating," said Blong Xiong, a former City Council member.

Professor Vang was at home in the Midwest, but she told me she had been following developments in California closely as a member of a far-flung population tightly bound by shared history.

When she was a young child in the 1970s, her family, like more than 200,000 other refugees, fled Laos in the years after the U.S.-led wars in Southeast Asia.

Many of those families landed in the Twin Cities area in Minnesota and in Milwaukee. And many settled in California's Central Valley, mostly in Fresno.

At first, their destinations were dictated by American sponsors, Professor Vang said — often church members.

“Many people ask me, ‘Why here?’” she said, “We didn’t choose — we went where there were people who came forward to sponsor refugees.”

Over time, though, support systems and family networks grew.

Now, roughly 300,000 people of Hmong descent are living in the U.S., according to a Pew Research Center report from 2015.

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That’s still a tiny portion of the overall Asian-American population — particularly in California. According to A.A.P.I. Data, a group that tracks demographics of Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders, there are 94,454 Hmong people in California compared with more than 1.4 million Chinese people.

But Karthick Ramakrishnan, associate dean of U.C. Riverside’s School of Public Policy and A.A.P.I. Data’s director, said Southeast Asians faced particular challenges that have often been overlooked.

“We have different images of who Asian-Americans are,” he said. “A lot of it is informed by popular culture — like ‘Crazy Rich Asians,’ or thinking about Silicon Valley, in terms of the enormous wealth there.”

A new report he co-wrote, about Asian-American and Pacific Islander workers in California, found that working Hmong, along with Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander Californians, struggle disproportionately with poverty.

[\[Read the full report here.\]](#)

And the San Joaquin Valley has the highest proportion of Asian-American and Pacific Islander workers struggling with poverty.

Professor Ramakrishnan told me lots of factors have contributed to the disparities between East Asian communities — Chinese, Korean or Japanese — in the state’s urban areas and Southeast Asian communities that have formed in the Central Valley.

But he said that different waves of immigrants over decades have come to the U.S. for different reasons and with different levels of education and skills.

For Southeast Asian refugees who were fleeing violence and migrated with nothing, the climb was steeper for first-generation immigrants, which has made it tougher for their children to achieve higher levels of education.

Professor Ramakrishnan said he hoped the report would “get people to pay attention and to invest.”

Professor Vang, of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, said that for kids she grew up with, starting in a new country in poorer communities where they also dealt with hostility was difficult. And some young people may have joined or formed gangs.

Still, she said, she was troubled to read that the Fresno Police Department moved to start an Asian gang unit to investigate Sunday’s shooting — despite the fact that there wasn’t evidence that any of the victims had ties to gangs.

“It seems like an illustration of larger stereotypical assumptions, that a group of young Asian men are either gangsters or these nerdy people in the tech field,” she said.

Lar Yang, a graphic designer in Fresno who founded a project called HmongStory 40, emphasized that he didn’t know the details of the case, but said the association with gang activity “kind of broke my heart.”

He said that the Hmong community had, over the course of just four decades in the United States, shown resilience and strength. And the response to tragedy, he said, underscored that.

Going forward, Mr. Yang said he hoped to build on his work preserving and sharing the stories of Hmong refugees and their descendants in the U.S.

“We’re at a crossroads,” he said. “We’re deciding what parts of our heritage we should keep.”

Here’s what else we’re following

We often link to sites that limit access for nonsubscribers. We appreciate your reading Times coverage, but we also encourage you to support local news if you can.



Firefighters battling the Kincadee fire in Healdsburg. Pacific Gas & Electric said one of its transmission towers had malfunctioned in the area shortly before the fire began. Philip Pacheco/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

- **Pacific Gas & Electric needs to find its way out of bankruptcy** — and soon. If the utility doesn't reach an agreement with its victims and creditors, it might not be able to participate in a new state wildfire fund. [The New York Times]
- Also, **PG&E's woes animated rural Democrats at the state party's convention**. They believe frustration with the utility could be a way into deep red districts. [The Desert Sun]
- And **more than a quarter of Sonoma County residents could lose power** on Wednesday as part of another pre-emptive blackout. [The Press Democrat]
- It **was set to rain in Southern California on Tuesday evening**, while conditions were still dry in Northern California. [The California Weather Blog]
- A California woman, Kim Gervais, who was shot and paralyzed at a Las Vegas country music festival in the deadliest shooting in American history, **has died two years later**. [The New York Times]
- **A fight over an attempted theft led to a fatal stabbing on a BART train** at the system's South Hayward station on Tuesday, the authorities said. [KTVU]
- **Chief Petty Officer Edward Gallagher, the Navy SEAL at the center of a high-profile war crimes case, is expected to be ousted** from the elite commando force on Wednesday morning. The move would be in conflict with President Trump's actions. [The New York Times]
- Amid questions about the regulation of oil extraction and an increase in permits, **Gov. Gavin Newsom imposed new rules on fracking on Tuesday**. [NPR]
- **A review of internal Juul records found that it borrowed from big tobacco** for its formula. [The Los Angeles Times]
- "To balance everything out when it comes to the costs, I would have had to charge like \$85 for a cheeseburger." Break-ins and sky-high operating costs mean **business owners are hesitant to open restaurants in San Francisco**. [The San Francisco Chronicle]

Refuges and traditions



Taro farmers in Kailua, Oahu, Hawaii, in October, turning up soil. Scott Conarroe

- On Hawaii, **locals are fighting to revive taro**. [T Magazine]
- If you missed it, Southern California's oldest bookstore, **Vroman's in Pasadena, is celebrating its 125th anniversary**. To celebrate, it's dropping "bookstore" from its name: "You can't get stuck in a cemented identity." [Pasadena Star-News]

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Jill Cowan grew up in Orange County, graduated from U.C. Berkeley and has reported all over the state, including the Bay Area, Bakersfield and Los Angeles — but she always wants to see more. Follow along [here](#) or on Twitter, [@jillcowan](https://twitter.com/jillcowan).

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