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Photo shows workers processing orchids to be exported for wholesale at an orchid farm in the central Thai province of Nakhon Pathom. Once considered a popular pastime among the Thai elite, orchid growing has developed into a multi-million dollar industry and the kingdom is the world's biggest exporter, but the pandemic has seen one in five farms shut recently and growers are expecting further hits due to the war in Ukraine. — AFP photos



A worker watches as orchids are watered at an orchid farm in the central Thai province of Nakhon Pathom.



Workers process orchids to be exported for wholesale at an orchid farm in the central Thai province of Nakhon Pathom.



Photo shows a worker watering orchids at an orchid farm in the central Thai province of Nakhon Pathom.



A vendor moves baskets of orchids at the Pak Khlong Talat wholesale flower market in Bangkok.

BLOOMING SHAME: PANDEMIC, UKRAINE WAR HURTS THAILAND'S ORCHID INDUSTRY

Thailand's orchid growers, already weary after two years of being battered by the pandemic, are bracing for fresh blows to their livelihood as the war in Ukraine and changing weather patterns further cloud their futures. Once considered a popular pastime among the elite in Thailand, orchid growing has developed into a multi-million dollar industry, and the kingdom is the world's biggest producer and exporter of cut orchids.

But the pandemic has seen one in five farms shut recently, according to the Thai Orchid Exporter Association. "No one has the heart to buy flowers, and transportation is very complicated," said Somchai Lerdrungwitayachai as he stares in despair at the sea of purple at his orchid farm west of Bangkok.

He grows Dendrobium Sonia orchids—a hybrid variety with delicate white and purple petals. Popular in Japan, China and the United States, they are used for anything from religious ceremonies to college

graduations. At his 20-hectare property, workers treat the cut flowers with a special solution before trimming the stems and fitting them with a small vial, containing vitamins and nutrients, to preserve their fresh appearance for up to two weeks.

But times are tough: Somchai has been dipping into his savings for two years to keep paying his 50-odd employees. COVID-19 and Russia's invasion of Ukraine have sent the price of fertilisers and pesticides up by 30 percent, he said. Adding to his woes are dramatically falling sales: pre-pandemic China bought 270 million orchid stems annually from Thailand—a figure that dropped to 170 million last year.

Once accounting for 80 percent of Somchai's export income, China has been hit with coronavirus lockdowns in a number of cities, including its biggest: Shanghai. Transporting orchids to the key market by road used to take up to three days, but the same journey can now take

between eight and 10 days. In the flower business, time is money, and wilted orchids are frequently discarded before they can ever reach a Shanghai customer's home to be admired.

'Time is running out'

While Somchai delivers his produce directly overseas, the majority of orchid growers in Thailand use large exporters based in Bangkok. Air-freight costs have tripled or quadrupled in recent months, depending on the destination, said Wuthichai Pipatmanomai, vice-president of the Thai Orchid Exporter Association and co-owner of Sun International Flower, a major exporter. Before the pandemic, the company was delivering 3.6 million orchids a month to China, Japan, Vietnam and the United States.

Now, only 1.2 million flowers leave the warehouse, and he has had to let go of half of his staff. "We have asked the authorities for financial support, but we

have not received anything," Wuthichai said. "Time is running out." Increasing his selling price by 20 percent has resulted in several importers—particularly those in Europe—dropping him to concentrate on more local flowers. The only hope is that sales to Japan remain stable and those to the United States increase with the start of the wedding season, he said.

However, in the long term, changing weather patterns are also troubling for growers. "We are increasingly experiencing the effects of climate change," Wutachai said, pointing to a recent surprise cold snap at the start of April in which the temperature dropped sharply from 36 Celsius (97 Fahrenheit) to 21C in just 24 hours, affecting orchid production. "We are worried that these situations will occur more and more frequently."

Wilted fortunes

Thailand's coronavirus restrictions have also hit domestic sales—a lack of tourists

meant restaurants and hotels scaled back orders, and bans on gatherings affected Thai Buddhist ceremonies. And despite the kingdom's international reopening, local demand remains lukewarm. While Bangkok's biggest flower market appears busy—wholesalers can be seen scurrying through colourful aisles laden with large woven baskets containing flowers—vendors tell a different story.

Than Tha Win, waiting patiently at her orchid stall for customers, said her income is down 70 percent. "Everyone is still afraid to come to the market because of Covid-19," the 21-year-old said. Meanwhile, 45-year-old vendor Waew said she now has about 600 unsold orchids left over daily and tries to stem her losses by plucking off the petals and selling them as a separate product. "Stop working with orchids? Impossible, I don't know how to do anything else," she said. — AFP

TikTok to launch ad revenue-sharing program for creators

TikTok has announced an ad revenue-sharing program with the social media platform's most prominent creators, moving closer to a model already used by its competitors. The short-video format app has become wildly popular in recent years with more than a billion active users globally, but has been criticized for not providing a way for creators to effectively monetize content.

Under the new TikTok Pulse program, companies can place their ads next to user content in specific categories, including health, fashion, cooking, gaming and others—and creators will get a cut. "We will begin exploring our first advertising revenue share program with creators, public figures and media publishers," the company, a subsidiary of Chinese tech firm ByteDance, said in a statement.

"We're focused on developing monetization solutions in available markets so that creators feel valued and rewarded on TikTok." Only accounts with at least 100,000 subscribers will be eligible for the first phase of the program, TikTok said. The firm's North America General Manager Sandie Hawkins told tech website The Verge that Pulse will roll out in the United States in June, and that approved creators will get a 50 percent cut of ad revenue.

In 2021, TikTok generated an estimated 4.6 billion dollars in revenue, according to industry publication Business of Apps. That figure is more than double the previous year's revenue, but remains roughly on par with competitor Snapchat, which has about 300 million daily users, according to Snapchat's data. Other major social networks that focus on video, such as YouTube, Instagram and Snapchat, have already implemented revenue-sharing systems. — AFP



A man looks at a mural depicting the tiger fight, during the rain petition ritual in Zitlala, Guerrero state, Mexico.

Mexican tiger fight ritual draws blood to bring rain

Seeking to appease the god of storms and end a drought, men and women in tiger costumes whip each other mercilessly into submission in an ancient ritual in southern Mexico. "They say it's a drop of blood for a drop of rain," Karina Vicente says as she prepares to take part in the annual tradition for the first time. "I'm very excited but nervous,"

the 22-year-old psychology student tells AFP in the town of Zitlala in Guerrero, one of Mexico's poorest and most violent states.

In the past, the 300-year-old indigenous ceremony to bring rain and plentiful harvests was only for men. But these days, women also want to help keep the three-century-old tradition alive, even if the lashes do hurt, Vicente says. According to tradition, blood spilled in the May 5 ritual, called Atsatsilistli, is an offering for the rain god Tlaloc. The sound of each whiplash represents a clap of thunder, the yellow color of the costumes a drought and the whip a tiger's tail.

Doing battle

Before the fight begins, the residents of Zitlala split into two groups and dance under the intense sun along steep streets, to the rhythm of banda, a type of



Gabriel Vicente prays at an altar before the tiger fight during the rain petition ritual in Zitlala, Guerrero state, Mexico.



A boy in a tiger costume walks through the neighborhood of San Francisco during the rain petition ritual in Zitlala, Guerrero state, Mexico.

Mexican music. First, the male contestants enter the battleground—the town's basketball court—to fight for about five minutes at a time, watched by crowds of spectators.

"Come on! Come on!" a burly, bare-chested man says, challenging his opponent. Minutes later, he raises his arms in victory, blood starting to seep from the wounds inflicted by his rival. Referees stand by ready to separate the fighters if they break the rules. The musicians of both sides play simultaneously, adding to a chaotic atmosphere. Soon the air is filled with the aroma of mezcal, an agave spirit that the contestants drink and use to wet their whips to make them more effective.

Equality replaces machismo

Three hours later, it is the women's turn. They greet and hug each other before and after the fight, unlike the men.

Within minutes, Vicente's opponent removes her mask in defeat after some well-aimed lashes. "I felt good, proud!" Vicente declares, savoring her victory. The ritual ensures the rainy season begins punctually—a lifeline for a community that relies on corn and other crops, says resident Cleofas Cojito, 60.

She welcomes the participation of women in the tradition, which was once so brutal that some contestants even died, Cojito says. "Now there's equality. There isn't so much machismo anymore," she adds. This year, around 30 women fought—compared with three at their debut in 2019—and 200 men. The next day, Vicente feels sore, but motivated. "I'll fight again. We have to look after what we've already won," she says with a smile. — AFP



People of the San Mateo neighborhood, dressed in tiger costumes, walk during the rain petition ritual in Zitlala, Guerrero state, Mexico. — AFP photos