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ASIAN KALEIDOSCOPE

MN BIZ VISION

Interview with May Lee-Yang: Powering Up on the Tabletop: How Mayhem Games Is Centering Asian American Joy

Harnessing the Fire Horse Advantage: Strategies for Growth, Innovation, and Resilience in 2026

Calling America HOME edition: featuring Zongxee Lee

Asian Media Access

This monthly e-Magazine is published by Asian Media Access and Multi Cultural Community Alliance to highlight the accomplishments of Asian American and Pacific Islanders' (AAPI) small businesses in MN.

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Bridging Cultures, Building Futures: Minnesota's AAPI Business & Workforce Magazine

Welcome to **MN Biz Vision: Asian Kaleidoscope**, a monthly e-magazine dedicated to empowering Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities across Minnesota. More than a publication, this platform uplifts AAPI entrepreneurs while advancing workforce pathways through the **Center for Wellness Technology** - a visionary hub that integrates Agricultural Technology, Multimedia Technology, and Wellness Technology into culturally grounded IT career opportunities.

AAPI Entrepreneurship & the Need for New Pathways

AAPI entrepreneurs are vital to Minnesota's diverse business landscape, operating successful restaurants, grocery stores, salons, healthcare practices, consulting firms, and manufacturing businesses, etc.. While AAPIs comprise 6% of Minnesota's population, Asian-owned businesses represent only 3% of the state's small businesses—revealing persistent barriers to entrepreneurship. Yet these 15,500+ Asian-owned firms account for 35% of all minority-owned businesses in Minnesota, demonstrating the community's outsized economic impact and resilience. Targeted workforce development in specialized IT sectors can help bridge this entrepreneurship gap and create new pathways for community economic mobility and innovation.

The Center for Wellness Technology: Our Dual Mission

At the heart of MN Biz Vision stands the Center for Wellness Technology, which unifies three high-impact technology tracks designed for AAPI youth, families, and entrepreneurs:

- **Agricultural Technology (AgTech)**: Blending modern engineering with ancestral agricultural knowledge, learners explore aeroponics, aquaponics, vertical farming, and sustainable food systems that support food sovereignty and sustainability.
- **Multimedia Technology**: Youth and creatives gain experience in game design, AR/VR development, digital storytelling, and AI-assisted media production—tools that amplify AAPI voices and ensure cultural stories are represented in the digital future.
- **Wellness Technology**: Integrating traditional healing practices with modern innovations, the Center supports healing with telehealth systems, VR calming room designs, and culturally informed wearable devices, advancing non-invasive and holistic care models.

Together, these tracks demonstrate why IT matters: technology becomes a vehicle for economic mobility, cultural preservation, and community innovation.

What You'll Discover Each Month

Every issue of MN Biz Vision highlights AAPI business owners across diverse sectors, celebrates immigrant and refugee success stories, and shares practical resources on financing, marketing, digital tools, and entrepreneurship. Workforce development features dive into emerging IT opportunities within AgTech, Multimedia, and Wellness Technology, supported by training programs and employer partnerships.

Building Economic Opportunity & Cultural Resilience

Whether you are strengthening a family business, exploring a career transition, entering tech fields, or launching a new venture, MN Biz Vision: Asian Kaleidoscope connects you to the networks, knowledge, and inspiration needed to thrive. Join us each month as we celebrate AAPI excellence - honoring cultural traditions while embracing the technological innovations shaping Minnesota's future.

POWERING UP ON THE TABLETOP: HOW MAYHEM GAMES IS CENTERING ASIAN AMERICAN JOY

In 2024, a Twin Cities-based writer, performer, and comedian stepped into a new role: business owner. With the launch of **Mayhem Games**, she set out to change who gets to be the hero—not just in stories, but around the game table.

“I’m a Twin Cities-based writer, performer, comedian, and now business owner,” she says. “I created Mayhem Games in 2024, and our mission is to make card and board games that elevate Asian Americans from sidekicks to heroes, so they can POWER UP—on the tabletop and in real life.”

Her first product, *Clapback*, is a comedy-driven card game designed to help players stand up for themselves—with humor as their superpower.

From Immigrant Experience to Entrepreneurial Vision

Her decision to start Mayhem Games was shaped deeply by her immigrant journey and decades of observation.

“All my life, I saw how Asian folks were often ignored—at school, work, and as consumers,” she explains. “I always heard people in decision-making roles say, ‘You need to reach out to a broader audience first then you can be specific later.’ But after 40 years, I was tired of waiting for my turn to be seen.”

That frustration became fuel.

"Asian folks are tired of waiting on the sidelines while businesses try to sell to the 'broader' community," she says. "So I focused my company on creating things for Asians in the U.S."

Instead of waiting for representation, she built it herself.

Learning Business from the Ground Up

Transitioning into entrepreneurship was not without its challenges.

"My background has been in the arts, nonprofit work, and academia," she says. "So the biggest challenge for me was the pivot into the business field."

In 2023, she received a fellowship through The Finnovation program, which became her crash course in entrepreneurship. Through workshops and mentorship, she began building her first for-profit venture. She also filled in knowledge gaps by networking, studying industry best practices, speaking with other entrepreneurs, joining membership groups in her field, and reading extensively.

It was a hands-on education in turning creativity into commerce.

Culture at the Center

Her cultural background is not just part of her story—it is the foundation of her business.

"For far too long, Asians have been ignored in the American landscape," she says. "So I wanted to create games that center the Asian identity—while knowing

that the Asian experiences are diverse and I can never capture everyone's true identity."

Her goal is to celebrate self, community, and culture through laughter and entertainment.

"I mean, would you rather play a game or go to a workshop?" she asks with a grin.

With Clapback, culture and comedy intersect. The game transforms moments of awkwardness, stereotype, and microaggression into opportunities for humor and empowerment.

Advice for Immigrant Entrepreneurs

For other immigrants dreaming of starting a business, her advice is practical and empowering: do your homework.

"There are so many great resources out in the world," she says. "If you want to run a business, figure out who's your competition and how your business might be different from theirs."

She encourages aspiring entrepreneurs to study their potential customers—through industry reports, surveys, social media conversations, and simple everyday dialogue with friends and family.

"What products do they recommend in your field? What do they like? What are they complaining about?" she asks. "Then see if your business can meet those needs."

Identity as an Asset

Starting her business in her 40s gave her something invaluable: confidence.

“I’m confident enough in who I am as a person that I won’t compromise my values,” she says. “Part of those values is about building cultural pride and showing up as my full self.”

Rather than viewing cultural identity as a liability in the American business environment, she sees it as a competitive advantage.

“There are games that have a lot of Asian art and motifs, but they aren’t necessarily created by Asian folks,” she notes. With Clapback, the creators, graphic designer, and test players are Asian. “We’re committed to collaborating with and investing in this community.”

And contrary to her fears, business mentors never told her the company was “too specific.”
“Instead, everyone has said, ‘It’s so good you know who your audience is, so you’ll know where to find them.’ Because at the end of the day, products and services are not for everyone. Knowing who your target is is vital.”

Dreaming Bigger

When asked about her long-term vision, she doesn’t hesitate to dream boldly.

“I want to build a multi-million dollar board and card game company that will build self and cultural pride,” she says. “I want future generations of Asian kids to feel proud of who they are and have some grasp of where they come from.”
Beyond pride, she wants joy.

“I want my community to have a source of joy and laughter. Too often, we are laden with only trauma.”

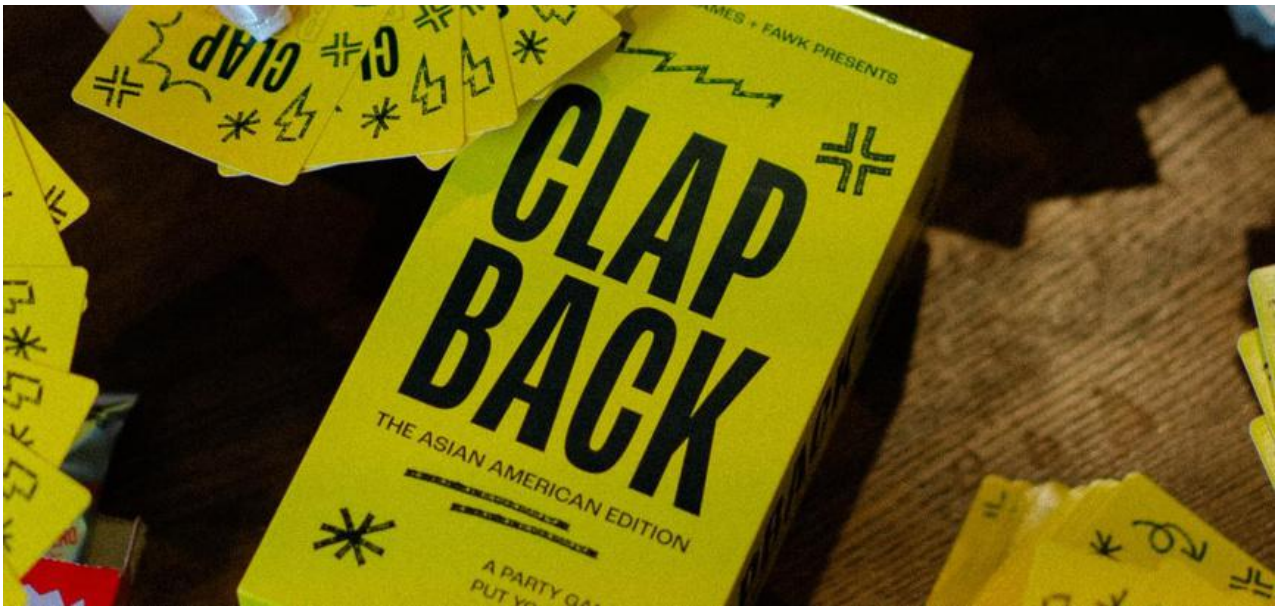
And success, for her, means reinvestment.

“Those profits I want to make? I want to donate a portion to initiatives that strengthen Asian communities in the United States.”

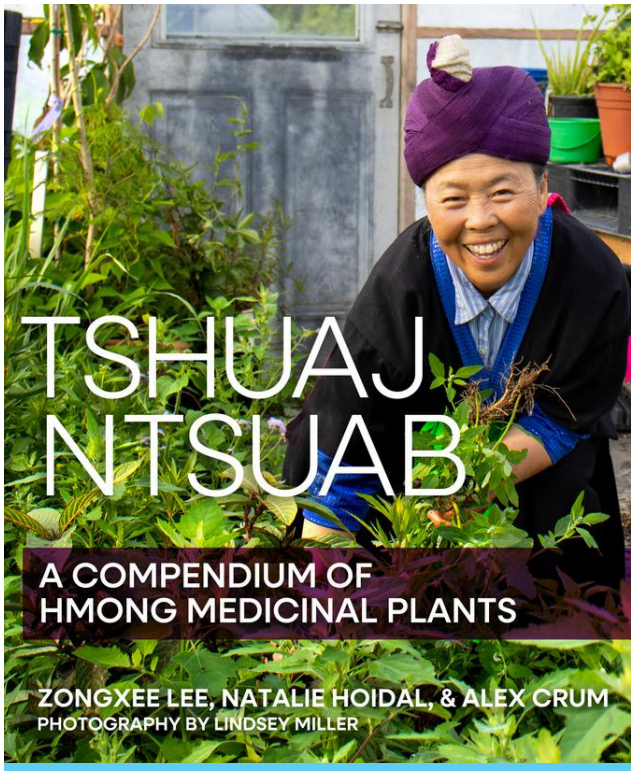
Through Mayhem Games, she is doing more than creating entertainment. She is reshaping narratives, building pride, and proving that sometimes the most powerful revolution begins with laughter around a table.

MAASU (Midwest Asian Pacific Islander Desi American) Conference

May Lee-Yang will be presenting a workshop titled “Clapback to Anti Asian Microaggressions” at the upcoming MAASU (Midwest Asian Pacific Islander Desi American) Conference. During the session, participants will play the game and discuss how lines like “I don’t date Asian guys” originated. She will also be tabling at the Night Market to sell her game. Lee Yang has previously attended MAASU conferences as a workshop presenter and artist and looks forward to seeing what younger generations of APIDAs are experiencing today.



Zongxee Lee



Tshuaj Ntsuab: A Compendium of Hmong Medicinal Plants, by Zongxee Lee, Natalie Hoidal, and Alex Crum

Series Preface: Asian Media Access proudly presents "Calling America HOME" Series, which is inspired by the resilience and hope shared by immigrants and refugees from all corners of the world who have rebuilt their lives in Minnesota. Through these stories, we invite readers to witness a legacy of survival, determination, and hope against impossible odds.

In this edition, we proudly feature Hmong American author Mrs. Zongxee Lee with her new book *Tshuaj Ntsuab, A Hmong Compendium of Hmong Medicinal Herbs, to promote holistic healing through a bicultural lens.*

Q: Thank you for speaking with AMA. Can you begin by introducing yourself and describing your journey to Minnesota?

My name is Zongxee Lee. I came to Minnesota when I was just one year old, the daughter of a a Vietnam War Veteran and part of a Hmong refugee family whose journey to America was rooted in survival, resilience, and hope.

When my parents first arrived in the United States, they chose St. Paul, Minnesota because that's where community was forming , where other Hmong families were trying to rebuild life after war. I was just a one years old when we arrived in St. Paul, then later became the second eldest of eight siblings.Some of my earliest memories are of going grocery shopping with my parents. We would walk the aisles searching, really searching for something that looked even remotely like the vegetables and

herbs we knew. There were no Hmong markets then. No familiar bundles of tshuaj ntsuab. The only hmong herb or “tshuaj rau qaib” was lemongrass . No mustard greens the way we liked them. I remember my parents turning produce over in their hands, trying to substitute.

But my mother didn’t settle for substituting vegetables. Instead, she rented gardening land.She learned how to garden in Minnesota soil , soil very different from Laos, so she could grow the foods that carried our identity. Every summer became a mission. We planted mustard greens, herbs, peppers, squash , anything that would help us preserve our flavors and traditions. Fall meant harvesting and preserving enough food to last the winter. Our backyard became our market. Our garden became our cultural lifeline. This is where it all began for me.

The Lee family at the cucumber farm, c. 1988

I watched my mother carefully protect seeds and herbs because no American store carried what we needed. She saved seeds like they were gold. She shared cuttings with other Hmong families. Plants traveled through community networks the same way stories did. What started as survival slowly became preservation.

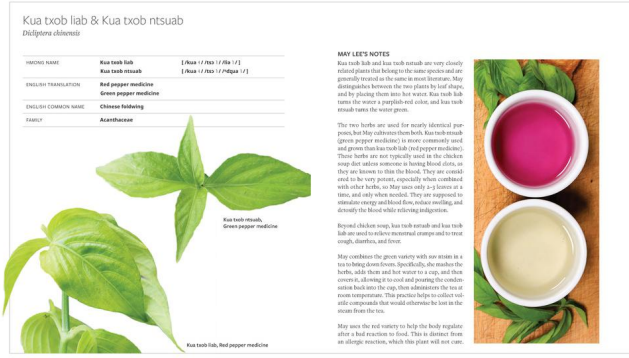
And now, in 2026, life has come full circle. We are no longer just searching grocery store aisle , we are the pioneers who kept those plants alive. We are the bridge generation who protected the herbs, seeds, and knowledge so they could thrive here. What was once scarce is now shared openly in markets, gardens, cultural gatherings, and across communities.

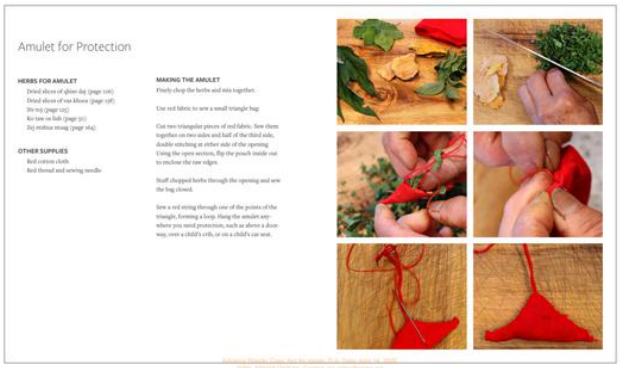
From a little girl scanning shelves for familiar greens to a woman helping cultivate cultural spaces rooted in plants and heritage. Minnesota didn’t just become home. We grew into it.

Those beginnings shaped everything about who I am today. I am a Hmong American researcher, cultural educator, herbalist, and author based in Minnesota. Growing up between two worlds, I learned early that our elders carried entire encyclopedias of plant knowledge in their memories sacred wisdom passed down through generations, yet largely undocumented and at risk of disappearing. I felt a calling to protect it.

My life’s work has become a mission of reclaiming, researching, and re-centering

Hmong herbal knowledge within both academic institutions and community spaces. Over the years, I have interviewed elders, planted and documented traditional herbs, studied their properties, created bilingual educational materials in Hmong and English, and led workshops that bridge traditional healing with modern wellness practices.





Hmong herbal knowledge within both academic institutions and community spaces. Over the years, I have interviewed elders, planted and documented traditional herbs, studied their properties, created bilingual educational materials in Hmong and English, and led workshops that bridge traditional healing with modern wellness practices.

In a time when younger Hmong generations are increasingly skeptical of traditional medicine and when even the Hmong names of many herbs are being forgotten . I stand at the intersection of preservation and innovation. I am committed to restoring cultural confidence and reconnecting our community to ancestral knowledge through both storytelling and science.

Today, I am honored to contribute to Minnesota's cultural landscape in meaningful ways. In 2019, I collaborated with Jamie Ausandorf to create a cultural garden showcasing Hmong herbs for educational tours. More recently, I have had the incredible opportunity to curate a Hmong Botanical Garden at the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum, where I presented DNA sequencing research conducted in partnership with Dr. Alex Crum and research partner Natalie Hoidal in 2024 and 2025 blending ancestral plant wisdom with modern scientific validation.

At my Hugo garden location, I created flower fields as spaces for families and children to gather, take photos, and experience healing through beauty and nature, now culminates in my new book on Hmong herbs - a labor of love that honors our elders, preserves our language, validates our knowledge through research, and invites the next generation to stand confidently in both tradition and innovation.

I am not just preserving plants. I am preserving memory, identity, and legacy.

Q2. How did your own cultural identity evolve while working in researching and writing about Hmong herbs? How has that work shaped your sense of belonging in both Hmong and American cultures?

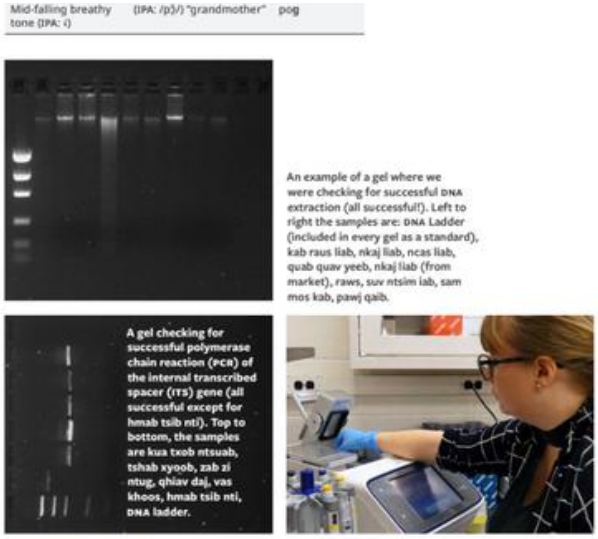
May at work in her greenhouse

Researching Hmong herbs transformed my identity from something I once felt I had to balance into something I now fully embody.

As the child of refugees, I often felt suspended between two worlds too Hmong in American spaces and too American in traditional spaces. For years, that in-between feeling felt like tension. But when I began documenting our herbal knowledge, something shifted. I realized our culture is not static or outdated it is living science. It is centuries of observation, experimentation, intergenerational data collection, and ecological intelligence passed down through memory and practice.

Through research and writing, I came to understand that bicultural identity is not a contradiction it is a strength. My American academic training gave me the tools to document, analyze, validate, and publish. My Hmong heritage gave me the knowledge, the language, and the spiritual relationship with the land. Together, they created a holistic worldview one that sees no division between science and tradition.

As a nurse by background, I began to recognize that everything my mother, father, and grandmother practiced aligned deeply with holistic health principles and plant-based healing. What they taught me about roots, soups, rest, warmth, and balance mirrors what modern wellness now validates. Healing begins from the ground up literally from the roots of plants yet so often we wait until illness becomes chronic before we seek intervention.



I used my healthcare background to thoughtfully collect, interpret, and shape understanding around the herbal practices of the Hmong community. There is a reason our grandmothers prepared specific postpartum broths. There is intention behind the Hmong chicken diet and its restorative soups. These practices were not superstition they were functional medicine, carefully refined through generations. And for so long, they remained undocumented.

Such work has grounded me. I no longer feel divided between worlds. I belong in both because I carry both. I believe bicultural healthy living means honoring ancestral practices while engaging critically, confidently, and intelligently within modern systems. It means recognizing that tradition and science are not opposites. When brought together, they create something more complete. And in embracing both, I have finally embraced myself.

Q3. How do you balance cultural authenticity while making your work accessible to readers who may not be familiar with Hmong traditions?

Balancing cultural authenticity with accessibility begins with respect, respect for our elders, our language, our ceremonies, and the context in which our knowledge was born.

I do not dilute Hmong wisdom to make it fit Western expectations. Instead, I translate it thoughtfully. Translation, to me, is bridge-building, not reduction.

In practical terms, I make my work accessible by providing both Hmong and English terminology so that language is preserved rather than replaced. I explain cultural context before introducing herbal plant names or applications, because understanding why something is used is just as important as knowing how it is used. I also distinguish between traditional belief systems and modern scientific parallels without dismissing either. There is room for both ancestral spirituality and laboratory research. Finally, I weave storytelling alongside academic research, because story carries lived data it holds memory, emotion, and generational wisdom.

Back row, left to right: Lindsey Miller, May Lee, Alex Crum. Front row, left to right: Natalie Hoidal, Zongxee Lee

But accessibility is not only intellectual , it is sensory and experiential.I invite the community to engage with plants using all five senses: smell the leaves, touch the textures, taste the bitterness, listen to the stories, and truly see the plant in its environment. Authenticity is practiced. It is felt.

Make the traditional Hmong chicken soup with the herbs. Sit with the aroma. Taste the broth slowly. Notice how your body responds. Crush an aromatic leaf and rub it gently on a sore muscle or place it on a minor wound. Pay attention. These plants are as authentic as it gets, they were cultivated through generations of relationship with the land. They evolved with us.

For immigrant and refugee communities, bicultural wellness means learning how to advocate for yourself within Western healthcare systems while maintaining your cultural roots. It means understanding medical terminology while remembering the language your grand/mother used. It means knowing when to seek clinical care and when to prepare the healing soup. I try to model that bridge.

Accessibility is not about simplifying tradition or stripping away its depth. It is about invitation. I invite readers in whether they are Hmong or not without compromising the integrity of the knowledge. In doing so, I show that bicultural healthy living is not a compromise between two worlds. It is the strength that comes from carrying both.

When we honor both, we do not lose authenticity — we embrace it.

Q4. What were some pivotal challenges you faced while building your life in America?

My journey has not been without challenges. As a first-generation daughter navigating institutions that have not always valued Indigenous knowledge, balancing family responsibilities, and overcoming self-doubt, I have had to grow into my voice. Those challenges did not silence me they strengthened me.

One of the most pivotal challenges I faced while building my life in America was invisibility the invisibility of Hmong history, refugee trauma, and Indigenous plant knowledge within mainstream systems.

Growing up, I rarely saw our stories reflected in textbooks, healthcare spaces, or public conversations. Our community's contributions and struggles often went unrecognized, and that absence shaped how I understood belonging.

As the daughter of refugees, I also carried the dual weight of gratitude and pressure. Many children of immigrant and refugee families understand this tensionthe deep appreciation for our parents' sacrifices, alongside the unspoken expectation to succeed, translate, advocate, and uplift the entire family. We often grow up quickly, navigating two languages and two cultural systems at once. Balancing cultural duty with personal calling was not always easy. I had to learn that honoring my parents' journey did not mean silencing my own.

Entering the healthcare field revealed another layer of challenge. As a nurse, I witnessed firsthand the health disparities within our community:language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, and gaps in care that left families feeling unseen or misinterpreted. I saw postpartum Hmong mothers questioned for drinking only hot water or following the traditional chicken diet. I saw providers unsure how to interpret practices that, to us, carried generations of reasoning and lived experience.

These moments were pivotal. They showed me that preserving herbal knowledge is not about nostalgia, it is about public health and cultural survival. When cultural practices are misunderstood, communities suffer. When language barriers prevent patients from fully expressing themselves, care becomes fragmented.Healing begins when we remember who we are.

Through my research and documentation, I began teaching nurses and healthcare professionals the physiological and cultural significance behind postpartum traditions , why warmth matters, why restorative broths are consumed, why specific restrictions exist. The Hmong chicken diet is intentional recovery nutrition. It supports healing, circulation, and balance after childbirth. What was once seen as mysterious or outdated is now contextualized and explained through both cultural knowledge and health science.

Beyond healthcare, I remain concerned about the erosion of language, the loss of plant names, and the growing disconnection younger generations feel from ancestral knowledge. These are not small issues , they are tied to identity, mental health, and community resilience.

Each challenge I faced: invisibility, generational pressure, systemic misunderstanding, ultimately clarified my purpose. I did not just want to succeed within American systems. I wanted to expand them to make space for us. And in doing so, I turned those pivotal challenges into the foundation of my life's work.

Q5. Love your statement "*Healing begins when we remember who we are.*" Reflecting on that journey, what impacts do you hope to have on the next generation?

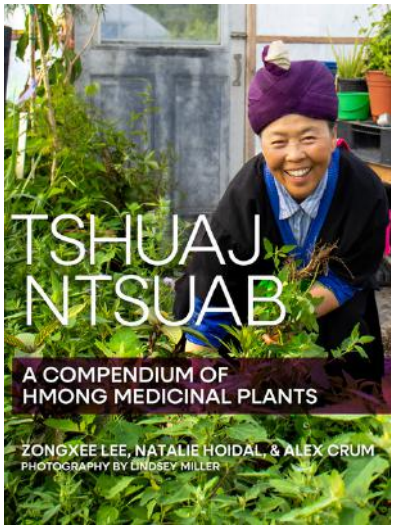
I hope the next generation grows up without shame about their heritage. I hope they see Hmong knowledge not as "old ways" but as intellectual inheritance.

I want young people especially daughters of refugees, to know that they can be researchers, authors, cultural bearers, and bridge-builders. I hope my work encourages them to document their elders, plant gardens, speak their language, and pursue higher education without abandoning their roots . If my journey shows anything, it is that remembering who we are is an act of resistance and healing.

Q6. Any final words for our readers?

To readers: Your roots are your parents and ancestors. My new book is about my roots, my mom's journey in saving the life of the herbs to America, just like she saved my life from drowning at the Mekong River as we escape the Vietnam War. Own and protect your stories. Document your elders. Learn the language. Plant something. Research something. Write something. Grow something.

My new book *Tshuaj Ntsuab, A Hmong Compendium of Hmong Medicinal Herbs*, will launch in April 2026, and I invite you to be part of this movement of cultural preservation and holistic wellness. Thank you for holding space for our stories. Our roots are deep and they are still growing.



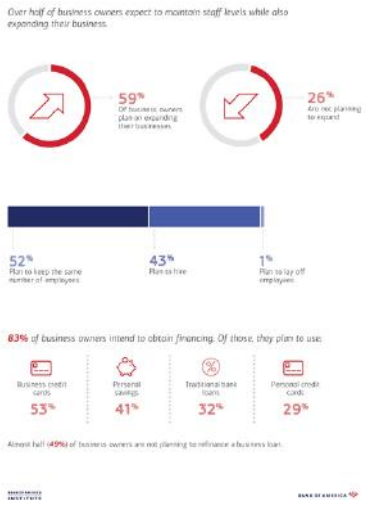
FMI: To order Zongxee Lee's new book - *Tshuaj Ntsuab, A Hmong Compendium of Hmong Medicinal Herbs*, please go to: https://shop.mnhs.org/products/tshuaj-ntsuab-a-compendium-of-hmong-medicinal-plants

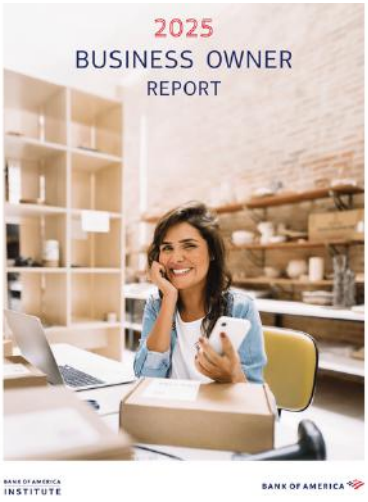
HARNESSING THE FIRE HORSE ADVANTAGE: STRATEGIES FOR GROWTH, INNOVATION, AND RESILIENCE IN 2026

By Lydia Swanson, Senior Vice President, Senior Relationship Manager Business Banking, Bank of America

The 2025 Business Owner Report confirms what we see every day across our communities: cautious yet determined optimism. Nearly three in four business owners expect revenue gains in the next 12 months, with many planning to expand (59%), hire (43%), and secure financing (83%). Growth is firmly on the agenda — but so is thoughtful, disciplined strategy.

At the same time, the 2026 Lunar New Year ushers in the Year of the Fire Horse — a rare 60-year cycle symbolizing ambition, acceleration, and transformative energy. For businesses and entrepreneurs, this moment calls for bold action grounded in smart planning. It is an opportunity to reassess financial objectives, strengthen operational foundations, and adopt strategies that support both stability and long-term progress. Together, the data and the timing send a clear message: momentum favors the prepared.





Invest in the Right Digital Tools

In the Year of the Fire Horse, innovation is a competitive imperative. Fast-moving businesses are accelerating digital adoption to drive efficiency and scale. Nearly all business owners (91%) plan to adopt new digital tools within five years, with 52% expanding digital payment options and 50% implementing AI.

Momentum is already underway: 77% have integrated AI in the past five years, applying it to marketing (50%), content creation (38%), customer service (37%), and inventory management (28%). Leaders are also modernizing checkout with platforms like Zelle, Venmo, and Apple Pay to accelerate cash flow and meet customer preferences.

Automation of scheduling, invoicing, and routine inquiries is freeing teams to focus on higher-value contributions, particularly amid labor shortages (61%). At the same time, 30% are increasing cybersecurity measures, strengthening authentication and data protection to preserve trust alongside growth.

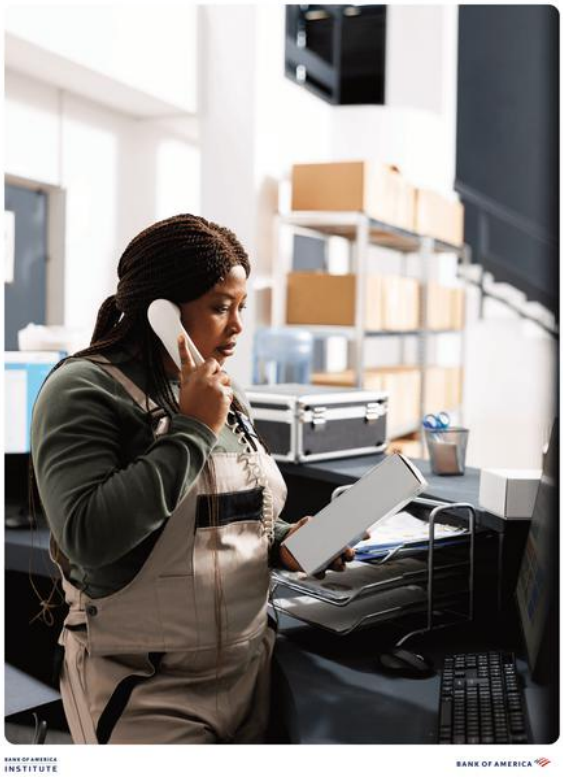
Harnessing Event-Driven Momentum for Community Growth

Fire Horse energy also favors businesses that engage their communities with intention. More than half of owners (58%) have aligned operations with major events from sports games to festivals through targeted promotions, themed campaigns, and sponsorships. As a result, 51% reported increased sales and 47% saw social media growth. Nearly four in five plan to repeat the strategy.

The broader impact of live events is significant. The Bank of America Chicago Marathon alone generated $683 million in economic impact, benefiting local hotels, restaurants, retail, and transportation. By setting clear revenue goals, optimizing staffing, and pairing in-person activations with digital calls to action, entrepreneurs can turn high-traffic moments into lasting brand acceleration.

Cash Flow Discipline, Strategic Financing and Succession Planning

Disciplined cash flow management will be essential in 2026, with inflation (70%) and interest rates (58%) top of mind. Nearly 88% report inflationary pressure, leading many to raise prices (64%) and scrutinize cash flow and spending plans (39%). Meanwhile, 75% face supply chain strain.



*75% of business owners say they are currently being **impacted by supply chain issues,** holding steady with last year. Those impacted are:*

52% Raising prices of goods/services

32% Having difficulty sourcing products/ supplies

*88% of business owners say they are currently being **impacted by inflation,** consistent with last year. Those impacted are:*

64% Raising prices of goods/services

39% Reevaluating cash flow and spending for the year ahead

*Roughly three-in-five business owners (61%) say they are currently being **impacted by labor shortages,** increasing five percentage points from Fall 2024. As a result, those impacted are:*

50% Working more hours due to staff shortages

40% Raising wages to attract more competitive talent

2025 Business Owner Report | 6

Owners are revisiting projections, optimizing expenses, and strengthening liquidity. With 83% planning to seek financing within the next 12 months, with business credit cards (53%), personal savings (41%), traditional bank loans (32%) and personal credit cards (29%) remaining central. Yet 40% still lack succession plans. By formalizing leadership transitions and tracking value drivers, business owners can convert today's optimism into sustainable, long-term enterprise value.

83% of business owners intend to obtain financing. Of those, they plan to use:

Business credit cards	Personal savings	Traditional bank loans	Personal credit cards
53%	41%	32%	29%

Almost half (49%) of business owners are not planning to refinance a business loan.

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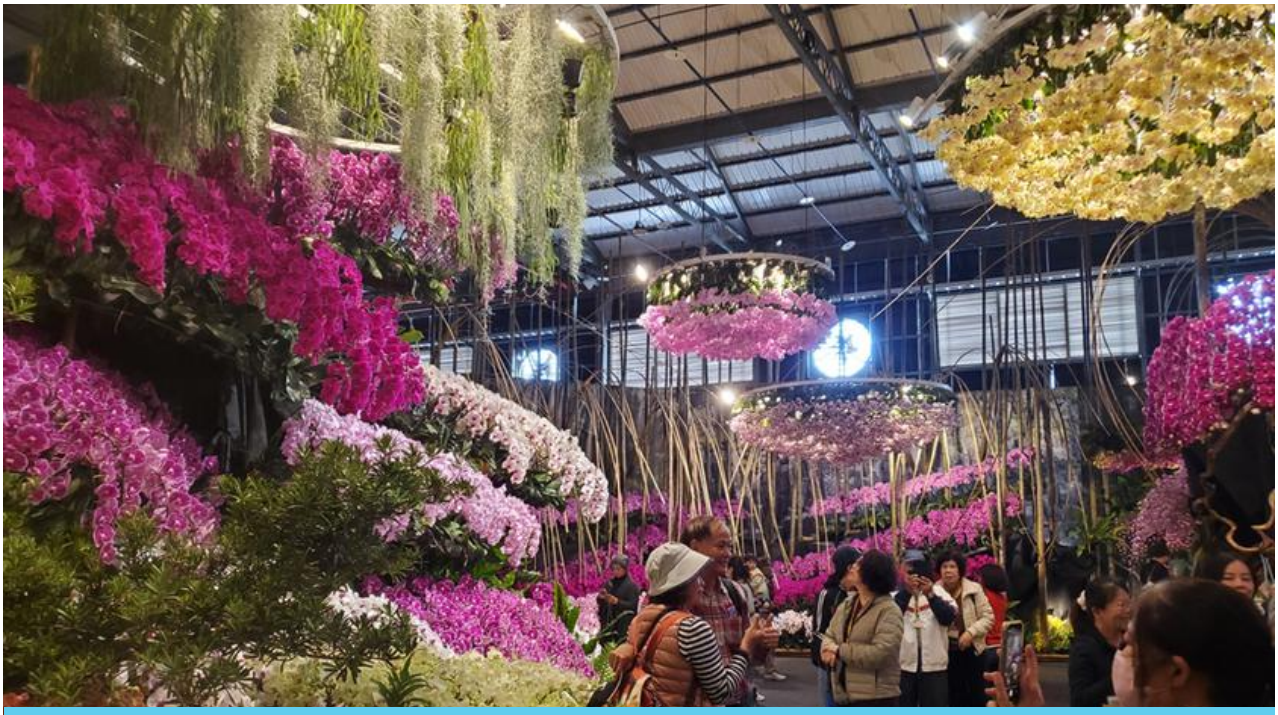
2025 Business Owner Report | 4



Photo/Video Courtesy: The 2026 Taiwan International Orchid Show & Floral Technology Exhibition

WHERE ORCHIDS BLOOM IN NATURE AND IN TECHNOLOGY

As wisdom reminds us, you cannot protect what you have never felt. The 2026 Taiwan International Orchid Show & Floral Technology Exhibition proved exactly this: that technology, at its best, can help people feel and interact with orchids in ways that inspire them to protect and preserve what they have come to love.

With more than 28,000 species — the largest family of flowering plants on Earth — orchids have spent 80 million years perfecting the art of connection, finding precisely the right sensory language to reach the creatures they need. The 2026 Taiwan International Orchid Show & Floral Technology Exhibition, held at the Ministry of Agriculture's Floral Industry Innovation Center in Houbi, Tainan, demonstrated that humans are now learning to do the same — using immersive technology not to replace nature's beauty, but to bring it to people who might never otherwise encounter it.

Agricultural Technology — Growing More Than Flowers

Taiwan's orchid industry — which now supplies more than 80% of the global Phalaenopsis market — has transformed from traditional greenhouse cultivation into a precision science. AI-powered climate control systems monitor temperature, humidity, light spectrum, and root moisture across thousands of growing chambers simultaneously, while growth modeling predicts optimal bloom timing for export markets, reducing waste while maintaining the consistency international buyers

require.

The 2026 show introduced a new variety registration platform and digital image database, enabling faster documentation and global sharing of cultivar data. This is conservation technology in its most direct form: when rare and heritage varieties are formally archived and made accessible to researchers and growers worldwide, the biological knowledge embedded in those varieties — about climate adaptation, pathogen resistance, and cultural significance — becomes part of humanity's shared scientific inheritance. As Minister of Agriculture Chen Junne-jih emphasized at the opening, Taiwan's industry has shifted deliberately from price competition to value creation, from growing more to growing better.

Showing the Taiwan National Flag

Immersive Technology — Bringing Nature Into the Body

The Floral Technology Exhibition's centerpiece was an immersive hall where curved LED walls spanning the full perimeter, suspended overhead panels, and 3D projection mapping dissolved the boundary between the botanical and the digital. Visitors did not simply look at orchids — they found themselves inside them, surrounded by floor-to-ceiling projections of Phalaenopsis patterns, tropical botanicals, and kaleidoscopic floral geometries that made the invisible architecture of a living flower fully and physically present.

The exhibition's most celebrated interactive installation featured a 3D-projected digital creature — a luminous whale constructed entirely of orchid blooms — that descended through the darkened hall, releasing cascades of flowers toward visitors below. Using AR-enabled mobile devices, visitors could catch virtual blossoms as they drifted down, each one revealing botanical information, cultivation data, or a conservation message when touched. The cognitive load of a fact sheet about orchid conservation is high; the experience of catching a glowing bloom released by a whale made of flowers lands somewhere else entirely — in the part of the brain that feels

first and thinks second. That, as environmental educators increasingly understand, is where lasting commitment forms.

Water-dyed orchid installations — blooms transformed through hydration techniques that allow natural pigments to migrate through vascular systems, producing colors that do not exist in nature — completed the picture: technology in genuine service to wonder, deepening rather than replacing the encounter with a living plant.

Showing the same color patters like Van Gogh's painting

Conservation — From Wonder to Stewardship

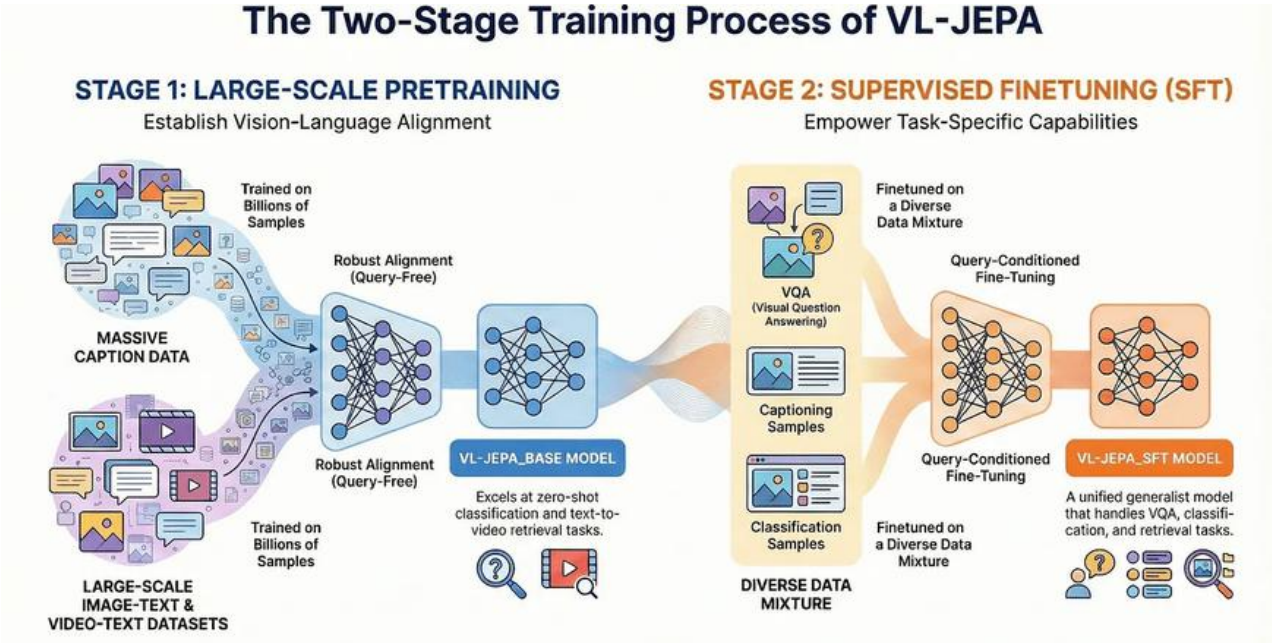
The orchid faces real and serious threats: habitat loss in tropical cloud forests, climate-driven disruption of pollinator relationships, and illegal collection driven partly by the same beauty that makes orchids so culturally significant. Taiwan's response has been to embed conservation logic directly into commercial strategy rather than treating the two as separate concerns. Investment in genetic diversity, digital documentation, and AI-assisted breeding simultaneously advances the industry and preserves the biological heritage it depends on.

This is the lesson that Asian Media Access carries forward as it develops the 5D Immersion Lab, inspired in part by the vision of the 2026 Taiwan Orchid Show: that agricultural technology and environmental education are not separate domains. The precision science that grows an extraordinary orchid is continuous with the conservation science that protects the habitats where orchids evolved. And the feeling of wonder that a beautiful flower produces in a human being — when amplified by technology that makes the invisible visible and the distant close — is one of the most renewable resources available to the global conservation movement.

Every visitor who engages with the Floral Technology Exhibition's immersive installations leaves with something beyond a memorable experience. They leave with a felt sense of the living systems these flowers represent — a quiet, embodied understanding that orchids are worth knowing, worth growing, and worth protecting. This understanding echoes the Asian traditions that have always emphasized harmony with nature, gratitude for the harvest, and reverence for the living world that sustains us.

Asian Media Access's upcoming 5D Immersion Lab will continue to explore how technology can carry both environmental significance and profound human benefit — keeping the orchid alive in nature, alive in technology, and, most importantly of all, alive in the hearts of every visitor who steps inside.

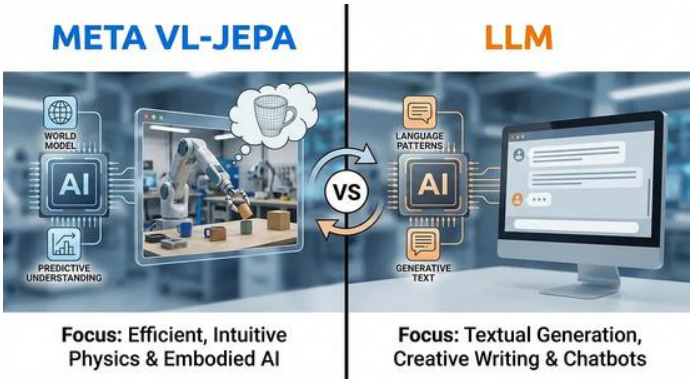
Photo Courtesy: The exhibition featuring thousands of live, hanging orchids that move up and down is called "*Floating Flower Garden: Flowers and I are of the Same Root, the Garden and I are One*". It is a permanent installation located at the teamLab Planets TOKYO.



META INTRODUCES VL-JEPA: A NEW DIRECTION FOR VISION-LANGUAGE MODELS

Columnist - Vivek Ekarat

Meta Introduces VL-JEPA: A New Direction for Vision-Language Models VL-JEPA learns by predicting internal concept representations instead of text, enabling stronger reasoning about the visual world with fewer parameters.



Researchers at Meta have introduced **VL-JEPA**, a new vision-language model built on a Joint Embedding Predictive Architecture (JEPA). Unlike traditional vision-language models that generate text token by token, VL-JEPA learns by predicting abstract representations of the world. This design shift makes VL-JEPA both more efficient and more capable. Despite using only about half the trainable parameters of comparable models, it delivers stronger performance across a wide range of tasks. More importantly, VL-JEPA supports diverse applications without requiring architectural changes, marking a fundamental move away from token generation toward genuine representation learning and physical world modeling.

Why Traditional Vision-Language Models Fall Short

Modern AI systems must be able to understand, reason about, and act within the physical world. Today's dominant approach relies on large vision-language models

(VLMs) that process images or video alongside text prompts and then generate textual responses autoregressively, one token at a time. While effective for many tasks, this approach has important limitations.

First, training is computationally expensive. These models must learn not only task-relevant semantics but also surface-level linguistic details such as phrasing and word choice. As a result, a significant amount of compute is spent generating token variations that do not meaningfully affect correctness.

Second, autoregressive decoding introduces latency, which is problematic for real-time applications such as live scene understanding or action tracking. Even when the underlying meaning is clear early on, the model must complete an entire decoding process before producing a usable output.

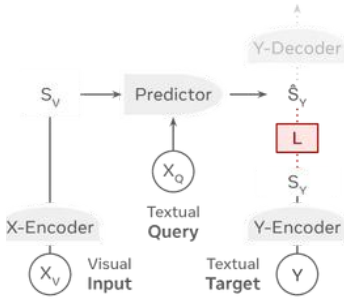
These inefficiencies motivate a different approach one that focuses on meaning rather than language form.

How VL-JEPA Works

VL-JEPA is built on the JEPA framework, which operates by predicting in latent (embedding) space rather than in raw data space. Instead of generating pixels or words, a JEPA model learns to predict the abstract representation of a target input from the representation of a related context input. By minimizing prediction error in this embedding space, the model learns high-level semantic concepts while ignoring unpredictable surface-level noise.

Originally proposed by Yann LeCun, JEPA has already been applied to images (I-JEPA) and video (V-JEPA). VL-JEPA extends this idea to joint vision and language modeling.

Architecture Overview

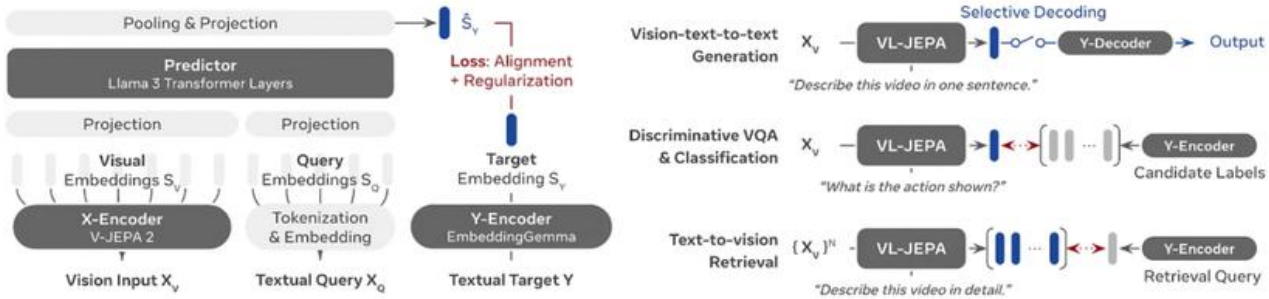


VL-JEPA consists of three main components:

- **X-Encoder**: Based on the V-JEPA 2 model, this encoder compresses high-dimensional visual inputs such as video frames into compact embeddings.
- **Text embedding module**: The textual query is tokenized, embedded, and concatenated with the visual embedding to define the task context.
- **Predictor**: Initialized using transformer layers from Llama 3, the predictor takes the combined visual and textual context and **predicts the embedding of the target answer.**

Crucially, the predictor does not generate text. It predicts the entire semantic concept of the answer in one step.

During training, the predicted embedding is compared to a target embedding produced by the Y-Encoder (initialized with EmbeddingGemma). The model learns by minimizing the distance between these embeddings. When human-readable output is required such as in visual question answering a separate decoder translates the predicted embedding into text.



Why Predicting Embeddings Is More Efficient

Embedding-based prediction offers several key advantages:

- **Reduced training complexity**: The model is not forced to learn every surface detail of language. Semantically equivalent answers like “the lamp is turned off” and “the room will go dark” may differ greatly in token space, but they lie close together in embedding space.
- **No heavy decoder during training**: Since the model is non-generative by default, it avoids the computational overhead of full token reconstruction.
- **Continuous semantic monitoring**: Because VL-JEPA is non-autoregressive, it can produce a stream of “thought vectors” over time. In online settings, the system can monitor semantic changes and only invoke text decoding when necessary.

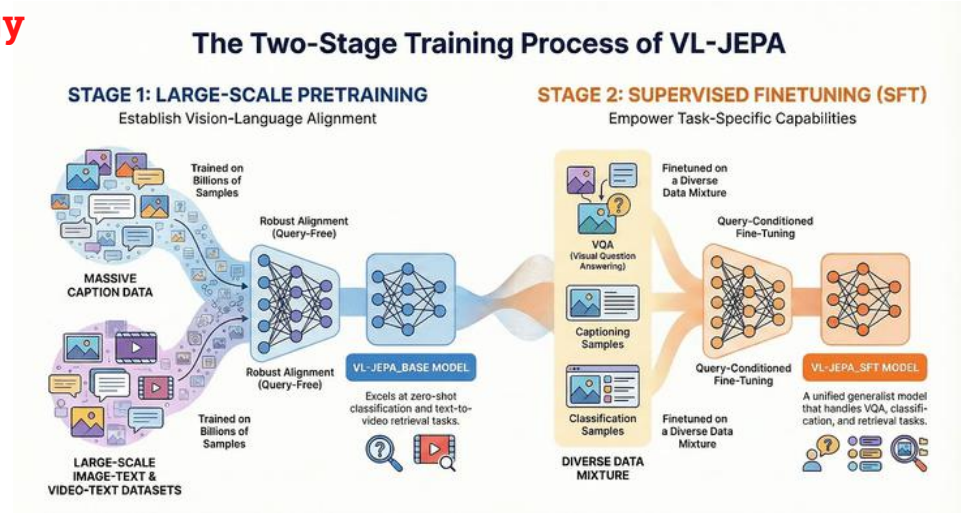
This makes VL-JEPA especially well-suited for real-time and streaming applications.

Training Strategy

VL-JEPA is trained in two stages:

1. Query-Free Pretraining

In the first stage, the model learns broad vision-language



alignment using large-scale image-text and video-text datasets. This produces VL-JEPA_BASE, which excels at zero-shot tasks such as video classification and retrieval.

2. Supervised Fine-Tuning
In the second stage, the model is trained in a query-conditioned setting using a mix of visual question answering, captioning, and classification data. A portion of the pretraining data is retained to prevent catastrophic forgetting. The resulting VL-JEPA_SFT functions as a unified generalist model capable of answering questions, counting objects, and reasoning about scenes.

Performance and Results

Meta evaluated VL-JEPA across a broad set of benchmarks, including eight video classification and eight video retrieval datasets. The model was compared against strong generalist baselines such as CLIP, SigLIP2, and Perception Encoder, as well as specialist models tuned for individual tasks.

- In **zero-shot classification**, VL-JEPA_BASE achieved higher average accuracy than the strongest baseline.
- In **video retrieval**, it delivered higher average recall.
- The model performed particularly well on motion-centric tasks, with slightly weaker results on appearance-centric benchmarks due to less exposure to image-text data during training.

After supervised fine-tuning, VL-JEPA_SFT closed this gap and achieved performance approaching that of specialist models. In visual question answering, VL-JEPA_SFT matched the performance of established VLMs such as InstructBLIP and Qwen-VL despite using only 1.6 billion parameters, compared to 7–13 billion in competing models. Most notably, in world modeling tasks where a model must infer the action connecting an initial state to a final state VL-JEPA achieved a new state-of-the-art accuracy of 65.7%, outperforming much larger frontier models including GPT-4o, Gemini-2.0, and Qwen2.5-VL-72B.

Implications

VL-JEPA demonstrates that generating language tokens is not always the best path to intelligence. Many real-world applications require systems that understand the environment and act appropriately not ones that produce fluent text. For these use cases, JEPA-based models offer a compelling alternative: more efficient training, lower latency, and stronger world understanding. VL-JEPA suggests a future in which AI systems reason in concepts first and only translate those concepts into language when needed.

February 21 & 22

MOA NEW YEAR CELEBRATION

Asian Media Access and Pan Asian Arts Alliance joined the Lunar New Year celebration at Mall of America, where live performances, cultural presentations, interactive activities, and festive decorations brought the community together to welcome the lunar new year. AMA's ED Ange Hwang has hosted the lion dance segments to wish community members all a prosperity Fire Horse Year.

March 07

HOLI CELEBRATION

The Holi Celebration hosted by the Hindu Society of Minnesota brought together community members for a vibrant day of color, music, and togetherness. Filled with joyful moments, cultural performances, and shared experiences, the event highlighted the spirit of celebration and connection. It was a lively and meaningful gathering that showcased the richness of community and tradition. Photo courtesy: Hindu Society of Minnesota

March 11

HMONG FUTURES KICK-OFF

Hmong Futures by Theater Mu is a powerful new production that reflects on 50 years of Hmong community in the Twin Cities while imagining what the next 50 years could look like. Created by playwright Katie Ka Vang through deep community engagement, the work brings together stories, experiences, and voices across generations. The production highlights themes of identity, resilience, and collective future, offering a meaningful and thought-provoking experience. Photo courtesy: Theater Mu

March 19

DUMPLING FESTIVAL

The 5th Annual Twin Cities Dumpling Feast brought community members together on Thursday, March 19, 2026, at Peking Garden Chinese Restaurant in St. Paul. Hosted by the Association of Sino American Neocultural Exchange and the Minnesota China Friendship Garden Society, the event celebrated culture, connection, and shared traditions through food and community gathering. The evening highlighted the joy of coming together and the rich cultural heritage that dumplings represent across generations.

2026 MN CUP: CALLING ALL ENTREPRENEURS!

The Secretary of State's office wanted to let you know about a great opportunity for Minnesota entrepreneurs, researchers, inventors, and small business owners. It's called MN Cup, it's organized by the University of Minnesota, and it's available to any Minnesota-based company with less than $1 million in annual revenue.

MN Cup has become a great first step for launching a new business, offering free education, mentorship, promotional opportunities, and seed funding for those that advance. The competition is free to enter, and participants have until Friday, April 3, 2026, to submit their application.

Click here to start your application

Click here to learn more about MN Cup and their resources

PLAN AHEAD AND SAVE THE DATE

The Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) Office of Broadband Development is hosting the Connecting One: Minnesota 2026 Broadband Summit on Wednesday, April 29, 2026. This in-person event will bring together national leaders, internet service providers, federal, state, tribal, and local government partners, and broadband advocates from across Minnesota. Connecting people to resources, information, and each other is critical to Minnesota's economic stability and digital opportunity.

The summit will start at 8:30 a.m. with registration, coffee, and a light breakfast, and conclude at 4:00 p.m. There will be an opening and welcome from DEED and State leadership, a networking lunch, and breakout sessions on BEAD implementation, mapping, digital skills and security, permitting, and other key topics.
High-level Agenda (Central Time):

- 8:30 a.m.: Arrival and registration with coffee and light breakfast
- 9:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.: Main stage general sessions with opening welcome from DEED and State leadership
- 12:00 – 1:00 p.m.: Networking lunch and Governor's Broadband Task Force monthly meeting
- 1:00 – 4:00 p.m.: Breakout sessions on key topics and initiatives

Registration will open in early spring. A $20 registration fee helps cover catering costs and ensures funds are used appropriately.

Full event details, registration, and the agenda will be shared soon. Mark your calendars for April 29!

For more information >>

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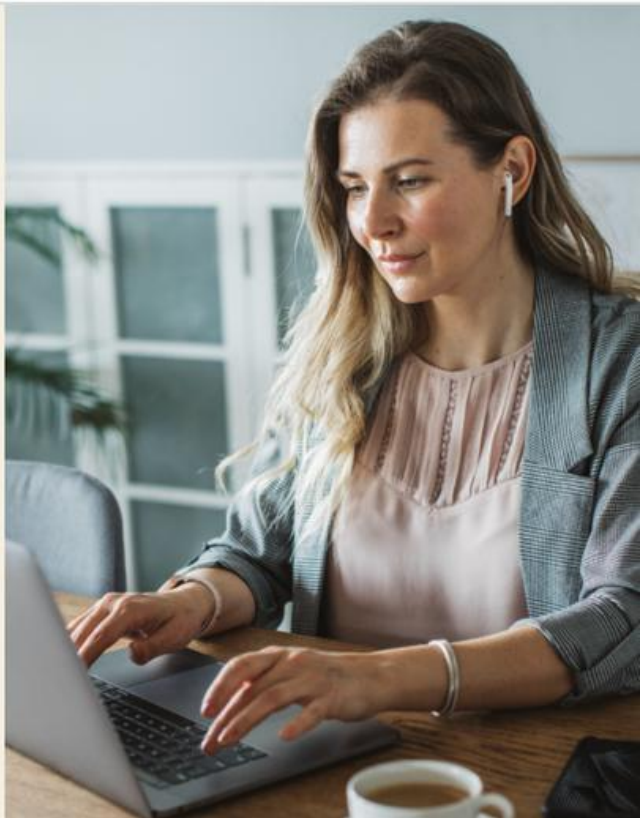

BUDGETING TIPS AND NETWORKING KNOW-HOW

Struggling with budgeting, networking, or work-life balance? Digital Ready can help you find your focus and achieve your goals. Discover expert insights and practical tools to streamline your success at:
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Event · Hands-on Help

SWOT analysis

Mar 30, 1 PM CT

Event · Ask the Expert

Contracting 101

Mar 31, 11 AM CT

Event · Ask the Expert

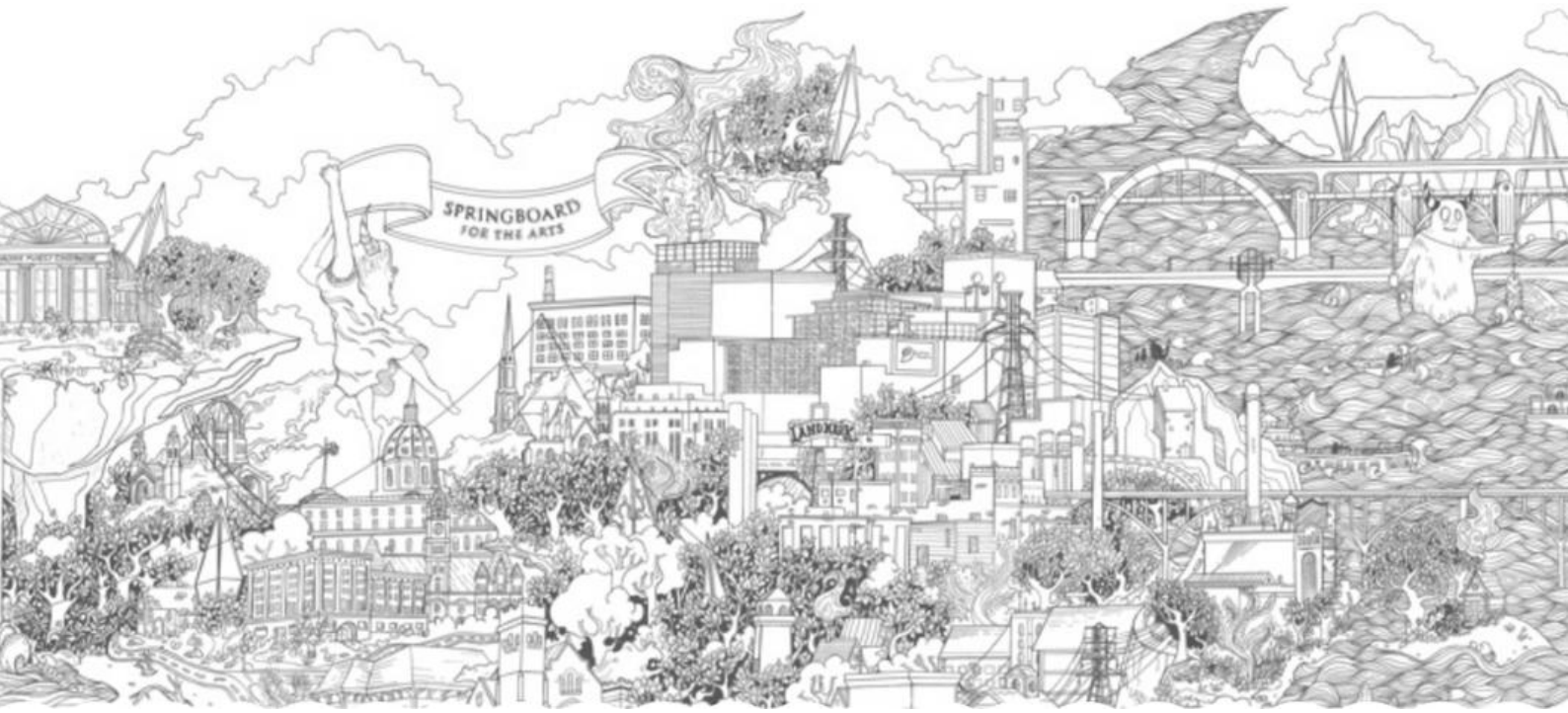
Protect your intellectual property

Apr 9, 2 PM CT

Event · Ask the Expert

The future of storytelling: How educational...

Apr 13, 11 AM CT



Springboard for the Arts Calendar of Events - Professional Development

- April 07, 2026 6:00 PM – 8:00 PM - Going Beyond Grants for Artists of Color
- April 09, 2026 6:00 PM – 7:30 PM - Financial Peace of Mind: Planning for Life's Ups and Downs
- April 21, 2026 6:00 PM – 8:30 PM - Work of Art: Portfolio Kit

Learn more and register at: https://springboardforthearts.org/events/

Additional Resources

- Get connected to Artist Career Consultants here: https://springboardforthearts.org/professional-growth/career-consultations/artist-career-consultants/
- Work of Art Toolkit: https://springboardforthearts.org/woa
- Handbook for Artists Working in Community: https://springboardforthearts.org/artists-working-in-community/

Tax Tips from the IRS

- Here's what taxpayers need to know about business related travel deductions
- Companies who promise to eliminate tax debt sometimes leave taxpayers high and dry
- Get an Identity Protection PIN.
- Tax Resources for Members of the Military

MAR
25
2pm~3pm

Unlocking the Factors Behind High-Performance Startup Ecosystems

Business Webinar

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MAR
31
2pm~3pm

Powering Growth: Build Your Scalable B2B Sales Engine

Business Webinar

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2
11am~12pm

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Business Webinar

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7
9am~10am

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Business Webinar

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9
1pm~2pm

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Business Webinar

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10
9am~3:30pm

Boots to Business Reboot - Rochester SBDC

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14
1pm~2pm

The Hidden Operations of Impact: How to Build Systems That Reflect Your Values

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MAY
5
9am~10am

Federal Certifications, do you need one? How do you acquire one?

Business Webinar

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