

# Catherine Lee

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*The call in action*

## The Soul Still Trembles...

"This is us, facing a new situation in Taiwan, our collective soul trembling as a COVID-19 surge in Greater Taipei has suddenly wrenched us from our complacency that all was well." The opening words of my previous link letter, written on 20 May, set the scene for the next three months as Taiwan went into level three restrictions (of a four-tier system) in an effort to contain the sudden explosion of cases. Everything closed down or moved online, everyone stayed home or remained local, with facemasks required everywhere outside the home. I am ever grateful that I live near the sea, and for those three months I walked there very early every morning, and often in the evening too to catch the sunset. Stunning!

Unbelievably, especially in view of the worldwide situation, Taiwan's "soft lockdown" pandemic response worked. And so, gradually, week by week, case numbers went down, vaccinations went up, deaths levelled off, and despite some temporary setbacks, we are now getting back to where we started. While restrictions have eased considerably, the government believes facemasks to be key, and they remain compulsory, including for all kinds of exercise (swimming being the only exception). Not surprisingly, daily temperatures of 35°C in a facemask made it feel like the hottest summer ever. Still trembling to think about it!

The other good news is that we have got to the end of the typhoon season without major devastation, but with lots of welcome rain, so Taiwan's worst drought in 50+ years is officially over. Even the earthquakes we've had recently seem smaller than usual, or maybe we've just got used to them? Our Moon Festival this year coincided with the anniversary of Taiwan's deadly 7.3 earthquake of 21 September, 1999 (the year I arrived in Taiwan), when over 2,000 people were killed. A little strange to have such a sombre anniversary on the day of a major festival; seemed almost as if earth, moon and soul trembled together in commemoration.

As also mentioned in my previous link letter, The Soul Trembles is the name of an exhibition at Taipei Fine Arts Museum by Japanese installation artist Shiota Chiharu (塩田千春). The exhibition opened on 1 May, then closed for three months, but is now open again, and has even been extended by 10 weeks as it's so popular. One of the exhibits is called Accumulation – Searching for the


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*A new day breaks on the Taiwan Strait*

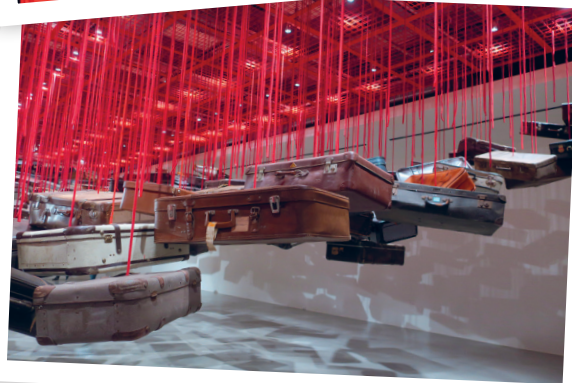
Destination, consisting of a large room full of suitcases hanging by red threads. The artist's idea is that each suitcase makes us think of someone who has left home, each with a destination in mind, and as they travel and mix with others, they come to see themselves anew.

And so, my mind is drawn to those here in Taiwan for whom the pandemic has been a particular struggle, especially those who came with suitcase in hand, now far from home, and who are in many ways still searching for a destination. Taiwan's world-famous semiconductor industry and the science parks have largely kept running throughout the pandemic, relying on thousands of migrant workers whose lives are now totally confined within the factory compounds, unable to leave, while their Taiwanese colleagues are free to return home each night after work. Most of Taiwan's migrant workers are from the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam, but there are also international university students who normally earn their school fees by working in the factories three or four days a week. Classes have been online since May, so they have also been totally confined to their factory compounds. Since October 2020, we've got to know a group of about 25 such students from Eswatini (Swaziland) and Uganda through visiting their university each month for a service and fellowship, one small way of showing our support. Two members of our St John's University Student Fellowship from Malaysia also went there to work this summer, but returned traumatised after a month when they saw a Vietnamese worker tragically jump to her death. Others in the group are torn between staying on in Taiwan and returning home. Homesickness at this time is very real.

So our souls tremble, if not for ourselves, then for the many suffering in this pandemic. Taiwan is still cut off from the rest of the world, and only those with a Taiwan passport or residence permit are allowed to enter the country. All face mandatory 14-day hotel quarantine, with the UK being one of five high-risk countries required to do so at a designated quarantine facility, with the costs covered by the Taiwanese authorities. Vaccination rates are still too low to even contemplate opening up the borders, and progress is dependent on the arrival of vaccine donations and those ordered by the government. Last year, Taiwan sent millions of facemasks as gifts to countries around the world, and in return has received large donations of vaccines from Japan and USA, with smaller but politically significant vaccine donations from several EU nations, but nothing as yet from the UK. Seems ironic really that this week's big news is of a British warship, HMS Richmond, the first for many years, passing down the Taiwan Strait – that same beautiful sea that I walk to each day. Taiwan is asking the world for vaccines, and instead we get a warship. No wonder the soul still trembles.

As we face this pandemic together, so our bishop, Lennon Yuan-Rung Chang, continues to remind us, "Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer" (Romans 12:12). Our souls may tremble, but our spirits are strong – and we continue on in God's grace and love, with your support and prayers. Thank you!

Catherine



*Photos from top to bottom: Sunset over the Taiwan Strait; university students: fellowship for students from Eswatini and Uganda (photos taken in November 2020 and March 2021); Accumulation – Searching for the Destination by Shiota Chiharu, Taipei Fine Arts Museum (photo taken May 2021)*

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