



COVID and Taiwan: A new phase

The COVID-19 epidemic has hit Taiwan like a train wreck in recent weeks, and we are all brought face-to-face with a disaster that we hardly saw coming. Needless to say, the situation in Taiwan seemed under control and on the whole safe for the last year—but that has changed dramatically in the last several weeks. I remember clearly at the first of May when suddenly the Taiwan Central Epidemic Command Center began announcing hundreds of new cases every day, and deaths were sprinkled in the count, and have risen more lately. Taiwan now has more than 3,500 cases, more than triple what we had lived with for the last year.

The principal background of all of these changes are several clusters of infections that emerged out of groups of airline pilots and their families, and group infections that emerged out of the “teahouses” in the Wenhua district in Taipei (in fact the number of cases has not risen dramatically in any other city in Taiwan, although they have risen some recently.) We are now in the grip of wholesale community prevention measures, new travel and border controls, and thorough infection control and monitoring of cases.

The government has responded, seemingly as effectively as in the past, but the nation is on red alert now, and I myself have witnessed the worry and stress on people’s

faces on the street and in stores. Although stores are often teeming with people buying supplies, bracing for the worst, I have noted that the subway has many fewer passengers lately, even during rush hours. And of course, everyone is masked now, even motorcyclists and their passengers. The government has announced a Level Three alert, which requires masks at all times, indoor gatherings limited to five people, all places of non-essential business and public venues shuttered, and continued COVID testing and monitoring. When I found abruptly one morning that I had to sign my name and phone number when I entered McDonald’s for breakfast, I could see that change was underway. I now have to sign in at virtually any store I enter.

Taiwan is now essentially under a partial lockdown, and a full lockdown may come soon. Brace yourself citizens of Taiwan, the worst has not passed.

Most important for me and other teachers, all schools are now closed in Taiwan, all classes must be conducted online, and this will continue until the end of the semester. I am now holding seven classes a week using the Line app, at National Taipei University of Business, and National Taiwan University of Science and Technology. These classes have gone reasonably well, but the pressure is great on teachers to ar-

range the materials and methods for these measures. On the whole, I have found that online classes are not as easy as you might expect, and in fact the tension in the room is high. Students truly cannot truly interact in these spaces, and they struggle to “be heard” at all. All the effort falls on teachers to provide learning materials, and to teach students as best they can. How effective will this be? That is question hanging over all of our heads, and we are struggling to craft answers. There are no easy outlets now, and I know that even less-than-perfect students are hoping beyond hope that this will all end, and we can all get back together in the classroom.

This has changed our lives in the most dramatic way, and all the concern about the effectiveness of online/distance learning has come into focus. We are going to have to do our best and, ideally, it is hoped that we will craft good solutions. I wish my colleagues, and every student in Taiwan, luck in this endeavor.

Readers, if you have any comments please write and we will publish it next issue. Send to dpendery@ntub.edu.tw.

Myanmar's Songkran Festival

A personal view, by staff writer Freddy Yang



The New Year in Myanmar (Songkran Festival) runs from January 10 to 14 (Around April 13 to 15 in the Western calendar). The word "Songkran" comes from the Sanskrit *saṃkrānti*, meaning astrological passage, transformation or change. The holiday is noted for people splashing water on each other to wash away filth and sins of the past year, and welcome the new. The custom of the Burmese is to worship, and there are many festivals that fill during the festival. Is the biggest festival in Myanmar, and people sprinkle water for five days consecutively.

Everyone has a full schedule for the five-day itinerary during the Songkran Festival. Little splash is the name of the Songkran Festival first day. Big splash is the name of the second and third day. People return to their families on the third day (like a Chinese returning to their own family during the New Year), The fourth day is an outing, and on the fifth day people go to temples to worship.

The Burmese people believe that water is a symbol of purity, and the source of life, as a god, and during the New Year people get up early to take a bath and dress up. An addition, they also invite friends to meet in front of the Buddhist statues in monasteries and hold bathing ceremonies. After the process of bathing, relatives and friends sprinkle water on each other. Then begins the Songkran Festival which lasts for several days, to celebrate the

New Year. Every year, the whole country is jubilant and warmly celebrates. Everyone in the streets and alleys acts crazy, splashing water on each other. It is intended to wash away the year's filth, and in this way people can welcome the new year with a clean body.

There are levels of water splashing methods during Songkran, Elders usually splash a few drops with branches and leaves dipped in water, while others splash water crazily, so those who have been splashed cannot hide, or they will hide their blessings. Young men also splash water to express their sincere affection to the girls they like.



Red paint symbolizes that the people's blood is wet, and satirizes the military's use of force

But the military coup in Myanmar has seized power for more than 70 days, and the situation shows no signs of easing. People have taken to the streets to fight and protest continuously. The military government's repression by force has been denounced worldwide, and the cumulative number of deaths and injuries has increased. The former Aung San Suu Kyi

government has urged the UN Security Council to intervene as soon as possible, lest more people be killed by the military's repression.

Now is the annual Songkran holiday in Myanmar. It should have been a celebration for the whole country, but because of the coup there is no trace of joy.

In the past, Burmese citizens would rejoice during the holidays of the Songkran Festival. Whether it was a light dripping or a crazy splashing, the whole country was filled with joy and enthusiastic celebration. However, because of the military coup, the country's celebrations have been reduced.

The demonstrators have stopped splashing water and instead are splashing red paint in protest. The people have not dressed up for joy, but instead are risking their lives to fight tyranny in the streets.

A simple happy new year is now an extravagant blessing for the Burmese people. The meaning of splashing water for "happiness and longevity" no longer exists. In the New Year 2021, in the hearts of Burmese people, without the splashing of water,

when will the traditional tastes return? Splashing water cannot wash the blood and pain away. Brave Burmese are not afraid of the sinister prospects, they face, and they believe their country can start again. In a democratic and free country, what can we do besides offer deep blessings?

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