

“Asia’s Orphan” During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Brian Hioe

Abstract: *Taiwan has managed to avoid expansive lockdowns and the suspension of everyday life seen elsewhere during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this sense, the COVID-19 pandemic may push Taiwan toward greater self-reliance, as well as increase Taiwan’s sense of subjective distance from other parts of the world. This may be the irony of increased international attention on Taiwan because of its successful handling of the pandemic.*

The experience of Taiwan during the COVID-19 pandemic has varied greatly from other countries in the world. Namely, Taiwan has managed to avoid expansive lockdowns and the suspension of everyday life. In this, Taiwan’s subjective experience of the COVID-19 pandemic is very different from other societies.

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was originally thought that Taiwan would be heavily affected by the coronavirus. Given Taiwan’s geographic proximity and close economic and political links to China, a large amount of travel occurs between Taiwan and China on a daily basis, ranging from tourism and sightseeing to business travel and study. Hundreds of thousands of Taiwanese currently live in China (Pan and Yeh 2019).

However, the Tsai administration acted quickly to prevent the pandemic from spreading to Taiwan, inspecting arriving passengers from Wuhan early on. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) deputy chief Lo Yi-chun saw

screenshots of messages from the Chinese whistleblower Li Wenliang during the early morning hours of December 31st, 2019 while browsing the Internet and forwarded these screenshots to colleagues, who subsequently wrote to the World Health Organization asking for more information (Chang, Chen, and Ko 2020).

The Taiwanese government began screening passengers returning from Wuhan for pneumonia-like symptoms the same day. A medical team was dispatched to Wuhan from January 13th to 15th, finding a family cluster that suggested that COVID-19 could be spread between humans. Borders were closed to individuals from Wuhan on January 23rd, subsequently widened to include Hubei, Guangdong, and Zhejiang provinces, with all travelers from China required to make a health declaration (Watt 2020a).

Borders were shut altogether on March 18th to foreign nationals, excluding individuals traveling to Taiwan to fulfill business contracts, those who held Alien Resident Certificates to work or study in Taiwan, or were traveling to Taiwan for diplomatic purposes. As of mid-June 2020, borders remain closed. Apart from tourists being unable to visit Taiwan, this has led to large disruptions for foreign students studying in Taiwan (Hioe 2020c).

Because borders were shut, the COVID-19 outbreak in Taiwan was largely contained. Taiwanese who return from abroad are required to undergo mandatory fourteen-day quarantines. Cell phone-based tracking apps were used as a means of preventing people from violating their quarantines, with local

police and neighborhood borough chiefs (a local elected position) used to ensure that individuals were not breaking their quarantine.

Subsidies were provided by the government to individuals undergoing quarantines and care packages of instant noodles, snacks, and medical supplies were sent to them on a regular basis (Hsieh 2020).

Some quarantine centers and hostels were set up in urban locations for individuals undergoing quarantine. A specialized fleet of taxi cabs and buses were also used to transport individuals returning to Taiwan (Wang and Liang 2020). Repatriation flights were arranged for Taiwanese stranded outside of Taiwan to return home, with individuals put under quarantine once they returned. However, individuals from places with large numbers of COVID-19 cases were initially not allowed to return to Taiwan.

Contact tracing was used to track individuals who contracted COVID-19, to determine who they had come into contact with, sometimes using cell phone location data. Individuals that infected people came into contact with were required to undergo quarantines. Taiwan's universal healthcare system and other government databases were centralized so that doctors could access the travel histories of patients that came in for check-ups. (Liu 2020).

Tracing transmission chains of COVID-19 eventually seemed to be successful in tracking down and eliminating domestic transmission chains, something that eventually resulted in domestic transmission of COVID-19 seeming to be eliminated entirely. As of mid-June 2020, it has been around eighty days since there last was a case of domestic COVID-19 transmission.

The Taiwanese government also intervened in private industry to ramp up the production of medical supplies used for preventing the

spread of COVID-19, such as medical masks and hand sanitizers. Though Taiwan initially faced shortages, the government took steps to cooperate with and subsidize the production of medical supplies. Sixty new production lines for medical supplies were set up, allowing Taiwan to produce 13 million medical masks per day (Wu and Chiang 2020), and the state-run Taiwan Tobacco and Liquor Corporation began producing alcohol sanitizer that was made available for sale in convenience stores and other locations (Xie 2020). Taiwan is now the world's second-largest manufacturer of medical masks (Ngerng 2020).

A rationing system to allow for the distribution of medical masks, with individuals given different days to purchase masks based on the number of their national healthcare ID, was set up (Chen, Chang, and Hsu 2020). The national healthcare ID was used to keep track of the number of mask purchases. Though this resulted in long lines at pharmacies and convenience stores and there were criticisms that some groups, such as foreign white-collar or blue-collar workers, lacked access to medical supplies, this system facilitated an effective national distribution of medical masks and other supplies (Lee 2020a). Quotas for medical masks allowed for purchase were increased gradually over time, as Taiwan's mask manufacturing capacity increased.

Consequently, as of writing, Taiwan had 447 confirmed COVID-19 cases, with only seven deaths. Out of this total, 356 cases were imported and there were only 55 cases of domestic transmission. A cluster of 36 cases tied to a navy vessel that visited Palau as part of a diplomatic visit was counted separately from imported or domestic cases. The origin of these cases is still unknown. It was previously feared that because the sailors had traveled around Taiwan after they returned, this would lead to an explosion of cases, but this did not occur.

Given the success of measures to prevent the domestic spread of COVID-19, Taiwan did not have to resort to lockdowns or experience significant disruption to everyday life. Social distancing measures were mandated on large gatherings, with restrictions on indoor gatherings of over 100 people and outdoor gatherings of over 250 people (Chen and Ko 2020). Some government facilities and some businesses were also closed as a result of the pandemic, while some companies allowed employees to work from home, while universities conducted classes above a certain size through video conferencing software.

Members of the public were also encouraged to go out less often and to wear medical masks in public. Individuals riding on public transportation were not allowed to board if they did not wear medical masks. Temperature checks were conducted at the entrances of establishments ranging from the subways and office buildings to restaurants, bars, and university campuses as a pandemic countermeasure. Visitors to places with significant concentrations of people, as detected through cell phone data, were sent text messages warning about the possibility of COVID-19 transmission in crowded places during major holidays (Lee 2020c).

Although restaurants, entertainment establishments, or tourist-focused businesses took a hit due to social distancing, with record numbers of workers being furloughed and put on unpaid leave, this was less than in other countries. With the COVID-19 pandemic seemingly under control in Taiwan, the government has now sought to encourage domestic tourism and spending by offering coupons that can be used at department stores, hotels, night markets, and other stores. The government also offered one-time cash grants of 10,000 NTD (US\$ 340) to workers that were laid off (“Virus Outbreak” 2020).

The Central Epidemic Command Center

(CECC) proved highly successful in communicating information regarding the status of efforts to fight the pandemic, ways to prevent COVID-19, as well as in fighting misinformation and disinformation regarding the pandemic. The Minister of Health and Welfare Chen Shih-chung held daily press conferences to provide updates on the COVID-19 outlook, creating a centralized channel for distributing information about the pandemic nationally. Because of these daily press briefings, as well as his work ethic—Chen was known to work constantly through the course of the pandemic—he became something of a political superstar with a large fan following. Consequently, Chen and other government officials used their COVID-19 fame as a platform. One memorable incident involved Chen and other male government officials wearing pink masks during the daily press briefing in order to destigmatize wearing pink, following an incident in which a young boy was bullied at school for wearing a pink medical mask (Watt 2020b). Likewise, when the priorities of the government shifted to encouraging domestic tourism once the COVID-19 pandemic seemed to be under control, Chen was called on to visit tourist locations as a demonstration that it was now safe to travel again (Lee 2020b). Moreover, the CECC distributed information about the pandemic through a number of mediums, targeting different age demographics. For example, cute graphics featuring a Shiba Inu “spokesdog,” named Zongchai, were used. Information was also disseminated through text-heavy messages popularly shared among the elderly in Taiwan on messenger apps such as Line.

Many content creators, such as authors of online comics, YouTubers, and others also used their platforms as a way to distribute information about the COVID-19 pandemic, further reinforcing social distancing measures and normalizing mask wearing as a measure to fight COVID-19. Vice president Chen Chien-jen,

who was the epidemiologist who managed Taiwan's response to the SARS epidemic in 2003, also took to offering basic lessons on epidemiology through online lectures and Facebook posts (Hioe 2020a).

Some concerns have been raised regarding the government collecting information about the activities of private citizens during the COVID-19 pandemic. Examples include the use of software to track citizens under quarantine, to trace transmission chains of COVID-19 through contact tracing, or the centralization of government databases on individuals' travel history and health information. However, the Taiwanese government has stated that it does not intend to retain such information beyond a certain time limit, and the Taiwanese public has generally been willing to accept the intrusions into their privacy to contain the COVID-19 pandemic (Hsiao 2020).

The successes of Taiwan fighting COVID-19 can largely be attributed to swift, effective action by the Taiwanese government. In particular, the response of the Taiwanese government was highly centralized, with the central government coordinating responses across all of Taiwan rather than leaving it up to regional and local governments. This can be contrasted with the uncoordinated responses of governments such as the US and Canada, due to regionalism.

Similarly, the Taiwanese government did not share the irrational unwillingness of countries such as the United States to intervene in the free market. The Taiwanese government, contrastingly, took quick steps to work with private industry to facilitate the production of needed medical supplies.

Basking in international accolades on Taiwan's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Taiwanese government has turned to using the increased spotlight on Taiwan in order to draw attention to its marginalization from the international community. Despite Taiwan having the 21st largest economy in the world

by GDP in 2019 and the 56th largest population out of the world's 200 or so countries, Taiwan is not diplomatically acknowledged as a nation-state by the majority of the world's countries. This occurs despite Taiwan having its own democratically elected government, economy, military, and currency.

Because of pressure from China, which claims Taiwan as part of its territory, Taiwan is excluded from international organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO), the UN agency responsible for international health issues like the current pandemic, and the International Civil Aviation Organization, the UN agency which is responsible for international aviation safety. Taiwan's exclusion from the WHO undermined Taiwan's ability to respond to global health crises such as the 2003 SARS epidemic, when it was excluded from the distribution of medical supplies and from information sharing regarding the pandemic (Chan 2020). Taiwan has sought to spotlight its exclusion from the WHO during the COVID-19 pandemic, claiming that it tried to warn the WHO ahead of time regarding the possibility of human-to-human transmission.

Several incidents have angered the Taiwanese public regarding Taiwan's exclusion from the WHO. In the first incident, WHO assistant director-general Bruce Aylward attempted to pretend to not hear the word Taiwan during an interview with journalist Yvonne Tong for Hong Kong public broadcaster RTHK and to pass over the question when asked about Taiwan's exclusion from the organization. In the second incident, WHO director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus provoked outrage after alleging that the Taiwanese government was involved in organizing a "racist" online campaign against him (Hioe 2020d). In the aftermath of the second incident, Taiwanese netizens crowdfunded an ad in the *New York Times* highlighting Taiwan's exclusion from the organization and detailing its contributions to

international health in spite of its exclusion. This ad was organized by individuals who had been involved in crowdfunding a similar ad for publication in international newspapers during the 2014 Sunflower Movement. The campaign raised 10 million NTD from 26,000 individuals and was designed by Aaron Nieh, who assisted Tsai Ing-wen's 2016 presidential campaign (Haggerty and Lee 2020).

It is generally believed that Chinese influence within the WHO is strong. Tedros, for example, has been criticized for numerous expressions of praise toward China's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This year's annual meeting of the World Health Assembly, the governing body of the WHO, began with a speech by Chinese president Xi Jinping. Taiwan's exclusion from the WHO took place under the auspices of previous director-general Margaret Chan, who was from Hong Kong, but represented China as the WHO director-general.

The Taiwanese government has taken to exporting surplus medical supplies as a form of soft power (Jao 2020). This has included sending medical masks to countries lacking in medical mask supplies, as a form of "mask diplomacy," as well as exporting other medical equipment. It remains to be seen, however, whether any countries will rethink their policies toward Taiwan after the pandemic.

It is probable that the COVID-19 pandemic will push Taiwan toward greater self-reliance. Some have suggested, for example, that a critical factor in Taiwan's rapid response to the COVID-19 pandemic was distrust of the WHO and distrust of information coming from China.

Moreover, some have suggested that the COVID-19 pandemic could push Taiwan further toward economic and political decoupling with China ("Editorial" 2020). If so, decoupling was something that was already underway, as a result of the US-China trade war, but it remains to be seen whether this will continue. Taiwan's

democratic response to COVID-19 has, in particular, been juxtaposed to initial efforts by the Chinese government to cover up the scale of the outbreak. Likewise, while the Chinese government has also sought to export medical supplies to other parts of the world, many of these medical supplies turned out later on to be poorly made. This has been juxtaposed to the quality goods exported by the Taiwanese government.

To some extent, because of the COVID-19 pandemic's origins in China, the outbreak has contributed to a growing sense of distance between Taiwan and China. It is noteworthy that the Chinese government stepped up military threats against Taiwan in the course of the pandemic, sending warplanes and ships near Taiwan as a sign of force (Rajagopalan 2020). It is possible that the Chinese government was reacting against increased international focus on Taiwan, and stepping up military threats against Taiwan was a way to distract attention from the COVID-19 pandemic, redirecting domestic anger among Chinese toward an external target, or that this was tied to broader trends in the US-China escalating rivalry. In response, the US also stepped up military drills around Taiwan, in a process of tit-for-tat escalation (Hioe 2020b).

There is also appreciation for Washington's stepped up support for Taiwan calling attention to its exclusion from the WHO through the #TweetforTaiwan campaign, which involved US State Department Twitter accounts posting the hashtag "#TweetforTaiwan" and calling on other individuals to do the same. Australian, Japan, and a number of EU countries also supported Taiwan's inclusion in the WHO (Lin 2020c).

At the same time, it is also probable that the American government's disastrous handling of the COVID-19 pandemic has affected views of the US in Taiwan. It has not gone unnoticed in Taiwan that American president Donald

Trump's handling of the pandemic has been catastrophic. Moreover, in spite of having called for Taiwan's inclusion in the WHO, the Trump administration abruptly announced that it would be withdrawing from the WHO in May, leaving Taiwan in something of a diplomatic lurch. Taiwan voluntarily suspended its campaign to push for inclusion in the WHO during the WHA, citing the need to prioritize containing the COVID-19 pandemic, but this is probably due to insufficient backing (Regalado and Fang 2020). Such actions by the Trump administration are likely to reinforce the perception that the Trump administration is unreliable, even if some Taiwanese cling to the belief that the Trump administration strongly supports Taiwan because of the December 2016 Trump-Tsai phone call.

Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to reinforce a sense of distance between Taiwan and other parts of the world. Taiwan, the so-called "orphan of Asia," has been historically marginalized because of its exclusion from the UN and other international organizations, and because of the fact that Taiwan is not diplomatically recognized by the majority of the members of the international community. Many countries do not seek closer ties with Taiwan because it is overshadowed by China politically and economically. It is not in the interest of most countries to seek closer ties with Taiwan when the Chinese economy is many times larger than that of Taiwan.

However, the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic has burnished Taiwan's image globally, focusing the limelight on its virtues as a vibrant democracy boasting effective governance. Perhaps some of the praise for Taiwan was a means of criticizing China, but no matter the motivation, Taiwan has been validated by COVID-19.

Having escaped the disruption to everyday life evident in other parts of the world, the COVID-19 pandemic may push Taiwan toward

greater self-reliance, as well as increase its sense of subjective distance and isolation from other parts of the world. This may be the irony of Taiwan's moment of glory.

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Populations Under COVID-19 in Japan, edited by David H. Slater.

Brian Hioe is one of the founding editors of *New Bloom*. He is a freelance writer on social movements and politics, and occasional translator. He was Democracy and Human Rights Service Fellow at the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy from 2017 to 2018.