

# TAIWANESE MEDICAL AND SECURITY POLICY TOWARDS THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

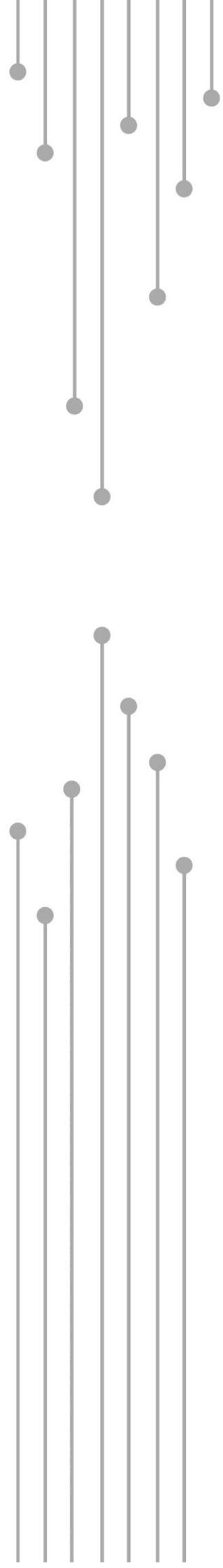
A Best Practice

Yi Chen Chang



European Intelligence Academy  
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## **About the Author**

Yi Chen Chang obtained her Bachelor Degree in Diplomacy at National Chengchi University in Taiwan in 2016. She was an exchange student at University of Jaén in Spain between September 2018 and July 2019. Currently, she is enrolled in the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degree (EMJMD) in South European Studies (EUROSUD) at the University of Glasgow, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, and the Autonomous University of Madrid. Her research interests include international security, international law and migration.

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## A Best Practice

### Introduction

Taiwan, as a neighboring country to China, with which it maintains a close association of economic activities, was predicted to be one of the countries with the highest importation risk of the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2, also referred to as COVID-19 or coronavirus) in the early stages of the coronavirus outbreak (Gardner 2020). However, the island country managed to hold for 253 days without any domestic case of COVID-19. There were merely a few imported cases on most days in 2020. While the rest of the world was struggling with lockdowns and healthcare-system breakdowns, the Taiwanese people were enjoying a relatively normal life, and the government was encouraging citizens to travel within the island, so as to support domestic tourism when it was not possible to travel abroad.

Despite being excluded from the World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Health Assembly (WHA), Taiwan demonstrated a set of best practices in the face of the threat of COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, Taiwan expressed its willingness to share information about best practices and provide any possible assistance to countries in need. The “Taiwan can help” and “Taiwan is helping” campaigns attracted worldwide attention. The island country has so far provided medical supplies to medical workers around the world, and has established partnerships with the United States and the European Union to work on tests and vaccines for the coronavirus. Although more recently Taiwan has been seeing a surge of domestic cases of the coronavirus, it is undeniable that, in the past year and a half,

Taiwan's management of the COVID-19 crisis turned out to be a great success in the global arena. The practice of Taiwan, adopted by both its government and its citizens, can be an important example for the international community in the fight against COVID-19 and future contagious diseases.

There are several factors that led to the successful experience of Taiwan. First, one of the most important factors for this success was Taiwan's fast and effective implementation strategy in the early stage of the outbreak, which had a lot to do with its previous experiences with contagious diseases, especially its experience with the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in 2003. Second, the comprehensive strategy of case- and population-based measures imposed by Taiwan's Central Epidemic Command Centre (CECC), and the collaboration between the governmental sector, privately owned companies and civil society, proved vital for combating the virus. In the third place, democratic governance and transparency were the basis of Taiwan's satisfactory management of the pandemic, thus showing that governments can fight against COVID-19 without sacrificing democratic principles. Furthermore, the collectivist spirit of the Taiwanese society certainly contributed significantly to its great success in response to the health threats. Last but not least, the successful securitization of COVID-19, applied by the Taiwanese leadership, also gives us a better insight on the country's exceptional practice in relation to the pandemic.

In April 2021, a cluster of COVID-19 infections broke out among airline staff, which caused further spread of the disease across local communities. Following that incident, Taiwan has been facing its most challenging period since the beginning of the pandemic. Taiwan's recent COVID-19 spike exposed the shortfalls in its policy responses. The island is now calling out for international help over vaccine shortages. This is the very first time that the Taiwanese people have experienced life under a quasi-lockdown during this pandemic. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the aforementioned factors are still playing an extremely important role, as the island battles the worsening situation.

This article first looks into the factors that led to Taiwan's successful practices in its first phase of the battle against COVID-19, and further points out the challenges that Taiwan is now facing, as well as how these factors continue to play a big role in the second phase of the country's fight against the coronavirus.

## **Experience from SARS in 2003**

One of the most important factors behind its successful mitigation practices was Taiwan's fast and effective implementation strategy in the early stages of the outbreak. That had a lot to do with its previous experiences with contagious diseases, especially the experience of SARS in 2003. Similar to COVID-19, SARS was also caused by a type of coronavirus that was first identified in China. The SARS outbreak had a significant traumatic impact in Taiwan. Drawing to that bitter lesson, the Taiwanese government made a series of reforms in its activities and regulations; it formulated a series of policy responses and organizational

adjustments in the area of communicable disease control (Taiwan Centers for Disease Control 2020). After SARS, Taiwan's central government established a complete epidemic prevention system, the National Health Command Center (NHCC), and its ad hoc affiliation, the Central Epidemic Command Centre (CECC). The main task of the CECC is to harmonize actions and facilitate collaboration across different ministries, and between the governmental and private sectors, during health crises. In the past two decades, the CECC has dealt with various communicable diseases, such as H1N1, H7N9, dengue, enterovirus, rabies, the Zika virus, and so on.

Thanks to these prior experiences, the Taiwanese government was conscious of the potential threats caused by the newly discovered coronavirus at the very early stage. Since December 31, 2019, the day the Chinese government reported to the WHO about the first detected pneumonia cases, the Taiwan Centers for Disease Control (CDC) started to monitor people who entered the country from the Chinese city of Wuhan. Following that, the Taiwanese government promptly imposed restrictions and border-controls, and later became the first country to ban flights originating from Wuhan. The government deployed a response team immediately, and elevated the CECC alert status from level 3 to level 1, which is the highest possible. Level 1 authorizes the CECC to mobilize and integrate resources from across government ministries and the private sector, so as to deal with public-health emergencies (Taiwan Centers for Disease Control 2020). The CECC continuously monitored the situation worldwide and constantly adjusted its travel notices.

Soon after the coronavirus spread to countries in Europe and the Americas, and evolved into a pandemic, Taiwan introduced stricter restrictions of entry, so as to prevent the spread of COVID-19 from international travelers. These border control measures were conducted jointly, under the framework of the CECC, by the Ministry of Transportation and Communications, the National Immigration Agency, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Mainland Affairs Council (Chen 2021). Moreover, the CECC made the decision to postpone the start date of the spring semester for all schools. Fever-screening and other forms of health assessment were soon set up in most public places like airports, universities, shopping malls and restaurants. Wearing masks was made mandatory in public transportation and other public-use places. As both international and domestic demands for medical masks rose dramatically, the CECC quickly prohibited the export of medical masks, in order to prevent the possibility of a domestic supply shortage and panic-purchasing behavior by citizens. Overall, this advanced deployment in handling the pandemic became a key factor for Taiwan's successful practice.

## **A Comprehensive Strategy for Disease Containment**

According to Article 17 of Taiwan's Communicable Disease Control Act, which was amended on June 19, 2019, "the central competent authority, in considering the severity of the domestic and international epidemic conditions [...], may establish a central epidemic command center

and assign an individual to be the commanding officer to unify command, supervise and coordinate government organizations at various levels, state enterprises, reserve service organizations and civic groups, to implement disease control measures; when necessary, the national armies may be coordinated for support” (Communicable Disease Control Act 2019). As mentioned previously, the CECC was designed to coordinate and mobilize resources from different governmental and private sectors.

There are three main sections in its organizational structure; each section has subgroups that cover the agency’s responsibilities in a number of different fields, so as to detect and respond effectively to infectious diseases. The main sections are intelligence, operation, and logistics, respectively. First, the intelligence section is in charge of disease-surveillance operations and international information-sharing. Second, the operational section is divided into three subgroups: border quarantine, community epidemic control, and healthcare response. These are responsible respectively for: quarantine measures for entry; tracing home-quarantined individuals and providing community care and medical support; and managing venues for group-quarantine and nosocomial infection control. Lastly, the logistics section is split into even more subgroups of various areas, namely: resource coordination; research and development; information management; administration; and public information. They are in charge of different functions, such as: resource distribution; research and development of rapid tests and vaccines; investigation of disinformation; epidemic prevention campaigns, and so on (Central Epidemic Command Center 2020).

These aforementioned duties require complete collaboration across a variety of government ministries. Under this framework, the CECC is able to implement a comprehensive strategy of case-based measures and population-based measures, in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19 on the island. For example, Taiwan has a very strict and well-established system for tracing and checking individuals who should undergo quarantine. All inbound travelers to Taiwan are required to undergo a 14-day home quarantine plus a 7-day self-health management period. Moreover, those who come back from higher-risk countries are required to undergo group-quarantine organized by the government. During the quarantine, the local government, police or public-health workers keep track of these quarantined individuals and contact them every day via text-message or web-app to make sure that they are in good health conditions and staying in their isolation places (Jian *et al.* 2020). In order to prevent violations, these quarantined individuals are also required to use the police-supplied mobile Global Positioning System (GPS) tracker. Additionally, it has been established that case-detection and contact-tracing are crucial components of efforts to prevent the spread of communicable diseases (Jian *et al.* 2020). The CECC puts a lot of effort on applying contact-tracing to each positive case. Information like “where the patient has been to”, “at what time the patient was there” and “who the patient has been in contact with”, would all be made public. All close contacts identified through such tracing would have to undertake quarantine immediately after their exposure to the confirmed cases. These

kinds of measures cannot be carried out efficiently without a comprehensive strategy from the central government.

Aside from the contact-tracing and digital-fencing system, the National Health Insurance (NHI) smart card system is yet another example of how the CECC fosters inter-ministerial coordination and integrates databases and information. The NHI system allows health workers to trace a person's history of travel from the record made by the National Immigration Agency. It is used to screen individuals when they enter hospitals, so as to prevent the spread of the virus. Not only an individual's history of travel, but also information like a person's contacts, occupation and exposure to COVID-19, can all be verified while screening (Chen 2021). Additionally, the Taiwanese armed forces take part in the broader plan to fight against the virus, since the nation's military can provide logistical support, such as transportation, infrastructural resources, medical professionals, and even specialists in epidemiology and virology (Graham 2020). Similar to the South Korean armed forces, Taiwanese military personnel have played a frontline role in the pandemic (Graham 2020). The military offers various assistance to the central government, namely disinfecting chartered aircraft that conduct repatriation flights, disinfecting local communities, supporting the needs of those who undergo group-quarantine and so on. When the Ministry of Economic Affairs had to mobilize mask manufacturers to enhance domestic production, the Taiwanese armed forces also joined the "national mask production team" in order to boost the production for surgical masks within a short time frame. Under its centralized leadership, and due to its professionalism, the CECC has been able to facilitate inter-ministerial coordination and resource-mobilization across various national sectors and stakeholders in the fight against COVID-19.

## **Democratic Governance and Transparency**

Democratic governance and transparency have been the main pillars of the Taiwanese management of the pandemic. In this sense, the country has shown the world that governments can fight against COVID-19 without sacrificing the tenets of democracy. Unlike the authoritarian regime across the Strait, Taiwan's successful practices against COVID-19 did not result from severe means imposed by the authorities that result in the violation of human rights, the imposition of censorship, restricting public access to information, and so on. At the beginning of the coronavirus outbreak, the Chinese authorities attempted to cover the actual situation of the emerging virus by silencing people, providing half-truth reports to the WHO, manipulating information, and insisting that the Wuhan virus was "preventable and controllable" or that there was "no evidence of human-to-human transmission". Beijing employed the same methods it always uses when facing potential criticism from public opinion, namely by tightening its control over social media and censoring news reports regarding potential threats. The curtailment of the freedom of expression, the right to information and the freedom of the press, combined with the use of government propaganda, were the Chinese way of dealing with the health crisis, which eventually led to a pandemic and have put human life across the planet in danger until today.

On the contrary, Taiwan, despite being excluded from the WHO and the WHA, has demonstrated a successful practice towards COVID-19 through democratic means. Political accountability is a cornerstone for democracy during both a state of normalcy and a state of emergency. The mass media and civil society ought to continue to enjoy and exercise the right and ability to supervise and question the legitimacy and legality of an elected government's policies and responses (Yeh and Cheng 2020). Under the nation's democratic governance, Taiwanese media and civil society have had the capacity to criticize and monitor the measures and policies introduced by the government, without conditions or restrictions. Thus, the Taiwanese government has maintained its legitimacy and has enjoyed a high degree of social trust in managing this public health crisis. As Yeh and Cheng (2020) mention, the social trust is preserved by the responsiveness and openness of government. Thus, the high level of government transparency, and the easy access to information by citizens, have helped to build trust between the Taiwanese people and the central government in the fight against COVID-19.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the CECC has been holding daily press conferences to announce and summarize the status of the pandemic in the country, provide updated information regarding the pandemic, share new findings about the disease, as well as explain new measures and policies in the fight against the pandemic. This high degree of transparency has been one of the key factors in building trust between the CECC and the public, and has served to reinforce the legitimacy of its decisions (Lin *et al.* 2020). Moreover, other governmental sectors regularly publish graphs with clear messages regarding COVID-19, and provide guidance with attractive and easily comprehensible content, in order to make the information more transparent and accessible to citizens. As Taiwan's Digital Minister, Audrey Tang, has said, the government adopted a "humor over rumor" strategy to counter COVID-19 misinformation with memes. Not only did this help spread accurate information among citizens, but it also encouraged the public to ridicule misinformation and disinformation (Taiwan News 2021). In this sense, the Taiwanese government made a very good use of social media with its "fast, fair, and fun" response against disinformation, thus sending correct information to the public in a markedly direct and effortless way. Besides the use of social media platforms like Facebook, LINE and YouTube, short-message services and phone applications have also been used to inform the public about possible exposure to the virus. Recently, a phone application named "Taiwan Social Distancing" has become very popular. It was developed jointly by the CDC and Taiwan AI Labs. It uses Bluetooth technology to notify users whether they have come within 2 meters of a confirmed COVID-19 case in the past few days. These easy and direct ways of accessing the latest information help mitigate against unnecessary panic and miscommunication among the population.

Lin *et al.* point out that Taiwan's practice and experience in the fight against COVID-19 demonstrate an alternative model to the myth of China's authoritarian effectiveness (2020:17). Both the government and the people have to share sufficient information in order to combat the health crisis. The public's access to information, and the openness of the

democratic government, foster a healthy relationship between citizens and their representatives. Transparency and accountability are two of the characteristics that an authoritarian regime like China's lacks. Controlling the flow of information cannot help control the spread of diseases. China's example demonstrates that authoritarian governance measures fail to prevent the emergence of a pandemic. Overall, as Yeh and Cheng suggest, "the Taiwan case shows that an accountable government can boost social trust in institutions, making citizens stand together despite their differences to engage in [fighting] a common danger" (2020:432). This is why Taiwan has managed to fight with impressive results against this and other health threats.

### **Collectivist Spirit of the Taiwanese Society**

Besides the government's strategies, the successful practice of Taiwan against COVID-19 can be attributed to its citizens. Two important social features in Taiwan are the general habit of mask-wearing and the collectivist spirit of the society. These features can also be seen in Japan, as well as in South Korea (Yeh and Cheng 2020). Due to the bitter lesson of SARS in 2003, the Taiwanese people are generally aware of the importance of masks in combating communicable diseases. In Taiwanese education, pupils are also taught to maintain personal hygiene by washing hands frequently and wearing masks when feeling ill. It is also worth noting that East Asian people wear masks in their daily life for other purposes as well. For example, in Taiwan, it is common to see people wear masks while riding scooters in order to limit their exposure to urban air pollution or airborne allergens; some people also wear masks when they do not feel like showing their faces without makeup. Overall, mask-wearing is a very common habit for East Asian countries, compared to the Western countries where it has been long stigmatized by society. As a result, the Taiwanese people started to wear masks and tend to their personal hygiene by washing hands and using sanitizer spontaneously, at the very beginning of the pandemic, which also made it much easier for the central government to impose precautionary measures to combat COVID-19.

In addition, the collectivist spirit of the Taiwanese society has further-contributed significantly to Taiwan's success in response to health emergencies. In general, East Asian countries share similar characteristics of collectivist spirit and citizen compliance to regulations. Taiwan is a very collectivistic society in terms of "the degree of interdependence a society maintains among its members" (Hofstede Insights 2021). According to Hofstede Insights, this kind of society tends to facilitate stronger relationships, in which every member takes responsibility for others in the group. This perspective helps to explain why the Taiwanese public collectively exercised such hygienic practices and voluntary compliance to these precautionary measures during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through the participation of civil society in both governmental policies and voluntary exercises, carrying out these preventive measures was already a prevalent mindset for the public (Yeh and Cheng 2020). As Yeh and Cheng describe, "the combination of precautionary measures as a disease prevention performance by the population can exert a synergistic effectiveness that is greater than the

simple aggregation of them” (2020:432). This “disease prevention performance” is evident in the example of Taiwanese society. Each of these measures was useful in dealing with the virus; but their combination by the population brought about much greater effectiveness in combating COVID-19. That is how the collectivist characteristics of Taiwanese society contributed to the nation’s successful practice against COVID-19.

## **Successful Securitization of COVID-19**

The securitization of COVID-19, applied by Taiwanese leaders, was a key element in Taiwan’s epidemic prevention policy. According to Buzan and Wæver, securitization of a public issue means that “the issue is presented as an existential threat, requiring emergency measures and justifying actions outside the normal bounds of political procedure” (Buzan and Wæver 1997:23-24). According to the Copenhagen School, such a threat is considered a survival issue and should be coped with through extraordinary measures within a short time frame (ibid. 1997). The act of public speaking, conducted by the securitizing actors, is a fundamental element for instituting exceptional measures in response to a threat. It reflects the rhetorical strategies that are applied by policy-makers in an attempt to frame an issue and announce swift policy responses. The securitizing actors usually tend to exaggerate the threat, so as to gain the attention of the audience. In order to be successful, the act of public speaking must be largely and collectively accepted by the audience, namely the mass of the population. When an issue is securitized, these exceptional measures and actions are usually legitimized under the discourse concerning emergency and existential threats.

The effects of the securitizing act of public speaking are discernible in the Taiwanese government’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Taiwanese leaders identified COVID-19 as a security threat, not only for the health of the Taiwanese people and the country’s economy, but also internationally. At the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen and former Vice President Chen Chien-jen, routinely mentioned COVID-19 as a national threat during National Security Council (NSC) meetings (Kennedy 2020). The need for what was described as an “advanced deployment” or “super-early response” was repeatedly emphasized by the central government. Due to this mindset and the act of public speaking, the idea that everyone had to be prepared for the worst possible scenario was naturally planted in the minds of the Taiwanese people.

In addition, the Communicable Disease Control Act and the Special Act for Prevention, Relief and Revitalization Measures for Severe Pneumonia with Novel Pathogens, were set up as the legal basis of the emergency measures put in place to combat the coronavirus. According to the Special Act, the CECC may implement necessary response actions or measures for disease-prevention and control requirements. Furthermore, according to Article 5, in order to facilitate the production of adequate disease-prevention supplies government authorities on all levels may, where necessary, expropriate or requisition required production equipment and raw materials, and provide appropriate compensation, based on instructions of the

CECC (Special Act for Prevention, Relief and Revitalization Measures for Severe Pneumonia with Novel Pathogens 2020). This kind of exceptional enforcement allows decision-makers to mobilize resources and impose restrictions much more easily than under normal circumstances.

In sum, the securitization strategies applied by Taiwanese decision-makers did contribute to the overall success of the country's epidemic-prevention effort. This successful securitization increased the willingness of the Taiwanese people to comply and cooperate with the policies and regulations imposed by the CECC. It also enhanced the public's support of stricter restrictions, alongside the rapid development of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Conclusion

Taiwan's extraordinary performance in the fight against COVID-19 drew a lot of attention from the rest of the world. Taiwan's experience in containing contagious diseases has been widely debated in the past 18 months. While the rest of the world was struggling with lockdowns and healthcare-system breakdowns, the Taiwanese people were enjoying a relatively normal life within their comfort zone. This led to a wave of compliments for the content Taiwanese government by the international community. However, this highly persistent virus has been able to break through Taiwan's barricade. Thus, one careless move or decision may result in a series of disasters in public-health security. The recent domestic outbreak has taught Taiwan another bitter lesson: the virus is constantly and rapidly evolving, and it even becomes more contagious over time. Since the fight against COVID-19 is not over yet, the government's policies and measures should also progress and change according to the development of the pandemic.

In Taiwan's case, despite the fact that the citizens and the government have been collaborating smoothly, with excellent results over this period, the importance of vaccines in combating COVID-19 was not given sufficient attention by the central government or the public. As a result, while other countries started their vaccination program for the majority of their population, and finally began to implement recovery plans and open up their borders, Taiwan closed its doors and suffered from the sudden rise of cases and the vaccine shortage. The Taiwanese people are now —somewhat late— waking up to the fact that they have been living inside their safety bubble, without thinking one step ahead, as they did at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, it is worth noticing that the aforementioned factors of Taiwan's successful practice are still playing an extremely important role, as the island battles a worsening situation. Once they noticed the severe domestic outbreak, the Taiwanese people spontaneously and voluntarily stayed home without the government imposing any lockdown restrictions. Moreover, democratic governance and transparency continue to serve as the basis of Taiwan's management of the health crisis. Just like before, the collectivist spirit of the Taiwanese society continues to contribute to the improvement of the situation on the ground.

Overall, the practice of Taiwan, adopted by both its government and its citizens, can be an important example for the international community in the fight against COVID-19. Taiwan's prior experience, and its outstanding national strategies on contagious diseases, should be further-studied. A meaningful participation in the WHO and the WHA should be the highest priority, not only for Taiwan, but also for the global society. Just as in the case of climate change, successfully tackling this type of pandemic requires the collaboration of every country, every nation, and every individual around the world. Everyone should be included, especially countries like Taiwan, who are capable and willing to provide vital support to countries in need, whether in the time of the coronavirus, or any future challenge for the global health system. Conversely, Taiwan also has a need for support and assistance from the international community when dealing with the threats of both traditional security and human security.

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