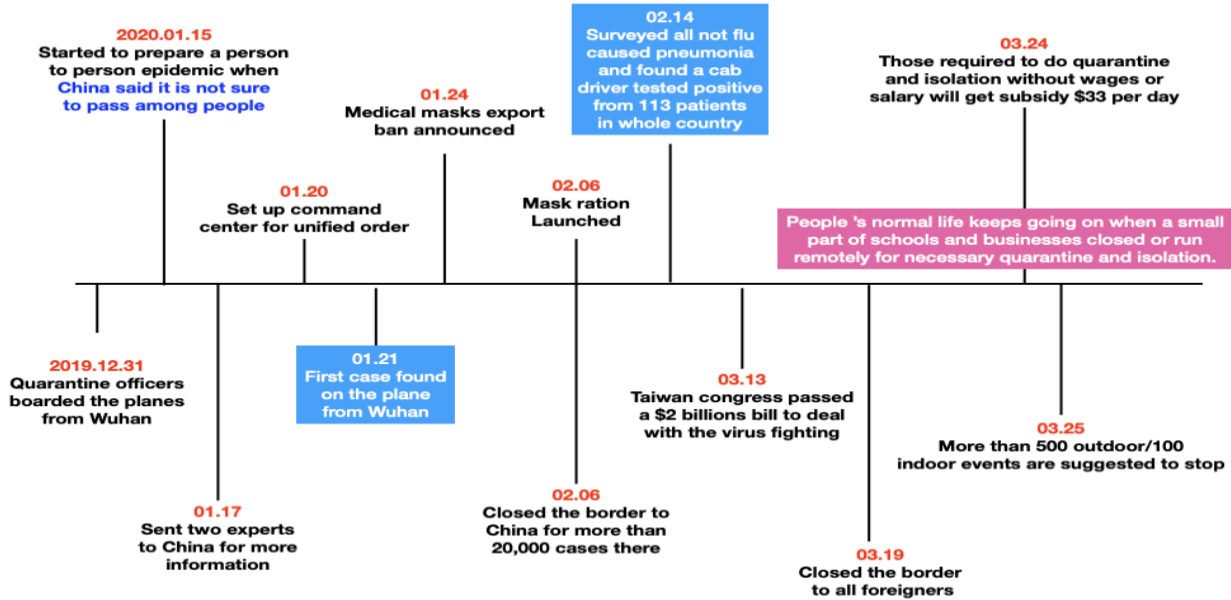


Resolute Island in Turbulent Times: How Taiwan is Responding to the Novel Coronavirus Pandemic

The globe is under the shadow of COVID-19, and most countries are struggling to revive both livelihoods and their respective economies, yet no one knows with certainty when the world can go back to its normal course. That is one reason why the narrative developing in Taiwan has impressed people so much. With less than 450 tested positive cases and 6 deaths of its 24,000,000 population by April 22nd, most of the people in Taiwan continue to run their life normally while large parts of the globe are going under lockdown.

At just 130 kilometers across the Taiwan Strait from China, and with more than 400,000 Taiwanese people working in China, not including many students and tourists who flow frequently across the Strait, Taiwan was predicted to be one of the hardest hit locations of the novel coronavirus pandemic. However, the subsequent events paint quite another story. How has Taiwan gotten this pandemic under control so far? Here are some clues to trace and may apply the persuasive answers of it.

The timeline of preventative measures that Taiwan deployed regarding the spread of the coronavirus (made by author, Chia Yi Chiu)



Early action is very crucial. Seeing the timeline that show Taiwan’s deployments of coronavirus prevention measures above, we will find that Taiwan started implementing travel-related restrictions and actions earlier than many countries to curtail the spread of the virus. At the end of last year, after the first case was revealed in Wuhan, Hubei Province of China on December 17th, the Chinese

government claimed that there was no proof that the virus could pass between humans. Meanwhile, by December 31st, Taiwan started onboard checking on every plane from Wuhan and found the first confirmed inbound case on January 21st, 2020 (which is the same day that the United States also had its first confirmed inbound case). Just one day before the first case was confirmed, on January 20th, Taiwan's Central Epidemic Command Center (CECC) was set up to consolidate information and formulate a unified government response.

On February 6th, Taiwan closed its border with China – four days after the United States closed its borders – with five newly-arrived cases coming into Taiwan on that day alone. Before this, a ban on the exportation of medical masks was announced on January 24th to prevent social panic that would have been caused by a shortage of essential supplies for coping with the possible coming outbreak. Foreseeing a potential risk of local transmission, on February 10th, when cases ceased temporarily for several days, with spare capacity, Taiwan health officials started to survey all non-flu related pneumonia cases and they identified a cab driver who later tested positive for the virus. This case was very crucial for stopping more locally transmitted cases in advance.

Addressing possible social panic is also very important to consider which measures are the most prudent to take to safeguard the public's interest and safety. After the ban on exporting masks, a pharmaceutical mask rationing system was launched on February 6th when the domestic daily producing capability was 1.8 million masks per day. With the government's ability to direct and invest in the mass production of masks, Taiwan's capacity to produce medical masks has risen up to 15 million masks per day after two months, with surplus supplies being donated to support other countries under severe outbreak like the United States and countries in Europe.

Let's talk about masks a little more. Rationing usually happens in wars. However, no one can deny that it is a real war effort to face this deadly virus threat. Taiwan's populace did not value wearing masks before the outbreak of the SARS epidemic 2003, which was primarily spread in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. The death toll in Taiwan reached 73, and that experience prepared Taiwan to be vigilant regarding diseases emanating from China and how to disseminate information when the COVID-19 situation began to develop. The main guidance for SARS prevention at that time included measuring individual body temperatures, thorough handwashing, and wearing masks. Indeed, this was quite a rehearsal for Novel Coronavirus outbreak this time. After SARS, many people in Taiwan usually wear masks during flu seasons or protecting themselves from outdoor air pollution. Western countries did not accept mask wearing just like Taiwan before SARS, but things change when it was proved to effectively protect people from virus exposure.

Notwithstanding the SARS experience, natural disasters such as typhoons and earthquake impact Taiwan often, and the people of Taiwan are keenly aware of the fighters from China encircling Taiwan to threaten attempts to separate Taiwan from China. This consistent vulnerability has turned into durability and fortitude of the Taiwanese people's will during times of crisis. Because of how it has needed to deal with the PRC for decades, Taiwan judged initial circumstances correctly and made resolute decisions to prevent the devastating outbreak.

Asides from correct predictions and early decision-making motivated by previous experiences, social institutions and technical abilities are also crucial for coping with this pandemic. More than 99 percent of people in Taiwan are covered by a government-run health insurance system, with monthly payments being less than \$40 per person, and the Novel Coronavirus test is free under doctor’s prescription. This allows for the creation and access of sufficient data that can be used to trace all medical treatments of individuals – which is an indirect means to trace the virus – and is what the mask rationing system counts on. Now with new digital dispensing platforms, people can buy their rationed masks online or get them from nearby convenient stores with their health insurance cards too.

The “electronic fence” is the way that Taiwan’s government traces individuals who should quarantine or self-isolate but have not done so. In place of GPS locating, this “electronic fence” uses cellphone signals to trace an individual’s path or footprint of the locations that they had been too, although it is less accurate to respect greater privacy. This can still frame the high-risk population for public safety. This is what the government did after the passengers of Diamond Princess cruise ship – which had more than 700 confirmed cases out of its 2,694 travelers – went ashore for a one-day trip in northern Taiwan on January 31st. The Taiwan government provided to the public a footprint map of the Princess Diamond’s passengers to warn the populace and take necessary precautions.

The map was released by the Central Epidemic Command Center for reminding people had been there recently. (the graph on the left is from UP MEDIA,



[https://www.upmedia.mg/news_info.php?SerialNo=80876\)](https://www.upmedia.mg/news_info.php?SerialNo=80876)

Combined with the technical abilities, a centralized and fully authorized command system comprised of experts can enhance the efficiency and accuracy of decision-making during this situation. The core

members of the Central Epidemic Command Center of Taiwan are all medically trained, along with a support team of field experts. This group's composition helps enhance the credibility and legitimacy of their decisions from the populace's perspective.

Last but not least, free media and availability of information enabled the public to be well-informed and reduced potential panic. This then encouraged the public to cooperate under the government's guidance even more. The Minister of Health and Welfare of Taiwan, Minister Shih-chung Chen, holds a media conference every day – sometimes twice a day – to update the public on the newest cases and prevention guidance. He also answers every question that media journalists raise. The data of confirmed positive cases include a brief description of every case, including: the case's assigned number, age, gender, date of positive test confirmation, and how the patient contracted the virus by analyzing the contact history of the patient. This information is meant to encourage people to develop their own individual strategy to protect themselves from being infected. Taiwan is one of the countries



in Asia with the most press freedom. As measured by the Press Freedom Index of Reporters without Borders, Taiwan ranked 42 in 2019, after South Korea's 41 (which has the highest ranking in Asia) and ahead of the United States (48). Reporting without restrictions from various free media sources helps people under crisis take the correct measures.

The Central Epidemic Command Center holds media conference every day.

In a free media ecosystem, strengthening preventive measures will surely face challenges. Tracing the virus means to tracing people, therefore there is a privacy rights issue inherent in the government's virus tracking approach. The pandemic also challenges the subtle and obscure boundary between individual liberty and public interests that would feed back into individual good. In Taiwan, a majority of public opinion supports strengthening government measures to contain the outbreak. However, some critics challenge the government's actions, such as the use of personal health insurance data to do mask rationing, and tracing the people who had travelled overseas or had contact

with positive cases. Human rights NGOs in Taiwan are launching campaigns at present for legislative action to clarify boundaries or limitations of the government's power to collect and use such data.

In a democracy like the United States or Taiwan, with free press and information openness, every public issue is debatable. However, through debate and social dialogue, our democracies will deepen and become stronger. That is what I believe.

The pandemic hurts Taiwan's economy as tourism and air traffic have reduced, which have caused people to lose their jobs. Taiwan's congress, the Legislative Yuan, has passed a bill allocating more than \$30 billion to help those impacted by the economic downturn that was caused by the outbreak.

Addressing the role of the World Health Organization (WHO) – which is supposed to lead world-wide public health affairs during this pandemic – may be an important issue to mention. President Donald Trump said that the WHO has been overly China-centric, for its consistent consultations and actions with China which should be blamed with covering up information about the Novel Coronavirus, such as human transmissibility of the virus, and with having the world lose the opportunity of reducing mortality that has led to the devastating situation now. President Trump was blunt, but his points have merit. Taiwan is excluded by the WHO, as is the case with many other international organizations, because of China's interference. Additionally to that, when Taiwan tried to notify the world of the coming danger and sent a notification to WHO at the end of last year, but was ignored. Now, there are many discussions about reforming this political and China-oriented organization, which has now fallen short of its given mission. It is yet to be seen whether real reform to the organization will happen.

The following quote on March 23rd in The New York Times, describes Taiwan's situation quite well: "You can contain clusters. You need to identify and stop discrete outbreaks, and then do rigorous contact tracing." This is easier said than done. "Doing so takes intelligent, rapidly adaptive work by health officials, and near-total cooperation from the populace." It is quite a description of Taiwan.

A successful epidemic prevention strategy needs to include social and individual perspectives, with leadership from experts in public health, and access to technologies that enable accurate and rapid response. Simulating the outbreak and preparing for advanced deployment of responsive measures, an expert-led united command center with laboratory-level accurate case tracking, digitally powered data coming from universal health insurance, and most of all, the sincere cooperation from a well-informed populace are all crucial points which make Taiwan among the best of dealing with this outbreak.

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by UC Berkeley's Office of Resources for International and Area Studies and the GW's East Asia NRC, available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I8ltzG7spbI>.