



Left: A return to normalcy in Taiwan; scene from August 2020 when no more domestic COVID-19 outbreaks had occurred. Photo by author.

Taiwan, COVID-19, and the fortuitous lack of politics

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Following Taiwan's first case of SARS in March 2003, an internal outbreak occurred at Heping Hospital in April. As the hospital was urgently sealed off and isolated from the outside world, many hospital workers suddenly found themselves trapped in a dangerous situation, lacking any means of an effective response to the virus or procedures for treatment in isolation. Lee Yuan-teh, who served at the time as superintendent of National Taiwan University Hospital, recounts that a key factor contributing to the explosive increase in hospital outbreaks at the time had been the disagreement between Taiwan's central government and the Taipei municipal government.

Seventeen years have since passed but memories of the Heping Hospital shut-down and images of hospital workers holding pickets in protest still remain ingrained in

the minds of the Taiwanese people. Mask wearing has become a well-established practice in Taiwan as a result of this. With the appearance of a similar respiratory disease seventeen years later, the country immediately went into a state of vigilant, wartime preparation to avoid previous mistakes. Daily press conferences were held for the public by the central government in order to report on the current state of affairs in dealing with COVID-19, and all questions put forth by the press were answered with great patience. This led the Taiwanese public to become fully informed of the situation and actively follow government guidelines regarding the wearing of masks and social distancing. Consequently, Taiwan was able to successfully halt the large-scale spread of the virus. In June of 2020, the government relaxed social distancing measures, allowing the Taiwanese public to return to their normal daily lives. Given the current global situation

order and global governance, public diplomacy and international development cooperation, these events provided an opportunity for researchers to come together (on-line) to diagnose in detail the current situation of, and tasks facing, both individual countries and wider regions.

The experience of the past six months has made it clear that prospects for the future must emerge from a consensus that is shared beyond borders. It may also be suggested that when the dust settles, a 'new normal' must be created in the post-COVID-19 world. Lessons have been learned from the ongoing pandemic and new directions have been discovered amidst the chaos, the most important of which is that the negotiation of this new normal must take place based on an ethos of openness and sharing, alongside the construction of a database in which the curation of field experience as well as traditional forms of data occurs, and it must involve the expansion of multi-layered global cooperation.

Currently, SNUAC is seeking to contribute to the negotiation of the new

normal by forming the Seoul National University COVID-19 Research Network (SNUCRN; <http://snuac.snu.ac.kr/snuacr>) with local and international researchers. Research topics relating to COVID-19 that are currently being explored by this network include the comparative study of global metropolises and the comparative study of East Asian regions; the publication of Country Reports for major countries and the building of a database with the data from these reports is also taking place. However, in order to truly overcome the effects of the pandemic in the long-term and the cumulative influence of COVID-19, the building of a new paradigm with much more global cooperation and mutual assistance must take place. SNUAC anticipates future cooperation with overseas experts and research institutes and welcomes any suggestions for opportunities of collaboration in the creation of a new normal.

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brought on by COVID-19, it is almost a miracle that all schools in Taiwan were open and fully running in the first half of this year and have also re-opened in September after the summer break. It is now even possible to safely travel throughout the country.

Resistance against infectious diseases is, in theory, a matter of public health; in reality, however, it also happens to be the battleground of political warfare. It was once said by a member of the opposition party that "Taiwan was lucky". Although this phrase was used to mock the ruling party, I too wish to use this phrase when addressing Taiwan's basic success in resistance against the COVID-19 pandemic, albeit from a different perspective. Firstly, it is important to note that Taiwan's heated presidential, vice-presidential, and legislative elections were held this year on 11 January, prior to the global spread of COVID-19. This meant that opposition to the government's policies on COVID-19 based on political reasons, which would have hindered the fight against the pandemic, was mitigated to some extent. Throughout the world, elections that have taken place or are due to take place in the COVID-19 era have illustrated how the contesting positions of the ruling and opposition parties concerning policies for infectious disease prevention have led their respective supporters to maintain different perceptions regarding COVID-19 prevention, which has proved unhelpful in the fight against the virus. Given this situation, the fact that the Taiwanese elections had already taken place can be regarded as being fortuitous indeed.

Secondly, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP)'s presidential candidate won re-election by a landslide margin of 2.64 million votes. This vote of confidence allowed the president to feel secure enough to step back, along with her administrative bureaucrats, and willingly hand over the task of fighting the spread of COVID-19 to those specialists, such as doctors and public health officials, who knew best. As a result, the public came to regard the government's policies regarding COVID-19 prevention with confidence and followed the guidelines accordingly.

Thirdly, there was a common basis of understanding shared by the central and local governments. The majority of the local governments were headed by members of the opposition party and questions and disagreement was put forth to the central government. This is, of course, to be expected in a democratic country. However, the opposition party was also keenly aware of the critical nature of the times and therefore, in the end, co-operated with the central government on issues of COVID-19 prevention. A notable event was the request made in early February by the head of the local government of the Kinmen

Islands, which had consistently supported the opposition party (Kuomintang), to temporarily halt connections between the islands and Xiamen, China, which had been established according to the Mini Three Links (小三通) policy. This was only the second time that links between the Kinmen Islands and Xiamen had been disrupted since exchange relations were first established nineteen years ago – the first disruption had taken place seventeen years ago, at the time of the SARS epidemic.

Fourthly, the Taiwanese public is well-informed when it comes to matters of public health. The experience of the previous SARS epidemic led not only to annual simulation training exercises at hospitals but also to a change of habits throughout Taiwanese society, the wearing of masks being a key example. Since wearing masks at the hospital or on public transport had become a norm, when the supply of masks was unstable in the early stages of COVID-19, the Taiwanese people offered to donate extra masks, which they had stocked at home, to medical staff. The government's swift decision to regulate the export of masks was also met with support from most members of Taiwanese society; those few who expressed opposition were met with great criticism. This is because the public was well-aware that wearing masks was the most effective means of preventing the spread of respiratory diseases. The ruling party's decision to hand over the reins to doctors and specialists in the fight against the virus also sent out the message that the government regarded with utmost importance the lives and well-being of its citizens. Accordingly, the public had few complaints in adopting to a new way of life that required constant mask-wearing and vigilant handwashing and disinfection.

Although COVID-19 is currently being contained with great success in Taiwan, constant vigilance is required until a vaccine is produced. This is the message that is continuously being stressed by the Taiwanese government. The fight against infectious diseases is a long one but when things are seen to have returned to normal, Taiwanese politicians will return to the political ring for another round of fighting. Once this happens, the current conflict between the US and China will inevitably have an influence on Taiwan's policies for disease prevention, as well as its political and economic policies in the post-COVID-19 era. If politics begin to gain the upper hand on disease prevention in the second half of 2020, the scenario that Taiwan may face is worrying indeed.

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