

“Never let a good crisis go to waste”: Taiwan’s COVID-19 management as a public diplomacy strategy to overcome its international isolation

1 Introduction

“The year is 2020. The entire world is plunged into unprecedented distress as national economies, civil liberties, and public health take a heavy toll. Well, not the entire world... One small country of indomitable Taiwanese still holds out against the virus.” If research on Taiwan’s COVID-19 management were released in the form of a comic book, it would probably begin like this. Indeed, while the rest of the world was struggling with high infection rates and strict lockdowns, Taiwan managed to escape both. Thus, it seems to have found the solution to pandemic elimination and emerged as a poster child for COVID-management on the international scene.

“Never let a good crisis go to waste”, said Winston Churchill as he was working to form the United Nations after World War II. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Taiwan seems to have taken the same advice. As the pandemic induced a worldwide health crisis, Taiwan acted swiftly and efficiently to protect its population before an outbreak could even take place. Then, the island took it as an opportunity to make itself seen. Taiwan’s successful COVID-management made multiple headlines in newspapers and magazines which are read around the globe, such as *The New York Times*, *The Diplomat*, *The Guardian*, *Forbes*, *Al-Jazeera*, *Wall Street Journal*, or *Time Magazine*, only to name a few. Moreover, the donation of over 54 million masks and other anti-pandemic supplies to more than 80 countries gave credibility to the “Taiwan Can Help” and “Taiwan Is Helping” public diplomacy campaigns. This sparked numerous debates both amongst many European governments and in the media about Taiwan’s exclusion from the international scene, and especially from the World Health Organization (WHO) whose objective is, after all, to provide health for all.

This research is aimed at uncovering how Taiwan expresses its uniqueness and how it communicates it to foreign publics – a concept generally described as public diplomacy. Thus, this paper demonstrates how and why Taiwan mobilized a heavy public diplomacy campaign in the European Union at this point in time. The introductory part will contextualize the questions that we attempt to answer and provides a chapter overview to demonstrate how each section will lead to answering the research question of “Why does Taiwan use public diplomacy around COVID-19 to advance its foreign policy goals in the European Union?”.

This paper is divided into six chapters. The first chapter introduces the research topic and question. The next chapter sees a literature review of the existing research in relation to Taiwan’s public diplomacy and its COVID-19 management and then lays out the research methodology of this paper. Chapter 3 elaborates the theoretical framework of neo-classical realism and how public diplomacy acts as a soft power tool. Chapter 4 explores the key systemic factors that influenced the Taiwanese government’s decision to use a heavy public diplomacy machinery around COVID-19 to make its case for participation in the international environment and especially in the WHO. Chapter 5 will see if and how Taiwan’s democracy played an additional role for the latter purpose. Lastly, Chapter 6 concludes the main reasons why the Tsai government has made use of public diplomacy around COVID-19 as a soft power tool.

2 Literature review

2.1 Existing research on Taiwan’s public diplomacy

Due to its recent nature, the subject of Taiwan’s public diplomacy around COVID-19 has not (yet) led to a voluminous scientific literature. However, an academic analysis of this topic cannot circumvent Gary Rawnsley’s (2003; 2012; 2014; 2017) extensive and long-haul research on public diplomacy and soft power in Taiwan. As recently as 2017, he called the island “soft power rich, public diplomacy poor” after examining the paradox of its lack of recognition on the international scene despite its considerable soft power capital, being a

leader in democracy and liberalism in Asia. His main conclusion is that Taiwan does not utilize its soft power to its full potential, especially around its political values.

Several authors have also studied Taiwan's bid for integration in international organizations, such as Sigrid Winkler (2008; 2012) and Lindemann (2014) on Taiwan's quest for participation in the World Trade Organization and the WHO. More specifically, Herington and Lee (2014), Chen (2018), and Brown and Landwig (2020) researched the limits of public health diplomacy and the concept of "universal participation" through the case of Taiwan's observer status at the WHO. However, they all focus more on China's diplomatic pressure and Taiwan's international exclusion, and thereby neglect Taiwan's agency in the matter.

More recently, general academic accounts about how Taiwan beat the virus have surfaced, especially in medical journals (see Han and Su, 2020; Brook, Ng, and Wang, 2020). Some researchers such as Chun-yi Lee (whose research is not published yet) and Wei-Ting Yen (2020) also looked into the background of Taiwan's COVID-management and centered their analyses around digital democracy and governance and state-society synergy. Yet, these studies are focused on Taiwan's domestic factors and do not provide an analysis of how or why Taiwan uses these facts to bolster its image in the international arena. Lastly, also in 2020, Colin Alexander published a critical analysis of Taiwan's bid for inclusion in the World Health Assembly (WHA), the WHO's most important decision-making body, in light of the pandemic. He views this bid as a rather self-centered call for attention rather than the wider moral imperative Taiwan makes it out to be.

2.2 Originality

While Chinese foreign policy has been treated extensively in the media and the scientific literature because of its growing economic and political power, Taiwan's diplomacy strategy has been much more neglected. Notably, as opposed to US-Taiwan, Japan-Taiwan, and cross-strait relations, research on Taiwan's relations with Europe is especially scarce. Additionally, academic accounts on the current president Tsai Ing-wen and her government, which has been in power since 2016, are still limited. Thus, this paper will shed some light on her foreign policy strategy towards Europe and how and why the COVID-19 outbreak

changed it. As in 2021, we are still living through the pandemic and seeing its effects and consequences unfold, it is an entirely new focus.

Based on the literature review, the originality of this paper lies particularly within Taiwan's agency in the international arena. Indeed, research on its influence (or the attempt thereof) on other countries is limited to a few case studies. However, as the COVID-19 pandemic completely uprooted the domestic and international environment, the case of Taiwan can be studied in a new light. While scholars and observers can agree with the facts that Taiwan's initial COVID-response was successful and garnered worldwide attention, research was mostly focused on the reasons behind the first and let this explain the latter. This paper, on the other hand, investigates a variety of reasons that influenced Taiwan's government to profit off this success not only domestically, but also internationally. Thus, we aim to provide a holistic approach of the systemic and domestic factors of why Taiwan used the COVID-crisis to bolster its image on the international scene.

For our research, we decided on using four main primary sources: interviews with researchers and Taiwan scholars who are experts in the field, interviews with different divisions of the Taipei Representative Office in the EU and Belgium and relevant information from its website, interviews with two high-ranking Taiwanese diplomats, and Minister of Foreign Affairs Joseph Wu's biannual addresses to the Taiwanese Legislative Yuan between 2018 and 2021. Thus, this paper includes many different points of view in order to filter out the distinct reasons for Taiwan's public diplomacy strategy around COVID-19. To answer this question, the raw material collected through the research methodology is analyzed in the theoretical framework of neo-classical realism and seen through the lens of public diplomacy.

3 Theoretical framework

This analysis is embedded within the scope of neo-classical realism, a political science theory that views the international system as inherently anarchic. The defensive branch of this theory postulates that states will work towards upholding a status quo in order to achieve a certain balance of powers. The case of Taiwan and Tsai Ing-wen's government fits well into this

theory because of its cautious approach to integrating the international system without upsetting the status quo. Furthermore, we will work on the basis of public diplomacy to explain Taiwan's larger diplomatic strategy, with health diplomacy as a new pillar of interest. As public diplomacy is a soft power tool, we will also briefly explain the concept of soft power and why it is a staple of international relations and diplomacy.

3.1 Neo-classical realism and the balance of power

This analysis is embedded in the theory of neo-classical realism. Realism, the most dominant theory of international relations, views the nation-state as the supreme political authority and the scene of international politics as fundamentally anarchic, unsafe, and untrustworthy. Thus, states must look out for their own security and national interest must be kept in the foreground. Neo-classical realism, as described by Waltz (1979), relies on these same principles. At the same time, it views the international political realm as "intensely competitive" and focuses on relative gains in comparison to other states rather than having a preoccupation with absolute gains. Waltz, an author of the defensive branch of neorealism, believes in a balance of power for a stable and relatively peaceful international environment. Thus, states will most often opt to protect the status quo in order to ensure their survival, as they refrain from jeopardizing their security (Baylis et al., 2008: 210).

The case of Taiwan and Tsai Ing-wen's government fits into this theory because of its rather cautious approach to integrating the international system while claiming to maintain the status quo (Chen and Cohen, 2020: 6). This status quo is still based on the Ma Ying-jeou era premise of "no unification, no independence, and no use of force" from either side of the Taiwan Strait. In order to maintain this fragile peace, the Tsai government's Ministry of Foreign Affairs practices what it calls "steadfast diplomacy". Steadfast diplomacy, according to Foreign Minister Joseph Wu's first report to the Legislative Yuan in May 2018, relies on focusing on cultivating bilateral relations and international participation. In this context, Taiwan uses soft power and public diplomacy to ensure its survival as a *de facto* independent country without upsetting the status quo and thus potentially triggering an aggressive response from the Chinese People's Liberation Army.

Neo-classical realism is first a theory about the international system in general. It is not a handbook to explain every single foreign policy decision, but rather the foreign policy behavior of a state. As a way of viewing the structure that governs international relations, neo-classical realism mainly interprets foreign policy through the lens of systemic factors. However, as opposed to classical realism, the neo-classical theory accepts that systemic factors alone are not enough to explain states' behavior on the international scene; domestic factors are also looked at. As Walt (2002: 211) elaborates, neo-classical realism “places domestic politics as an intervening variable between [...] power and foreign policy behavior”.

Finally, in terms of power, classical realism measures a state's power primarily through its material and military capabilities, or “hard power”. Neo-classical realists, on the other hand, put a bigger emphasis on a state's place in the international system. This place does not only rely on hard power, but also on soft power assets. So, for them, states do not always have to try to increase their military capabilities or enlarge their territory in order to be safe. Security can also be reached by occupying a bigger space on the international scene, which the state can do by influencing its environment and the international community. In short: influence is power. This is why soft power and public diplomacy play a big role, especially for Taiwan, as the rest of this chapter will explain.

3.2 Soft power and public diplomacy

In 1990, Nye famously coined the term soft power and later defined it as “the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment” (2008), directly opposed to hard power which relies on military and economic incentives. China is benefitting from an immense and expanding political, economic, and military power, which means that its hard power cannot easily be competed with. Thus, Taiwan has no choice but to expand its soft power in order to survive as a *de facto* independent country that wants to gain more space on the international scene. One former high-ranking Taiwanese diplomat explains: “As Taiwan does not enjoy the normal political and diplomatic status in the international community, soft power plays an exceptionally critical role in its diplomacy.”

Soft power is thus a “form of national power” (Melissen, 2007) based on the attractiveness of a nation’s culture and values as well as of the legitimacy or perceived morality of its foreign policies. In our information age, Nye (2008) notes, a country is more likely to gain soft power if its culture and values align with “global norms” such as liberalism and pluralism. In this regard, as a thriving democracy with free and fair elections, liberal values, stability, and a strong and growing economy, Taiwan has the potential for a high soft power capital, at least from a Western, European point of view.

However, soft power alone is not enough to change “the hearts and minds” of people, as Nye (2008) puts it. The intangible attributes of soft power must be translated into tangible outcomes (Rawnsley, 2012: 132). Thus, to make its soft power work in its favor, an actor must first communicate to its target public, convince this public to adjust its views based on the received message, and lastly try to have this public opinion influence and impact political outcomes on the international scene. Kroenig et al. (2010) point out that psychological research found that a change in opinions is most likely when the “source is credible and attractive”, the message is “repeated and has emotional content, and the target is in a receptive mood”. Throughout this paper, we will come back to this statement and show how Taiwan is trying to ensure a change in public opinion by making itself credible and attractive and repeating its message that Taiwan should join the WHO and be included in the international community.

3.3 Public diplomacy as a soft power tool

Public diplomacy, as explained by Sharp (2011), is “the process by which direct relations with people in a country are pursued to advance the interests and extend the values of those being represented”. Public diplomacy is one of the most prominent ways to promote a country’s soft power and the one we will be focusing on in the scope of this paper. In our information age, as Nye (2008) argues, public diplomacy is becoming more important than ever: public opinion influences the leeway leaders have vis-à-vis other countries. That is why, as Melissen (2007: xix) explains, practitioners of diplomacy are now forced to take the opinion of foreign publics into account in order to advance their government’s interests. In a

time where information is easily and quickly available, governments need to act fast and strategically in order to influence public opinion in a favorable manner.

Here, as Nye (2008) postulates, credibility is a key factor. A government's public diplomacy output can only translate into a positive public opinion when the targeted public believes the provided information. If, on the contrary, the information or the government itself are not deemed as credible, public diplomacy can easily be dismissed as propaganda, which hurts a government's reputation and its chance for successful public diplomacy in the future. Thus, credibility is an important source of soft power and the basis for successful public diplomacy. The kind of credibility required for a positive public opinion is, especially in our information age, achieved through pertinent policy and transparency.

3.4 Research scope and question

The temporal scope of this research is the second term of President Tsai Ing-wen, which started in 2020, right at the onset of the pandemic. We will limit our analysis to the timeframe between December 31st, 2019, when Taiwan first confirmed its knowledge about the novel coronavirus, and May 2021, when the island suffered a new outbreak as its vaccine supply falls short under Chinese pressure. This paper aims to establish how and to which degree systemic and domestic factors influenced the roll-out of Taiwan's public diplomacy strategy around COVID-19, which boils our main research question down to:

Why does Taiwan use public diplomacy around COVID-19 to advance its foreign policy goals in the European Union?

4 Public diplomacy around COVID-19

Taiwan's successful COVID-management gave Taiwan a high potential for new soft power gains. However, that is not enough: as Mattern (2005: 288, quoted in Rawnsley, 2012: 123) notes, "[s]oft power depends on other people's *knowledge* of one's alluring qualities" [original emphasis]. While soft power is the goal, public diplomacy is a way to convey it in order to lead to a change of public opinion and ultimately to a change in foreign policy.

In terms of the COVID-19 crisis, not only did Taiwan adapt its pandemic response at home, but also the way to communicate it. In our interview, researcher 2 explains that while before and at the beginning of the pandemic, Taiwan often made itself out to be the victim of international exclusion, it is now slowly realizing its power and attraction. Thus, instead of counting on the moral argument to include the opinion and lives of 23 million people in international governance, Taiwan shows that it has something to offer: “You [...] have a pivot change in [the] style of public diplomacy where Taiwan is now saying ‘We have expertise that you need, so let us participate’. And that is a much stronger argument.”¹ As Taiwan’s successful COVID-management was quickly dubbed “the Taiwan model”, its MoFA proudly embraced this title and constructed its public diplomacy around this know-how.

The Taipei Representative Office explains that given that Taiwan has successfully coped with the COVID-19 for 18 months – until the “recent small outbreak” – the Office has shared its experience with their “European friends” through online seminars and other events. Indeed, a high-ranking official from the Office’s European Parliament Division said that he witnessed the spike in interest firsthand. He noticed that Taiwanese Ambassador Tseng received numerous requests from MEPs from different EU Member States to share Taiwan’s experience in fighting this crisis and what lessons their respective countries and the EU as a whole can learn from it. Furthermore, the Office’s Political Division reveals that there is a bigger strategy behind these activities of knowledge sharing, explaining that it strives to turn this ministerial-level communication “into opportunities for concrete cooperation which would be beneficial for both sides”.

Apart from bilateral knowledge sharing, Taiwan’s diplomats’ main aim is to try to let people know that the country can contribute to the fight against the pandemic with its expertise if it were to be allowed to take part in the WHO’s mechanism: “Taiwan can contribute to the international efforts in fighting this pandemic. So, we, Taiwan, is committed to and stands ready to contribute to the international community by meaningfully participating in relevant international organization[s]”². This goal of meaningful participation refers to the fact that

¹ Interview with researcher 2 on March 29th, 2021.

² Interview with a Taiwanese diplomat from the Office’s European Parliament Division on March 30th, 2021.

instead of seeking WHO membership, which requires statehood, Taiwan is seeking observer status at the WHA, for which sovereignty is defined more broadly.

The Office's Press Division explains that for the Representative Offices around the world, there is no coordinated public diplomacy strategy coming directly from MoFA. This problem has been time and again addressed by Gary Rawnsley (2014: 167), as it "prevents [...] the communication of persistent themes and messages". However, around the WHO issue, MoFA seems to have learned a lesson. While it leaves the Representative Offices a lot of freedom in designing their social media strategy, it pushes for a heavy output around the WHO issue, especially when nearing the WHA. Being asked about MoFA instructions, the Press Division's representative says that they do not actually get many, except for when the WHA is about to assemble: "during the WHA session, the MoFA will give us lots of material to share or to post or to tweet. [...] So far, it's the priority from MoFA". While this focus is not entirely new, it gained more importance since the Tsai administration, as it has been completely shut out of any WHA meetings. As the representative believes, "this year is much more important due to the COVID-situation. [...] As you know, Taiwan has not been invited into the WHA session for the fifth year, so it's a continuing effort that we have to do".

As mentioned previously, a change in opinions is most likely when the source is credible and attractive, the message is repeated and includes emotional content, and the target is in a receptive mood. Within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, all three of these factors seem to be reunited. First, Taiwan makes itself credible and attractive through its successful fight against COVID-19 even without the aid of the international community or WHO membership. This credibility is heightened by Taiwan's government's transparency both on the domestic and the international front. Second, the message is repeated constantly and through many different channels. Third, the pandemic locked people up in their homes for months while over 4 million people died and many more got sick. This makes the message of "Taiwan Can Help" loaded with emotional content, as the international public was desperate for solutions to overcome the pandemic as quickly and safely as possible.

In an interview with *The Guardian*³, Foreign Minister Wu said that Taiwan needs more support in rejoining international bodies. The following two chapters will lay out the underlying reasons for this interest in international participation, with the WHO in the foreground, and for using public diplomacy to do so.

5 Systemic factors influencing Taiwan's public diplomacy

The systemic factors for Taiwan's government to use public diplomacy around COVID-19 are the ones mentioned the most in scholarly conferences and by Taiwanese officials. First, the "China factor", especially with the virus' Chinese origin, gives Taiwan the opportunity to stand out and show itself independent and inherently distinct from mainland China. Second, Taiwan's difficult relationship with the WHO, in which it is neither a member nor an observer, leaves Taiwan little choice but to address the issue publicly if it wants a seat at the table. Third, Taiwan's WHO issue can be regarded as a "means to an end", with the goal of putting Taiwan's exclusion on the international agenda and thus increasing its visibility.

5.1 The "China factor": A public diplomacy necessity?

The "China factor" can be seen as both a systemic and a domestic factor. In fact, Taiwan's internal party politics have long been centered around the "China question", and it remains the main point that divides the KMT camp which favors closer cross-strait relations, and the DPP camp which emphasizes Taiwan's independence from the mainland. Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic was a chance for the DPP government to not only make a memorable success in Taiwan's public health management but also to prove the benefits of less dependence on China. As a representative from the Office's Press Division explains, the Taiwanese public quickly changes opinions based on new information. Thus, even short-term successes and failures can have long-lasting effects on Taiwanese electoral politics, and the perception of China as friend or foe plays a crucial role. Here, it can be argued that the DPP actually needs the "China factor" to keep its political base in line with its decisions.

³ Davidson, H. (2020). "'Stronger Together': Taiwan Foreign Minister Urges New Alliance Against China". *The Guardian*, 07/12/2020.

Now in the context of COVID-19, deeply rooted distrust of mainland China, both within the government and the population, made Taiwan act swiftly and decisively against a virus originating on the mainland. With the heavy baggage of experience from the SARS and H1N1 outbreaks, Taiwan chose not to wait for international guidelines to close its borders to visitors from the mainland and enact its emergency protocol as soon as possible. This early response is said to be one of the main reasons for Taiwan's successful response to the spread of COVID. The mistrust that Taiwan has accumulated over the years seems to have spread over to Western countries, with the United States demanding an independent investigation into the origin of the virus, which China is reluctant to allow. This international mistrust of the CCP actually plays well into Tsai's government's diplomacy strategy: as China shows itself uncooperative with the investigation and at the same time aggressive on the military front towards Taiwan, more and more Western countries are showing themselves ready to jump to Taiwan's defense. As explained, soft power and public diplomacy rely heavily on credibility, which in turn, according to Nye, relies both on transparency and on pertinent policies. However, since 2018, China has been losing the credibility battle on the international front due to a number of events: its authoritarian suppression of civil liberties in Hong Kong under the eyes of the foreign press, its alleged Uyghur concentration camps and human rights abuses in Xinjiang, its military feud in the South China Sea, and last but not least its secrecy around COVID-19 which plunged the entire world population and economy into unprecedented distress. This lack of transparency and internationally 'acceptable' policy decisions leaves China with shrinking credibility and thus helped to create a space for Taiwan's 'cry for help' on the international scene.

The "China factor" is arguably also the most important factor in Taiwanese diplomacy. Especially since the Ma-era "diplomatic truce" was rescinded by Beijing, Taiwan has – again – found itself in a constant battle over diplomatic allies with the mainland. As China gains more and more international partners, not least thanks to its "checkbook diplomacy" of contributing large amounts of money towards less developed countries, Taiwan seemed to be losing this battle. In fact, between 2016 and 2021, it has lost six diplomatic allies to the PRC, which promised these countries large aid and investment plans. Thus, Taiwan finds itself in dire need for a diplomatic strategy to win the hearts and minds of the international public. Here, we can certainly see a change in diplomatic strategy from the Tsai government: while

previous administrations focused a lot of money and energy on their few diplomatic allies, Tsai's administration is trying to broaden the field. Instead of continuing the "checkbook diplomacy" battle with Beijing over official diplomatic allies⁴, it shifts its attention to "like-minded countries"⁵, especially the US, Japan, and EU Member States. This also shows that the Tsai administration can be analyzed with the theory of neo-classical realism, as Taiwan is looking for a certain balance of power with a broader field of allies of which it does not demand official relations.

Furthermore, it can be said that Taiwan's public diplomacy relies considerably on the "China factor". Indeed, at the same time as revealing Taiwan's strengths, its public diplomacy campaigns often point out China's perceived weaknesses and put both in contrast with each other. However, as researcher 4 highlighted, "from a soft power [perspective], it's much better to emphasize your positive sides. [...] And so even with COVID-19, quite often from the official side, it's instead of focusing [on] how great Taiwan has done, it's more like how bad China has done". Researchers 2 and 3 support this claim. Thus, it can be argued that Taiwan and especially the DPP actually needs – or at least thinks it needs – the "China factor" both on the domestic front and for its public diplomacy on the international one, as the contrast to China seems to make Taiwan all the more attractive.

Taiwan's few remaining allies made it a habit to express their support for Taiwan's participation in the WHA debates. However, as they are not only shrinking in number but also in influence, Taiwan needs to convince other, like-minded countries of their duty to back its claim. However, China's growing economic and political power shows itself not only in state-to-state relations, but also increasingly in international organizations such as the WHO, which we will explore in the next section.

5.2 Taiwan and the WHO: Inclusion as means to an end?

⁴ Report by Jaushieh Joseph Wu, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of China (Taiwan), at the Foreign and National Defense Committee of the Legislative Yuan on September 28, 2020.

⁵¹⁵ Interview with a Taiwanese diplomat on March 30th, 2020.

Taiwan's bid to join the WHO is in no way new. Already in 1997, Taipei started to argue for its inclusion in the international health mechanism on humanitarian and scientific grounds. The organization was seen as "a way in" to the setting of functional intergovernmental organizations that deal with vital needs of the Taiwanese population (Chen: 2018). This way, the country would have a reason to regain some legitimacy as a sovereign state on the international scene, and ultimately have a stronger bid for inclusion in the realm of the international network of states that is the United Nations. After repeatedly being denied from the WHO, Taipei changed its approach to seek WHA observer status, which actors such as the Holy See, Palestine, or the International Committee of the Red Cross also have. This way, the WHO did not have to decide on Taiwan's statehood and might be more open to its inclusion. After the SARS pandemic, Taiwan's approach to the WHO focused on the moral imperative to include the 23 million Taiwanese in the international health governance mechanism. Showing itself as a victim of international exclusion, it deplored the lack of information and assistance from the organization on political grounds and accused China of interference.

With Taiwan having a more enticing moral argument after the SARS epidemic, China proceeded to take action in order to underline the "One-China principle" in the institution. One interviewed high-ranking Taiwanese diplomat remembers that in May 2005, China signed a secret Memorandum of Understanding with the WHO setting the conditions for Taiwan's participation in the organization's activities: first, if granted participation, Taiwan must do so under the name "Taiwan, Province of China" in respect of the One-China principle and second, its invitation depends on China's prior approval. The Taiwanese government, unsurprisingly, entirely disapproves of this policy, with the argument that "international organizations should not be a place for [China's] political games [...], especially when it comes to health, human rights or climate and environment issues"⁶, as this lacks professionalism in a functional multilateral organ.

After the warming up of cross-strait relations under KMT president Ma Ying-jeou, in 2009, Taiwan was finally invited to join the WHA as an observer under the name "Chinese Taipei". However, this invitation also came 'with strings attached': Taipei had to apply to every

⁶ Interview with a Taiwanese diplomat on March 30th, 2020.

technical meeting separately, and out of its 187 applications, Beijing still vetoed 130 of them⁷. Since 2017, after Tsai Ing-wen got elected and cross-strait relations came to a new low, no invitation has been extended to let Taiwanese experts join the meetings despite growing international advocacy for their inclusion. This led the Tsai government to deploy a heavy diplomacy strategy around this issue.

Invitations to WHA meetings have to be granted by the WHO Director-General. In 2017, the PRC actively supported Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus' accession to this position. Then, Dr. Tedros signed a Memorandum of Understanding which supports China's Belt and Road Initiative and praised Xi Jinping's proposal to initiate a "medical silk road" while visiting Beijing.⁸ Under this Chinese influence, which has already been deplored multiple times by the United States government, the WHO is critical of Taiwan at best and ignores its sovereign existence at worst. At the onset of the pandemic, the WHO was quick to openly criticize Taiwan for barring flights arriving from Wuhan. Later, on March 29th, 2020, Bruce Aylward, former WHO Assistant Director-General and now senior WHO adviser, plainly dodged a journalist's question about reconsidering Taiwan's membership in light of its successful COVID-management, and when pressed about, simply ended the interview. Taiwan's Minister of Foreign Affairs Joseph Wu shared the clip of the interview with the caption "Wow, can't even utter "Taiwan" in the WHO? You should set politics aside in dealing with a pandemic." The incident and the responses it sparked demonstrate the heightened tensions between Taiwan and the WHO. What's more is that the WHO lists Taiwan's case numbers under China, thereby undermining and misrepresenting Taiwan's success in the COVID-battle.

To highlight these WHO issues, the Taipei Representative Office in Brussels, in conjunction with several other Offices around Europe, organized an event called "Walk with Taiwan" in 2018 and 2019. This march is led by the Office in Brussels because it specifically targets the "Brussels bubble"⁹ of EU diplomats and foreign policymakers. The campaign is timed around the WHA in May in order to raise awareness of Beijing's "sabotage" of Taiwan's

⁷ Ellington, L., Melnik, J., and Shattuck, T. (2021). "Taiwan and COVID-19: Global Pressure, Domestic Success", in Kenley, D. (ed.). *Teaching About Asia in a Time of Pandemic*. Association for Asian Studies.

⁸ *Idem*.

⁹ Interview with a Taiwanese diplomat on March 30th, 2020.

participation in any UN specialized agency, according to the Taiwanese diplomat. Notably, while the event is supposed to be a show of support for Taiwan's WHO inclusion, its main message is "Support Taiwan, Support Democracy". This shows that even though Taiwan officially emphasizes that politics should not interfere with public health, its WHO campaign is closely linked to cross-strait politics as Taiwan wants its political system to openly stand apart from the Chinese one.

Furthermore, Yen (2020: 458) notes that according to scientific research, countries that find themselves excluded from international organizations act in a more cautious and responsible way when affronted with a crisis. This fact, among others, shows that the systemic factor of Taiwan's exclusion from the WHO played a direct role in its domestic COVID-19 policies. Moreover, its exclusion is one of the main reasons for Taiwan to roll out an extensive public diplomacy around its health management. In fact, not granting observer status to a government that eliminated the COVID-crisis most effectively while the rest of the world was struggling reveals the absurdity of power politics in functional international organizations. In order to put pressure on the WHO to include Taiwan's experts in its meetings, Taiwan is in need to make its voice heard. However, this attempt is seriously hampered by the island's consistent lack of visibility in the realms of international politics and media. Thus, Taiwan's bid to the WHO seems to play directly into the issue of visibility, and *vice versa*.

5.3 Taiwan's visibility: the ultimate goal?

Due to China's diplomatic pressure on both Taiwan and third countries, Taiwan considerably lacks participation and thus visibility on the international scene. As one high-ranking Taiwanese diplomat during the Chen Shui-bian administration (2004 – 2008) confirms in our interview, Taiwan wants to integrate the WHO under the general objective to increase its visibility: "Taiwan is internationally isolated under Chinese pressure, and so international visibility, international participation is important"¹⁰. This segment shows that Taiwanese diplomacy practitioners closely link international participation to the issue of visibility, and the need for visibility to countering Taiwan's international isolation. Here, Alexander's

¹⁰ Interview with a high-ranking Taiwanese diplomat on June 14th, 2021.

(2020) stipulation comes to confirm that the Taiwanese government is *more* concerned with keeping the issue of Taiwan's diplomatic marginalization on the international agenda than actually being granted observer status at the World Health Assembly.

Indeed, Taiwan's successful COVID-management even with its exclusion from the global health mechanism shows that it does not strictly need the latter in order to have an efficient public health system. Researcher 4 confirms this theory: "To say that Taiwan really need[s] the WHO is not really true. Yes, it would be nice, but it's a very political kind of argument". Thus, there is a different reason behind Taiwan's yearly bid to integrate the WHO. It is interesting to highlight that even as Taiwan demands that the international organization does not put politics ahead of people's health or that it should not serve as a scene for political games, Taiwan seems to be doing exactly that. By continuously dragging the WHO issue, the government can both pose as a victim of Chinese pressure and international exclusion and put this image into the foreground year after year. Thus, while visibility increases Taiwan's bid to integrate the WHO, the opposite is also true.

To tackle Taiwan's lack of visibility, the Tsai government has become proactive in its public diplomacy. Since 2017, it has established Facebook and Instagram pages for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on which it posts content regularly. Minister of Foreign Affairs Joseph Wu always includes current statistics on the number of followers in the remarks on his country's diplomacy, which he uses to showcase that his ministry is efficiently raising Taiwan's international visibility and "taking proactive steps to make [its] voice heard internationally"¹¹. Tsai Ing-wen, for her part, is also known to be a vocal leader on her various social media accounts.

Of course, Taiwan seeks visibility for its positive aspects. In the context of the pandemic, it aspires to be seen as a moral actor worthy of status and international integration. Thus, MoFA embraced the "Taiwan Model" not only for its own successful COVID-management, but also in the hope to be a source of inspiration for other countries. Interviews in this context, always with the official goal of knowledge sharing, have thus to be viewed through the critical lens

¹¹ Report by Jaushieh Joseph Wu, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of China (Taiwan), at the Foreign and National Defense Committee of the Legislative Yuan on September 28, 2020.

of public diplomacy. Soft power, as explained, depends on people's knowledge of a country's qualities. Thus, we can see visibility, a step toward increased soft power, as the ultimate goal of Taiwan's public diplomacy around COVID-19.

Overall, the systemic factors of China's shrinking international credibility, Taiwan's increasing visibility during the pandemic, and its simultaneous complete exclusion from the WHO created a perfect moment for Taiwan to highlight its dilemma on the international scene. What is more, Alexander (2020: 49) points out that "an attempt to advocate the virtuosity of a state or government, through public diplomacy or other communications activities, is an attempt to frame the landscape of politics favourably towards one's power ambitions". Overall, we can see that the systemic factors coupled to Taiwan's timely and successful reaction to the COVID-pandemic created a favorable environment to push for inclusion in multilateral organs and especially the WHO, to pose as a stark contrast to the PRC, and to achieve its goal of more visibility – all of which are an attempt for Taiwan to overcome its international isolation.

6 Taiwan's democracy as a source of soft power

The domestic civil society played a crucial role not only in Taiwan's COVID-management but also for its public diplomacy. Rawnsley (2012: 122), who has been conducting extensive research on Taiwan's public diplomacy through interviews with Taiwan government officials, reveals that its institutions have "deliberately designed their strategies with one eye on the internal political environment". Today, Taiwan's domestic public is developing an increasingly pronounced Taiwanese identity, a fact that it wants to portray on the international scene. Therefore, Taiwan's intensive public diplomacy around COVID-19 is not only aimed at foreign publics, but also at the domestic one. Indeed, whether the DPP government can overcome the pandemic and thereby make the case for Taiwan to increase its international participation will inevitably influence the next electoral outcome. On the domestic front, the DPP's claim for power is enhanced by being the party's image for democratic deliberation, in opposition to the KMT's authoritarian past. The image of democracy coupled with transparency around the pandemic also gives Taiwan credit on the international front and

legitimizes its actions around mask diplomacy, which are all factors that increase Taiwan's international profile while lending it democratic credibility.

Taiwanese growing identity is not only made possible, but also reinforced through its political system. Overall, with two main parties, the incumbent DPP and the KMT, and a regular and peaceful transfer of power, Taiwan has proven itself to be a consolidated democracy. As such, Taiwan enjoys a high soft power capital, especially from a Western, European point of view: sharing with the EU the principles of democracy, rule of law, and human rights, it is seen as a “like-minded” partner for the Union¹². With the EU's goal to promote these values around the world, Taiwan can be seen as a role model for democratic transition in East Asia. This makes the EU more open to listening to Taiwan's plea, even as China tries to undermine the government's links with other countries and institutions.

Since the end of Taiwan's martial law era and its transition toward a full-fledged democracy, this political model has been the island's main selling point in the international arena. This is especially the case for the DPP governments: while Ma's KMT government focused more on its role as a preserver of traditional Chinese culture, the DPP doubles down on Taiwan's role as a beacon of democracy. In this value-based approach, the DPP puts Taiwan's freedom, rule of law, and respect for human rights in the foreground¹³. In 2019, Taiwan made international headlines as the first Asian country to allow same-sex marriage. After the Chinese crackdown on independent Hong Kong journalists in 2020, it also offered them safe harbor. Since 2017, Taipei even hosts the first Reporters Without Borders bureau in Asia. The NGO's Secretary-General Christophe Deloire justified this choice due to Taiwan being “the freest place in Asia” according to the organization's annual Press Freedom Index (Reporters Without Borders: 2017). Researcher 4 also explains that many critical China-based journalists who left the country because of the pandemic were not allowed to go back to China, and henceforth have focused more on Hong Kong and Taiwan. However, as a freelance journalist who lives in Taipei after being denied re-entry in China reports, “China is shooting itself in the foot by expelling lots of journalists” (Olcott: 2021). Indeed, on the island, journalists are more exposed to opinions that tend to be critical of the mainland. This, again, is a public

¹² Interview with a Taiwanese diplomat on March 30th, 2020.

¹³ *Idem*.

diplomacy win for the Tsai government, as it has the potential for long-term effects on international media coverage on Taiwan since many journalists permanently relocated there.

The island now enjoys the 11th most democratic regime in the world according to the 2020 Democracy Index ranking countries on the basis of electoral process and pluralism, government functioning, political participation, political culture, and civil liberties¹⁴. Here, in the span of one year, it jumped up 20 places in the global ranking – more than any other country this year. *The Economist* even titled Taiwan as 2020's "big winner", as it finally saw the consolidation of Taiwan's accession from the status of "flawed democracy" to "full democracy", alongside Japan and South Korea. This accession is particularly flagrant as 2020 witnessed a global decrease in democracy to "by far the worst global score since the index was first produced in 2006"¹⁵. As researcher 4 points out: "Taiwan could show that a part of Chinese society – let's call it a Chinese society, culturally – can become a democracy. COVID-19 just highlighted that Taiwan, even in times of crisis, can *stay* a democracy." As we see with the declining rates of democratic stability even in previously consolidated democracies, this is not a natural phenomenon but rather marks Taiwan as an exception.

Taiwanese officials have the habit of putting these values in sharp contrast to China's authoritarian rule over its population. Researcher 4 confirms that "in the current public diplomacy of Taiwan, they really emphasize that Taiwan is so different from China". This contrast also shows its relevance during the COVID-pandemic: Taiwan marked its uniqueness by keeping its democracy and civil liberties alive, all the while protecting its population from a deadly virus. Escaping a hard lockdown and sharing information with the public on a daily basis provided a counterweight to China's authoritarian and secretive pandemic management. In an interview with *Nikkei Asia*¹⁶, Natasha Kassam, a former Australian diplomat in Beijing, confirms that Taiwan has garnered so much international attention around COVID-19 not despite but precisely *because of* the contrast it provides to Beijing.

¹⁴ The Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2020*.

¹⁵ *Idem*.

¹⁶ Horton, C., Li, L., and Cheng, T. (2020). "Taiwan Counters China's Isolation Campaign with Mask Diplomacy", *Nikkei Asia*, 23/04/2020.

7 Conclusion

“Taiwan is engaged in a fierce verbal attack against the PRC, blaming the Chinese government for keeping quiet about the disease for too long, and for keeping Taiwan outside the World Health Organisation”. While these words were written by Gary Rawnsley (2003: 11) after the 2003 SARS epidemic, they keep their validity 18 years later. Indeed, Taiwan’s public diplomacy has long focused on its victimhood vis-à-vis China and the wider multilateral system. However, during the COVID pandemic, we have seen that Taiwan is slowly changing its public diplomacy message from victim to agent, mainly through the image of the “Taiwan model” of knowledge sharing and mask diplomacy. Still, instead of only highlighting its strong suits and trusting that their positive aspects can stand alone, Taiwan’s officials have the habit of falling back on the China-Taiwan dichotomy.

When Winston Churchill was working on the ambitious project of forming what would eventually become the United Nations, he said: “Never let a good crisis go to waste”. In the same vein, Taiwan turned the context of the COVID-crisis into a political and diplomatic opportunity. First, the context of the pandemic made the target public receptive to the “Taiwan Can Help” campaign of sharing the insights of the Taiwan model. Repeating this message loaded with the emotional content of being both a victim and a success story makes for an efficient public diplomacy output that has the potential to turn into a significant soft power domain. This makes the context of the pandemic the time and the WHO the place for Taiwan to attempt to elevate its place on the international scene.

This paper aims to answer the question why Taiwan used public diplomacy around COVID-19 to advance its foreign policy goals in the European Union. While we confirmed that the systemic factors of Taiwan’s international exclusion in the WHO mechanism, its lack of visibility, and China’s pressure both on Taiwan and on third countries were the main reason for its public diplomacy strategy around COVID-19, we further established that these three factors are closely linked and pursue distinct goals. Indeed, we found that Taiwan seems to ultimately use its successful pandemic management to increase its visibility. This is meant to change foreign public opinion in a positive way that incites the international community to

support Taiwan's bid to the WHO. In turn, Taipei's bid to the WHO is also meant to increase its international visibility. Thus, we conclude that while accession to the WHO has been a long-term foreign policy goal for Taipei, it is not the main reason it used public diplomacy toward the European population. Rather, it used the COVID-crisis to forge a positive public opinion through public diplomacy which is meant to help it overcome its international isolation by putting the topic on the agenda.

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