

## Public Opinion, Policy Responses, and Party Politics under the COVID-19 Pandemic: Examining Taiwan and Its Strategic Neighbors

Edited by Chia-hung Tsai and Yao-Yuan Yeh. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2024. xviii + 304 pp. £85.00 (hbk). ISBN 9781666940978

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Taiwan was one of the world's most successful countries at coping with the COVID-19 pandemic. It was able to keep cases to a minimum from 2020 until mid-2021, by which time most of the population had been vaccinated. Moreover, its success in controlling the virus allowed Taiwan to avoid the economically damaging lockdowns seen in most European countries. In other words, together with New Zealand, Taiwan was one of the few countries in the world to get the right balance between protecting the health of its population and economic growth.

Considering Taiwan's remarkable handling of the pandemic, it is not surprising that it has attracted extensive policy and academic attention. *Public Opinion, Policy Responses and Party Politics under the COVID-19 Pandemic: Examining Taiwan and its Strategic Neighbours*, edited by Chia-hung Tsai and Yao-Yuan Yeh, represents an important contribution to understanding Taiwan's success and challenges in dealing with this pandemic. Their book has some overlap with another outstanding edited volume, *Taiwan's COVID-19 Experience: Governance, Governmentality, and the Global Pandemic* (Routledge), edited by Ming-Cheng M. Lo, Yu-Yueh Tsai and Michael Shiyung Liu, which was also published in 2024.

Several ingredients make the book under review distinct and worth reading. While the Lo, Tsai and Liu volume adopts a multi-disciplinary approach, the chapters in this book examine the Taiwan case through the lens of comparative politics and international relations. Additionally, the latter part of the book sheds light on the politics of COVID-19 in a range of Taiwan's strategic neighbours, including chapters on China, Japan, Australia and New Zealand. These chapters prompt the reader to think comparatively about how Taiwan fared in this challenging period.

The seven Taiwan-centred chapters paint a vivid picture of key trends in public opinion and party politics between early 2020 and mid-2021. The majority rely on public opinion polling data and attempt to answer one or two core questions. For instance, the chapter by Dennis L. C. Weng, Chia-hung Tsai and Katherine Chen examines the relationship between partisan identity and vaccine hesitancy. I especially enjoyed the mix of qualitative analysis and survey data in Nathan F. Batto's chapter on the "Role of the partisan opposition." This chapter first unpacks the changing strategies the largest opposition party, the Kuomintang (KMT), adopted to attack the ruling Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP) COVID-19 policies. Then it examines survey data to show how such negative campaigning led to distinct patterns among partisans regarding whether to be vaccinated and which vaccine to select.

The final four chapters consider the COVID-19 politics in four of Taiwan's strategic neighbours, namely China, Japan, Australia and New Zealand. It might have been useful to have also added a South Korea chapter, as it is the case most often compared to Taiwan, due to similarities in their democratic histories. The chapters on Japan and New Zealand tie in especially well with the earlier focus on party politics and public opinion in most of the Taiwan chapters. However, I felt that these comparative lessons needed to be highlighted for the reader.

The editors have gathered an outstanding collection of articles on the politics of COVID-19, but there were several possible improvements that could have made this an even better edited volume.



Firstly, I thought it needed a stronger introductory chapter that set out and elaborated on the key themes that would hold the volume together. Instead, the introduction was far too short, diving into the chapter overview after just two and a half pages. Also, the book read like a collection of eleven excellent research papers, but they needed to be more closely connected, perhaps through cross-referencing chapters. Another strategy might have been to bring the threads together by adding a concluding comparative chapter.

A constant academic challenge is that publications need to go through the time-consuming peer review process. But considering the Taiwan experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, I could not help thinking that this volume might have been even stronger if the editors had allowed the authors a little more space for updating. In other words, rather than mid-to-late 2021, a better cut off point might have been the end of 2022. This would have provided two advantages. First, Taiwan finally lifted its quarantine border entry requirements in late 2022, as it transitioned from trying to control the virus to living with COVID-19. Second, Taiwan held extensive local elections in November 2022. The inclusion of these elections would have presented opportunities for comparative analysis with the elections during COVID-19 discussed in the Japan and New Zealand chapters. The November 2022 elections represent an important case to test the relationship between public opinion and party politics in Taiwan. The opposition KMT made COVID-19 policies one of its central appeals, attacking the DPP government for alleged failures in its vaccine policies. In contrast, the DPP tried to campaign on what it framed as one of the world's most successful handling of COVID-19, something highlighted by it nominating the architect of its COVID-19 policies, the former health minister Chen Shih-chung, as its candidate for Taipei mayor. While New Zealand and Taiwan are often touted as the world's COVID-19 policy success stories, the electoral verdicts were quite different. The chapter by Alexander C. Tan and Neel Vanvari shows how New Zealand's voters rewarded Labour with an unprecedented national parliamentary majority in 2020. In contrast, Taiwan's ruling DPP suffered disastrous local election setbacks in November 2022.

Despite these reservations, this volume provides an important contribution to our understanding of the politics of COVID-19 in Taiwan and its neighbours, and it shows some of the challenges but also advantages that democracies had in dealing with this unprecedented public health crisis.

doi:10.1017/S030574102400081X

## Sparks: China's Underground Historians and Their Battle for the Future

Ian Johnson. London: Penguin, 2023. 400 pp. £25.00. ISBN 9780241524947

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Ian Johnson has tapped into the wealth of interviews and reports from his 20-year stint as a journalist in China to compile his book on "China's underground historians and their battle for the future." The title, *Sparks*, refers to the optimistic prediction made by Mao Zedong in 1930 that, in the political situation of the time, "a single spark could start a prairie fire." That prophecy, borrowed from a traditional expression, did not materialize, but was used again in 1960 by a group of intellectuals who hoped to change the political situation by revealing in an underground journal