Re-Reading Taiwan's Pandemic Through the Lens of Civil Society Engagement

A Review of Taiwan's Covid-19 Experience: Governance, Governmentality, and The Global Pandemic

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Abstract: This article reviews Taiwan's COVID-19 Experience: Governance, Governmentality, and the Global Pandemic (Routledge, 2024). It highlights how the volume's analysis of governance, governmentality, and the emergence of a "public-health state" is strengthened - and at times problematised - when placed in dialogue with civil-society perspectives gathered from relevant stakeholders. Drawing on the ODCSE methodology (Systematic, Ongoing, Direct Civil Society Engagement), the article shows that civil society functions not merely as a compliance partner but as a potential co-producer of knowledge and accountability. Taiwan's unique geopolitical position outside the UN human-rights system further shaped its reliance on rights-based justifications and the limits of external oversight. The article argues that participatory, civil-society-centred approaches can play an important role in evaluating rights-restrictive measures adopted during public-health emergencies.

Keywords: Human Rights Justifications; Civil Society Engagement; Taiwan; Governance; Governmentality; COVID

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1. Introduction[1]

Taiwan's COVID-19 Experience. Governance, Governmentality, and the Global Pandemic, co-edited by Ming-Cheng M. Lo, Yu-Yueh Tsai, and Michael Shiyung Liu (2024), is one of the most recent sophisticated and analytically rich examinations of Taiwan's pandemic response.

Taiwan's response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been described as "abnormally normal" (Ka-Ki Ho, 2024, p. 97), a phrase signalling the absence of mass outbreaks, nationwide lockdowns, or visible state–society conflict - developments that sharply contrasted with those observed in many Western countries. Taiwan's governance trajectory must be understood in light of its multilayered historical and political legacies, including its Japanese colonial past, the Kuomintang (KMT) authoritarian regime, and its later democratisation. These legacies have shaped a hybrid governance culture that combines bureaucratic efficiency (Clark, 2000), technocratic rationality (Lee, 2021), and vibrant civil society activism (Hendrix, 2025).

The Volume *Taiwan's COVID-19 Experience. Governance, Governmentality, and the Global Pandemic* situates Taiwan's pandemic governance in this unique socio-political context. The editors argue that Taiwan's experience can be understood through the dual lenses of *governance* and *governmentality*. As explained by the editors, "[t]he notion of governance serves to frame COVID policies as informed by the legal bureaucratic authority institutionalized in the state and consolidated through civil society, with debates centering on what counts as rational state action. […] In contrast, the concept of governmentality sensitizes us to how, during the pandemic, new categories of health risks and medical needs were constructed by the state and internalized by its citizenry. […] In very broad terms, discussions of pandemic governance generally focus on whether, and how, the state effectively and justly provides protection for its citizens' lives and livelihood, whereas writings on pandemic governmentality analyze how such state protection can be accompanied by subtle forms of repression" (Lo, 2024, p. 2).

The Introduction emphasises the fragility of Taiwan's "solidarity-to-come," a term highlighting that civic unity - although powerful in the early phase of the pandemic – has been constantly vulnerable to political polarisation, disinformation, social hierarchies, and structural inequalities (Lee, 2025).

This article places the Volume's insights in dialogue with the methodology developed within the HRJust project, demonstrating how civil-society perspectives can both enrich and complicate the conceptual framework of governance and governmentality developed in the book.

2. Governance, Governmentality, and the Taiwanese Context

The edited volume's central analytical move is to reject the widespread but simplistic interpretation of Taiwan's COVID-19 response as an expression of East Asian "collectivist" culture and society (Lo, 2024, p. 6). Instead, the authors (with backgrounds in law, sociology, information science, and political science) emphasise that Taiwan's pandemic governance emerged from a combination of factors, including the bureaucratic legacies of Japanese colonialism, the authoritarian techniques of the Kuomintang era, Taiwan's comparatively young but vibrant democratic institutions, a dense, highly participatory civil society, and the geopolitically tense relationship with China.

These historical and social layers produced what has been labelled as a form of "abnormally normal" governance: neither authoritarian nor fully liberal, neither centrally coercive nor purely participatory. Governmentality allows the authors to conceptualise how digital infrastructures (e.g., cell-tower tracking, database integration, SMS check-ins, electronic quarantine monitoring) became *technologies of rule*, embedding the pandemic within existing logics of population management and risk classification. In particular, the Chapter by Shun-Ling Chen and Yu-Ling Huang argues that digital pandemic control measures facilitated the emergence of a so-called public health state, with "prioritization of public health administration […] during the pandemic" (Chen & Huang, 2024, p. 92).

This conceptualisation aligns closely with the HRJust project's interest in human rights justifications, i.e. the ways in which governments deploy human-rights language to legitimise state policies, even when those measures restrict individual liberties (Cristani & Fornalé, 2025).

The next paragraphs offer a better understanding of the concept of public health state as described in the Volume.

3. Pandemic Governmentality and the Public Health State

The Chapter by Shun-Ling Chen and Yu-Ling Huang (2024) provides an extensive examination of Taiwan's digital surveillance tools, including the digital fencing system (based on cell-tower triangulation), the National Health Insurance (NHI) database integration with immigration and customs data (TechUK, 2020), and the SMS-CTS contact-tracing system.

These tools, the authors argue, became central to pandemic governance not merely as instruments of efficiency, but as techniques of governmentality that enabled the state to classify, monitor, and discipline populations; as the authors claim, "[e]mpowered by an unprecedented level of digital monitoring, the public health authority established a new social order during the pandemic" (Chen & Huang, 2024, p. 92).

The authors highlight how pandemic governance blurred boundaries between health administration and policing.

4. The Role of Civil Society: Which Engagement? The Importance of the ODCSE Methodology

The role of civil society (Pennino, 2025) in Taiwan, especially during the pandemic, has been well described in the book, and reveals the unique experience of the country, also when compared to other Western states. Indeed, as the editors highlight, the notion of governance has framed Taiwan's COVID-19 policies as the product of legal-bureaucratic authority that has been strengthened through sustained state-society interaction. Taiwan fits what has been labelled "embedded liberalism" with its "centralized and professional leadership, democratic and accountable political culture, vibrant civil society, and broad social participation" (Yeh & Cheng, 2024, p. 57).

Since democratisation in the 1990s, social movements and civic mobilisations have generated a cultural expectation that the state must respond to citizens' needs. This reciprocal dynamic - citizens demanding action and the government being pressured to deliver - has reinforced institutional trust and enabled collective action during

crises. As noted in the book, "while many countries have seen rising trends in anti-establishments and social polarization in many aspects, the case in Taiwan shows that an accountable government could boost social trust in institutions, making citizens stand together despite their differences to engage with the common dangers" (Yeh & Cheng, 2024, p. 52).

This tradition of state–society engagement has shaped public-health governance. Taiwan's civil society came together temporarily at the start of the pandemic around a temporary discourse of mutual protection - mask wearing, distancing, and adherence to safety measures - reflecting a shared belief in civic interdependence. Taiwan's "prosociality" thus stems from democratic accountability and institutional responsiveness. Importantly, accountability and public participation are mutually reinforcing: good governance requires active citizen engagement in monitoring the state and expressing diverse perspectives (Lo, 2024).

At the same time, Taiwan is not free from fragmentation, misinformation, or populism. The 2021 outbreak indeed saw these dynamics mobilised by opposition forces to challenge the government with unsubstantiated allegations over vaccine procurement. Such developments remind us that Taiwan's pandemic governance reflects both the strengths of its liberal-democratic institutions and the vulnerabilities of an immature welfare system and contested political environment. While state protection played a crucial role in enabling effective pandemic response, scholars caution that such protective capacities can also carry repressive potential (Lo, 2024).

The HRJust project addresses this gap through the proposed development of the ODCSE (Systematic, Ongoing, Direct Civil Society Engagement) methodology. ODCSE provides a structured framework for integrating civil society into research on human-rights justifications, combining top-down and bottom-up dynamics (Cristani & Fornalé, 2025). At its core, the methodology brings together the strengths of normative analysis and fieldwork by involving civil society iteratively in both generating and testing the project's findings.

The ODCSE approach rests on four conceptual pillars. *Systematic planning* ensures that engagement with civil society is not *ad hoc*, but it is built into the project from the outset through a sequenced and intentional design. *Ongoing engagement* requires civil society involvement throughout the entire research process, rather than through isolated consultations. *Direct participation* emphasises real-time interactions between researchers and civil-society actors, enabling mutual learning and trust. Finally, *co-production of knowledge* ensures that research outputs - analyses, conceptual frameworks, or policy recommendations - are shaped jointly by academic

inquiry and civil-society contributions. Co-production blurs the conventional boundary between "researcher" and "research subject": civil-society participants should be able to recognise their own terminology, concerns, and proposals in the project's findings.

These four pillars distinguish ODCSE from conventional legal or human-rights research methodologies. The approach aligns with emerging paradigms of participatory action research and "living laboratories," in which stakeholders contribute to continuous observation, validation, and refinement of knowledge. This orientation resonates with broader developments in governance and development studies, where meaningful civil-society participation is increasingly recognised as essential for legitimacy, accountability, and effectiveness.

Applied to *Taiwan's pandemic context*, the ODCSE methodology brings into view several dimensions of governance that the Volume does not fully address. Civil-society perspectives do not remain static; they evolved over time as public understanding of digital tools, quarantine practices, and administrative discretion deepened. Civil society is not merely a passive recipient of state policies but can serve as an active co-author of accountability.

A key contribution of the HRJust project is that civil society functions not only as a beneficiary or critic of pandemic governance, but as a potential co-producer of knowledge. If we consider the application of ODCSE to the pandemic analysis, as in this case, civil-society narratives surface the hidden social and rights-related costs of digital governmentality, and participatory methods of analysis of the government´s measure uncover inconsistencies in enforcement, and potential gaps in transparency.

This understanding advances two points that have been only hinted at in the Volume. First, it shifts the analytical frame from civil society as a policy target to civil society as an agent capable of shaping how governance is understood and evaluated. Second, it highlights the internal plurality of Taiwanese civil society, whose diverse actors bring different forms of expertise, contestation, and lived experience to the assessment of state policies.

5. Concluding Remarks

Taiwan's COVID-19 Experience. Governance, Governmentality, and the Global Pandemic is a significant scholarly contribution. The volume excels in its nuanced reconstruction of Taiwan's pandemic trajectory, framing the response through the

dual lenses of governance and governmentality and situating these dynamics within Taiwan's broader political and institutional history and social environment. These strengths make the book an essential reference for understanding how the Taiwanese state mobilised administrative capacity, technical expertise, and public trust in navigating a prolonged public-health crisis.

Placed in dialogue with the ODCSE methodology developed within the framework of the HRJust project, the volume's arguments can become richer and more nuanced.

Future research on pandemic governance can therefore consider integrating participatory, and iterative methodologies such as the ODCSE methodology. By incorporating diverse civil-society experiences and scrutinising the human-rights justifications deployed by states can scholars and policymakers produce a normative evaluation of crisis governance grounded in both democratic legitimacy and robust human-rights protection.

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