John J. Tkacik, Jr. On Taiwan: Taiwan's place on the coronavirus map
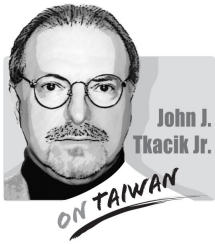
Written by John J. Tkacik, Jr.
Monday, 23 March 2020 06:56

Swirling within the cybersphere's vast ocean of reports, statistics and graphs about the international coronavirus pandemic, there is a short sentence out there in the worldwide web, which the Chinese government doesn't want people to notice. It is on the Johns Hopkins University website "https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html" which houses the popular "live map" of Wuhan coronavirus disease-2019 (COVID-19) data from individual countries.

That sentence reads: "The map's names of locations correspond with the official designations used by the US State Department, including for Taiwan." Most readers may think this merely is an unremarkable footnote, akin to other source data on the site. But it is not.

The Johns Hopkins "live map" first went "live" as a Covid-19 data-spotter on January 12, the day after the World Health Organization reported the first confirmed cases outside China. By the end of January, it was getting 200 million hits a day. A Johns Hopkins engineering professor assembled the map's dashboard, and a Chinese doctoral student, Ensheng Dong (董恩盛), took over as the map's webmaster. It is an ambitious project; Mr. Dong and a fellow grad student, Du Hongru (杜鸿儒), envision the map tracking individual Covid-19 patients around the world right down to their street addresses (with due care for privacy, of course).

Unsurprisingly, these young Chinese graduate students at Johns Hopkins adopted a "Country/Region/Sovereignty" naming scheme used by the World Health Organization for Taiwan; "Taipei and its environs."

This not only was an insult to Taiwan, but it was also wholly inaccurate and unhelpful to public health professionals who need solid data on how Taiwan has managed the epidemic so well. The JHU map lumped Taiwan's numbers together with China's, and consequently buried some

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extremely important epidemiological data. Moreover, China's own diagnosis and management of the disease were suboptimal at the onset of the epidemic, and as a result, Wuhan pneumonia has easily spread to the rest of the world resulting in a total of over 200,000 cases and 9,000 deaths worldwide beyond China. By contrast, Taiwan has reported 169 cases since December 31, 2019, 28 recoveries, and two deaths.

A concerned citizen in Washington, D.C., (full disclosure: it was not me), asked Johns Hopkins why their map was so useless to researchers who need to follow Taiwan. But getting the run-around from JHU, the aforesaid "concerned citizen" phoned colleagues at the US State Department to remind them of President Trump's ukase against "Orwellian Nonsense." "Taipei and its environs" was "Orwellian Nonsense" in its purest form. Happily, the State Department was very responsive, and seemed pleased for a chance to set the matter straight. State called JHU and, after a friendly conversation, "Taiwan*" was restored in all its ambiguous glory to the JHU map — with an asterisk.

The JHU "live map" website, which by March 9 was getting over a billion worldwide page-views daily, now explains clearly (and in a way that hopefully prevents Mr. Dong Ensheng from getting in trouble with the Chinese Embassy) that the name "Taipei and its environs" was used initially to be in conformity with the WHO's list, but that the names "now correspond with the official designations used by the U.S. State Department, including for Taiwan."

Sadly, the State Department's website remains noncommittal on the subject of Taiwan. There, among the official roll of "Independent States in the World," is "Taiwan*". Alas, not under the "Ts," but with an asterisk at the end of the alphabet way down below the "Zs" [https://www.state.gov/independent-states-in-the-world/] and has the disclaimer that Taiwan is "…Claimed by both the Government of the People's Republic of China and the authorities on Taiwan. Administered by the authorities on Taiwan..."

However, as regular readers of the Taipei Times know, for the past year, the State Department has encouraged countries that maintain diplomatic ties with Taiwan to keep them, while prodding countries that have recently broken ties with Taipei to reinstate them.

And for good reasons; one of which is "public health." The coronavirus "tsunami" now engulfing the globe is due, largely, to China's irresponsible secrecy and denial, and partly to China's overlarge influence in the World Health Organization, which meekly and obediently follows China's instructions rather than the advice of its own epidemiologists.

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The matter of "Taiwan" now draws global health attention because Taiwan has kept its epidemic under control. Against all odds, Taiwan has successfully contained its persistent, but still small, Wuhan pneumonia (coronavirus) outbreak despite disembarking two to three flights daily from Wuhan prior to January 23 and repatriating hundreds of Taiwanese citizens resident in Hubei province. As of today, Taiwan has counted 169 confirmed cases of Covid-19, 28 of which have recovered and two deaths. These numbers compare favorably to my own state of Virginia, where, yesterday, there were 156 confirmed cases, no recoveries and two deaths in a period of two weeks!

This past week, the Wall Street Journal, the New York Times, Time and Forbes magazine, and a number of other American newspapers, have remarked on Taiwan's exemplary management of the epidemic and have suggested that America's public health leadership should learn from Taiwan. While Taiwan's compact geographic area is an advantage, its population density is a complicating factor.

Taiwan's sophisticated public health insurance network, household registry and national identification system, and its excellent immigration management all have reliable and up-to-date databases. But America's public health managers would learn the most from Taiwan's database scientists.

A study in February by doctors at Stanford University reports that computer wizards in Taiwan's government, in one day, coded software to seamlessly integrate public health databases with border controls and national registries. Even more amazing, the study reported, was the software integration of SMS messages via commercial network mobile phones with QR codes sent to individual telephone handsets, and enabled private mobile phones to signal their geographic location to the government's epidemic control center. This software interface was compiled in 72 hours. Taiwan's wireless phone networks can message users about the epidemic, keep track of aggregations of movement, and warn when urban crowds are in danger of forming a critical mass for disease transmission.

Such technical and cyber software coding is possible in societies possessing advanced telecommunications and data network infrastructures, like Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Singapore certainly achieved full contagion control even earlier than Taiwan. China, on the other hand, has a long and infamous history of monitoring, surveilling and controlling the Chinese population's political expression through its mobile phone networks but for some reason hasn't sharpened internet or telecommunications networks' public health potential. So,

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Messrs. Dong's and Du's vision of their JHU map database accessing Taiwan's health data, together with Japan's, Korea's, Singapore's, and Hong Kong's, is not far-fetched.

Nonetheless, China seems unhappy with the Johns Hopkins "Coronavirus COVID-19 Map." On March 9, the day that JHU changed its Taiwan listing, hackers somewhere in the "dark web" replicated the JHU map (and all its data functionality), and modified hundreds of lines of code to upload data exfiltration viruses and keystroke logs to unsuspecting users' machines. Within a few days, the US Department of Health and Human Services sent memos to all large American health care and insurance companies warning them that "a malicious website pretending to be the live map for Coronavirus COVID-19 Global Cases by Johns Hopkins University is circulating on the internet waiting for unwitting internet users to visit the website."

Unfortunately, this US government memo didn't mention that there was a real, genuine Johns Hopkins live map that was perfectly secure. My own sister, a data analyst for a major health care provider in Oakland, California, sent me a frantic email warning me not to visit the Johns Hopkins Covid-19 map website. Possessing a deeply suspicious mind, I now assume that "someone" assembled the "malicious" website more to discourage visits to the JHU map than to upload Trojan software.

I also assume that "someone" was an employee of the Chinese government.

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