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Milk Tea Alliance 2.0: Towards greater political leverage and civic awareness?

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Foreword

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On April 8, 2021, in celebration of Milk Tea Alliance's first anniversary, Twitter Public Policy announced that they are "launching an emoji for the #MilkTeaAlliance, an online solidarity alliance [...] led by activists and concerned citizens in Hong Kong, Thailand, Taiwan, Myanmar and around the world¹."

Over the past year, more than 11 millions Tweets featured the #MilkTeaAlliance hashtag, according to the official account. Like #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter, #MilkTeaAlliance has grown undoubtedly into a thriving bottom-up transnational initiative calling for democratic reform and social change.

The grassroots movement 'Milk Tea Alliance' was ignited initially due to Chinese netizens' attack against Thai actor Vachirawit Chivaaree and his girlfriend Nnevy in April 2020, accusing them of posting comments that implied Taiwan and Hong Kong were independent countries. (for more details, please read the previous paper of TSENG Ting-Hsuan "When online meme war transformed into a Pan-Asian Alliance: Milk Tea as shared identity of the Youth against authoritarianism")

The war was declared between Chinese and Thai fans on April 11. Within few hours, Taiwanese and Hongkongers joined forces with Thais against the Little Pink² as the topics swiftly turned into politics. Chinese trolls or Wumao³ insulted the Thai government and Royal family while netizens from Thailand, Hong Kong and Taiwan scoffed at the Chinese authoritarian regime and human rights violations with the hashtag 'Nnevy'.

This online war-of-words quickly spread to likeminded citizens from India, the Philippines, Malaysia, Myanmar and more, aiming at pushing back China's nationalism and dominance in the region. This anti-China front — named 'Milk Tea Alliance' by HK, Taiwan and Thai internet users as they all enjoy tea with milk whereas the Chinese prefer tea alone — has thereafter taken a wider turn and become a larger battle fending off authoritarianism and dictatorship.

The pro-democracy movement generated by young demographics played an important role during the unprecedented social movements in Thailand setting off in July 2020, where virtual solidarity transcended into real-life collaboration and rallies.

For example, 'Taiwan Alliance for Thai Democracy (TATD)' was formed in August 2020 by a group of Taiwanese and Thai students residing in Taiwan, aiming at supporting Thai people's pursuit of freedom and democracy.

After the stalled state of protests in Thailand due to Covid-19 outbreak, as well as arrests of key movement leaders, this on-line solidarity, — the first 'transnational geopolitical Twitter

¹ <https://twitter.com/Policy/status/1379982365380911104>

² A term used to described ignorant, easily brainwashed young Chinese nationalist, who are normally familiar with the internet.

³ As known as "50 cents", are internet worriers paid by the CCP to comment on the post about China and to promote Chinese communism/nationalism.



war’ — so described by Prajak Kongkirati, an assistant professor of Thammasat University⁴, did not die out as some might have expected.

Instead, due to the outburst of a military coup in Myanmar, the Milk Tea Alliance was reinvigorated and has been once again gaining momentum across Asia by pro-democracy advocates both in cyberspace and in the streets.

On the morning of February 1, 2021, the Tatmadaw, the official name of the armed forces of Myanmar, took over power and proclaimed a year-long state of emergency. Rejecting the victory of Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD) in last year’s general election, the junta arrested Suu Kyi and other leaders of her party.

Tens of thousands of peaceful pro-democracy protestors have taken to the streets demanding the junta to relinquish power and release the country’s civilian leaders. Nevertheless, demonstrations have been violently repressed by troops. By March 31, at least 500 people were killed; more than 140 civilians died on March 27 alone, making this year’s Armed Forces Day the worst bloodbath of the coup.

Facing fierce crackdowns on demonstrators, Myanmar’s anti-coup campaigners called for help from the international community via social media since mid-February, using the #MilkTeaAlliance hashtag to connect.

As a response, not only global rallies were held on the streets of Taipei, Bangkok, Hong Kong, Melbourne and New York, but also online protests were organized by activists in Indonesia and Malaysia during February and March — the whole ASEAN civil society joined the mobilization invitation.

Paul⁵, an exiled Hongkonger, took part in two rallies held in Liberty Square, Taipei. He told the author that more than a thousand participants from Myanmar, Hong Kong, Thailand, Tibet, Taiwan and more were gathered each time, where organizers emphasized repeatedly the presence of the members of the Milk Tea Alliance during events.

Meanwhile, tens of thousands ‘#MilkTeaAlliance’ were mobilized on Twitter, by both opinion leaders and active organisations such as Matthew Tostevin, Reuters’ Southeast Asia Editor, non-partisan grassroots organisation Hong Kong Liberty, May Toe Khine, a Burmese public figure with more than 130K followers and Civil Disobedience Movement, a vital pro-democracy platform in Myanmar with more than 100K followers. Ro Nay San Lwin, the cofounder of Free Rohingya Coalition and one of the most Retweeted Burmese activists, accompanies almost every post with the very hashtag.

It’s also noteworthy that, according to Ro Nay San Lwin, this military coup has in an unexpectedly way sparked the reconciliation and solidarity between ethnics groups in

⁴ « Insta-star wars: China tensions in Southeast Asia flare online », Reuters, April 14 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-china-internet/insta-star-wars-china-tensions-in-southeast-asia-flare-online-idUSKCN21W11P>

⁵ Name changed in order to protect identity.



Myanmar when the minorities started to mobilize to take part in this ‘Asian Spring Revolution’, a term often use by Milk Tea Alliance’s supporters.

Burmese ethnic minorities, including Rohingya, who have been long suppressed by the civilian government, are united unprecedentedly to fight against the military coup. Groups of Rohingya either take on the streets or show their solidarity by posting photos on social media. Burmese demonstrators also held cardboard expressing regrets and apologies regarding the minority crisis: “Dear Rohingyas, we now learn true colour of Tatmadaw in the BITTER way. How Ugly!”⁶

Numerous Tweeter accounts were created with the name of Milk Tea Alliance, some combined with Myanmar, exchanging the latest information and mutual support in regard to the fight against dictatorship in Myanmar and beyond, such as #MilkTeaAlliance⁷, Milk Tea Alliance Philippines⁸, Milk Tea Alliance Malaysia⁹, Milk Tea Alliance Myanmar¹⁰ and Milk Tea Alliance Myanmar (with Myanmar’s national flag)¹¹.

Some of them were launched in 2020, before the advent of the Coup d’État, which means that Myanmar activists didn’t wait until Tatmadaw’s seizure of power to join forces with the pan Asian pro-democracy movement. According to social media analytic tools, during a one-month period since March 3, #MilkTeaAlliance was mentioned 9.14 million times within all social media.

Erkin Azat, a Paris-based Kazakh journalist in exile for his reports on Uyghur concentration camps, expressed his strong support for the Milk Tea Alliance during an interview conducted by the author, “This movement has helped a lot in pushing forward Uyghur’s issue, because we are all, directly or indirectly, victims of the Chinese government. We shall thus collaborate to have a collective voice.”

The political refugee Paul uttered a similar observation, “Unlike protests in Hong Kong which made often headlines, Myanmar is a relatively underprivileged country in term of international influence. Therefore, with the mobilisation of other ASEAN citizens, they have more chance to gain more attention from the international community, thus to pressure the authoritarian regime.”

Even though each community/country has different political agenda at home, their fights against an authoritarian regime, whether it be CCP or regimes backed by CCP, resonate with one another. In other words, the ‘Milk Tea Alliance’ acts as a common thread and seeks to build up a pan-Asian pro-democracy coalition which now plays a consistent role in helping advocates throughout Asia mobilize.

⁶ <https://twitter.com/nslwin/status/1365973292528660482/photo/1>

⁷ <https://twitter.com/alliancemilktea>

⁸ https://twitter.com/mta_PH

⁹ <https://twitter.com/MYmilkteh>

¹⁰ https://twitter.com/Milktea_Myanmar

¹¹ https://twitter.com/MilkTeaMM_MTAM



Furthermore, the potential of the Alliance to widen perspectives and go beyond self-related issues is also affirmed by Erkin Azat: “It seems to me that Uyghur and Tibetan communities tend to stay within their own circles, but these issues are globally linked. ‘Milk Tea’ provides a starting point: to let South-easterners know more about XinJiang, and vice versa.”

In terms of its practical function, first of all, the hashtag serves as a mechanism that ties like-minded netizens and citizens together to optimize visibility, reach and engagement within social as well as traditional media. As a living and thriving example of media activism, #MilkTeaAlliance provides activists with a collective platform to report, investigate and spread first-hand information of what is happening during the pursuit of social and political movements, aiming at transforming the awakening of consciousness into actions.

Secondly, in view of the ever-changing socio-political contexts and spread of communication at the speed of light, today’s news is often tomorrow’s history. Facing this reality, #MilkTeaAlliance provides an affective instrument that interconnects all similar political claims. For instance, a Hong Kong pro-democracy netizen can tweet in support of Myanmar’s protests while linking struggles and on-going efforts at home. By doing so, issues that are more or less out of sight of the international community can be tied up together and mentioned as we talk about current events.

Moreover, social media have been enabling not only the formation of shared identity among the young generation but also mutual influence on protest tactics: from occupation movement in Taiwan’s Sunflower Revolution utilized in HK’s Occupy Central later on, to ‘Be Water’ strategy in HK then appropriated in Thai demonstrations, then to three-finger ‘Hunger Games’ salute first adopted by Thai activists which are later used by Myanmar citizens. That is to say, the #MilkTeaAlliance hashtag provides citizens access to manuals of each others’ protest tactics translated into their own languages.

However, some political realism believers might be doubtful about how much difference could this hashtag actually make. All in all, could the Milk Tea Alliance bring about eventually political change?

Thitinan Pongsudhirak, a professor of political science at Thailand’s Chulalongkorn University told DW that even though the movement will need stronger ‘leadership, coordination, and organization’ to further develop and persist, he holds hope on Milk Tea Alliance’s potential to “catch on as a significant political force across Asia as the younger generations grow up and have more means to carry on political activities.”¹²

Paul refuted also such a question within the interview, “Whoever say this, they are only looking from a macro perspective and forget about the micro level. Looking from a micro perspective, we are all independent individuals; if we don’t start from each individual, no change could be achieved.”

¹² « Asia's 'Milk Tea' activists give cross-border support for democratic change », DW, March 8, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/asias-milk-tea-activists-give-cross-border-support-for-democratic-change/a-56806229>



In sum, the Milk Tea Alliance is now transforming solidarity, mutual support and collective voice into greater political leverage for transnational pro-democracy citizens to stand up against authoritarian regimes.

More important, the Milk Tea Alliance can be seen as a large scale mobilization of social/civic awakening, just as Paul concluded, “With the help of Milk Tea Alliance, we are now able to change political indifference by raising our civic consciousness.”



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