

# Transnational Youth Activist Networks in Asia: The Evolution and Dynamics of the Milk Tea Alliance

Tuwanont Phattharathanasut  
Waseda University, Japan

**Abstract** This study examines the development and dynamics of transnational youth activism in Asia, focusing on the case of the Milk Tea Alliance (MTA). It addresses two research questions: “How did it emerge?” and “How has it continued until today?”. Through interviews with 50 activists across Asia, the study argues that the MTA networks were developed and nurtured over many years, rather than being solely facilitated by digital communication technologies. The study identifies two key networks: the triangular network among Hongkonger, Taiwanese, and Thai youth activists, and the Network of Young Democratic Asians (NOYDA). While the triangular network was crucial in the early days, the NOYDA network became a key actor after the 2021 military coup in Myanmar. By using network analysis and a transnational historical approach, the study provides a more nuanced explanation of the recent wave of youth and student political activism in Asia. It also highlights the grassroots interconnectedness between East and Southeast Asia in the contemporary period.

**Keywords** Milk Tea Alliance. Transnationalism. Youth activism. Protest. Asia. Social Network theory.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Building a Transnational Youth Network in Asia. – 2.1 The Triangular Network Between Hongkonger, Taiwanese, and Thai Activists. – 2.2 The Network of Young Democratic Asians (NOYDA). – 3 The Role of the Personal Triangle Network in the Dawn of the Milk Tea Alliance. – 4 From the NOYDA Network to the Milk Tea Alliance of Myanmar. – 5 Conclusion.



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## 1 Introduction

The meme war between Thai and pro-Chinese Communist Party (CCP) netizens began on 4 April 2020, after Vachirawit Chivaaree, known as Bright, a Thai celebrity who is famous in China due to his Boylove (BL) series, liked a tweet by a photographer named @Yamastdio, who tweeted a photo of Hong Kong and called it a 'country'. This action was perceived by many pro-CCP Internet commentators as a statement of support for Hong Kong's independence. Despite Bright's apology on 9 April, a new wave of Internet conflict had already been triggered. The pro-CCP netizens found the social media account of Bright's girlfriend and believed she had insulted China and abused the 'One China Principal' of the Beijing government by supporting the independence of Taiwan because she commented on her Instagram photo during her trip to Taiwan that she considered her fashion style similar to that of a Taiwanese rather than a Chinese girl (Salam 2022). The conflict quickly spread across Asia, where many netizens joined the Thais to fight against Chinese attacks. A few days later, they established a loose transnational coalition, namely the Milk Tea Alliance (MTA).

Starting from a meme war on social media, the MTA developed into a transnational youth-led coalition to promote democracy and expand its influence across Asia. From the streets of Taipei to Bangkok, Hong Kong, and beyond, the MTA has become a new political cultural symbol that youth and student activists have adopted to support each other's political struggles and causes.<sup>1</sup> Simultaneously, it has become a space for social movements in Asia to introduce and exchange protest symbols, cultures, tactics, strategies, as well as human rights and democratic experiences. This cross-border dynamic demonstrates that activists in Asia can cooperate with each other to promote human rights and democratic values in the region. It also

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**1** From 2019 to 2021, a series of mass demonstrations occurred across East and Southeast Asia. It began with the Anti-Extradition Law Movement in Hong Kong, followed by the Free Youth Movement in Thailand, and the Spring Revolution in Myanmar. These movements took place at different times and locations, but they all shared anti-authoritarian values and considered themselves as part of the MTA.

illustrates the flow of knowledge and action between and within East and Southeast Asia beyond economics (Shimizu 2010; Ba 2014) and pop culture (Siriyuvasak, Shin 2007; Baudinette 2023).

The purpose of this study is to explore and understand the development and dynamics of transnational youth activism in Asia by focusing on the case of the MTA. In particular, it tackles two key questions: “How did the MTA emerge?” and “How has it continued until today?”. To respond to these questions, I apply network theory, with the aim of moving beyond dominant narratives about the MTA to discover its hidden dynamics and relations (Krinsky, Crossley 2014, 1). In addition, I rely upon a transnational historical approach to analysis, allowing the capture of the long-term dynamics that extend beyond the nation-state (Iacobelli, Leary, Takahashi 2016). In doing so, this article illuminates the cross-border flows of activism that the MTA is grounded on, as well as the transnational connectivity that has united, over the years, individual activists throughout the region. Throughout, I approach the MTA as a transnational solidarity network with a flexible and open architecture, enabling it to accept members from diverse groups. This flexibility, it is argued, prevents any single entity from fully claiming ownership, and allows members to move in and out of the network dynamically.

Several studies in the literature have aimed to understand and discuss the recent youth collaboration and protest diffusion under the banner of the MTA,<sup>2</sup> with two main implications. First, they considered the MTA as an organic coalition that emerged suddenly as a component of the meme war. As noted by Kreutz and Makrogiani (2024, 1), “no reports that the transnational nature of the 2020 movement could have been facilitated by pre-existing networks of activists”. They also mentioned the failed physical connection between Hong Kong and Thai activists due to Joshua Wong’s restriction from entering Thailand in 2016 (Dedman, Lai 2021, 14-15). Second, most scholars mainly focused on and interpreted it based on virtual relationships and online behavior, such as an ‘imagined digital political community’ (Huang, Svetanant 2022) and ‘fandom war’ (Schaffar, Wongratanawin 2021). This would suggest that the main driver of international youth activism relied greatly on digital media rather than on face-to-face interaction.

However, these studies do not capture the entire complexity and multi-faceted nature of activism (Diani 2003, 1). While important, their focus on specific events or a singular aspect of the MTA’s characterization, such as digital space, might overlook providing the necessary context for, and the social dynamics of, its emergent features.

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**2** E.g. Dedman, Lai 2021; Schaffar, Wongratanawin 2021; Huang, Svetanant 2022; Wang, Rauchfleisch 2022.

In fact, the role of personal (as opposed to digital) relationships in the development of the MTA starts to become visible, with studies beginning to show the relevance of pre-existing personal connections between individual activists that facilitated the MTA's maturation (Teeratanabodee, Prommongkol 2023; Wasserstrom 2023; Phattharathanasut 2024), as well as the role of diaspora communities in supporting its further consolidation (Wang, Rauchfleisch 2022). Against this backdrop, I argue that the network approach needs to be applied less sectorially and more comprehensively to explore the connected events across time and space, link the patterns of interaction involving individuals, groups, and organizations, and understand how these relationships influenced the eventful moments. By examining activism over a longer time frame, this study seeks to do so, delving into transnational Asian youth political activism in depth, in order to offer nuanced insights. Additionally, it seeks to illuminate the grassroots interconnectedness between East and Southeast Asia during the contemporary period.

This study argues that the MTA phenomenon emerged and continued because of two pre-existing networks of transnational youth activists in Asia that had been developed and fertilized for many years, rather than spontaneously occurring because of netizens and fandom collaboration. The first pre-existing network was the triangular network among Hongkonger, Taiwanese, and Thai youth activists, which was an accumulation of individual ties. The second network was the Network of Young Democratic Asians (NOYDA), the pan-Asian youth coalition operating between 2016-17. These two networks were separate, despite some overlapping members, and influenced the MTA during different periods. While the triangular network was crucial in the early days, the NOYDA network became a key actor after the 2021 military coup in Myanmar, as they transformed themselves into the #MilkTeaAlliance Friends of Myanmar. In short, the triangular network helped create the MTA phenomenon, and the NOYDA network converted this phenomenon into a more collaborative force, which has enabled it to sustain itself until the present day.

I gathered data by conducting semi-structured interviews using a snowball sampling strategy with 50 student activists from various geographic locations comprising Hong Kong, Myanmar, the Philippines, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam, between January and June 2023. All interviews were conducted by the author in one of three languages: English, Chinese, and Thai. Most of these interviews were conducted during my fieldwork in Taiwan and Thailand. However, for activists who were not readily available for in-person meetings, such as those in exile, online interviews were conducted using platforms like Google Meet and Zoom. I also observed many solidarity events in Taiwan to support the Thai youth demonstrations between 2020 and 2021. Finally, I collected secondary data available in Burmese,

English, Chinese, and Thai to strengthen this research analysis and sharpen my argument, including news reports, Twitter tweets, Facebook posts, memes, books, and short articles.

The challenge of understanding Asian transnational youth activism reflected an ongoing issue in activism and social movement studies, which have often viewed political action as spreading spontaneously (Castells 2012) “like a fever” (Walzer 1960, 114). This perspective heavily relied on the role of new digital communication technologies following the expansion of the Internet in the twenty-first century (Castells 2012; Bennett, Segerberg 2013), seeing it as a main driver for several movements, such as the Anti-American War Movement (Walgrave, Rucht 2010), the Egyptian Revolution (Holmes 2012) and Occupy Wall Street (DeLuca, Lawson, Sun 2012). However, recent evidence suggests that digital technologies cannot be considered the sole factor for mobilizing and sustaining a coalition and movement, as face-to-face interaction and social ties remain important factors (McAdam, McCarthy, Zald 2004; van Dyke, McCammon 2010). For instance, the Egyptian Revolution was significantly influenced by the offline networks of political opposition, labor movements, and Islamic organizations (Clarke 2014). Similarly, the 2020-21 student protest in Thailand was based on youth networks in various universities across the country that had developed over many years (Horatanakun 2024). Therefore, the current study crucially extends the understanding of the importance of networks and social ties as a precondition for political activism, and illustrates the necessity of tracing the history of networks.

‘Networks’ are always an integrated part of activism because they influence the likelihood of active members and supporters engaging in ongoing participation (Tindall 2015, 231), and are the primary drivers of campaign diffusion (Andrews, Biggs 2006; Wang, Soule 2012). According to Tindall (2015), a network can be categorized into two types. The first is a ‘personal network’. Personal or ego networks are a focal actor and the set of entire social ties that an individual knows and communicates with (Boase 2008, 493). The second category is the ‘group network’. A group or whole network comprises all of the nodes and all of the ties among the nodes, which create social grouping (Tindall 2015, 232). A network could occur because of either face-to-face or virtual interactions (Poell, van Dijck 2015, 533). Nevertheless, the networks that occur from face-to-face interactions would likely be stronger and play an influential role, especially when conducting activities that would rely heavily on trust, such as political campaigns (Haug 2013).

Additionally, the nature of ties in the network can be divided into two categories. The ‘informal ties’ are loosely coordinated with only occasional group communication. For instance, actions between actors with informal ties might involve planning to create a joint event

together, but would not pursue action further than that (van Dyke, McCammon 2010, XV). On the other hand, ‘formal ties’ could introduce an umbrella organization and form its own staff and resources to initiate coordinating action among the members (XV-VI). They might also set up regular meetings among members to monitor activities and determine campaign strategies. It is not always necessary that formal ties facilitate more information sharing and collaboration among network members; instead, it depends on the level of trust between actors (Chang 2004). In addition, the forms of ties would typically change because they are constructed through interactions, which would always entail a degree of contingency and fluidity (Diani, Mische 2015, 309).

In the next section, I discuss the background of triangular networks between Hongkonger, Taiwanese, and Thai youth activists and the NOYDA network. The subsequent section examines how the triangular network led to the emergence of the MTA. Next, I illustrate how the NOYDA network played an influential role in transforming the MTA into a more collaborative force for solidarity action after the military coup in Myanmar. Finally, I discuss how the MTA has changed the political resistance landscapes and the future of youth activism in East and Southeast Asia.

## **2 Building a Transnational Youth Network in Asia**

### **2.1 The Triangular Network Between Hongkonger, Taiwanese, and Thai Activists**

The triangular network, which consists of collaboration between young activists from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Thailand, has a bilateral, personal structure, centered around only a few actors. The development of these ties occurred over several distinct periods, beginning with bilateral relationships between the new generation of Hongkonger and Taiwanese youth activists. The network between youth activists from Hong Kong and Taiwan, who became involved in politics after 2010, was established in 2012 following the Anti-National Education Campaign in Hong Kong and the Anti-Media Monopoly Movement in Taiwan, when Hongkonger activists visited Taiwan to discuss and exchange knowledge (Taiwanese #1, pers. comm.). This trip happened because Wang Dan, a former student leader of the Tiananmen protest in 1989, invited a group of high-school Hongkongers, known as Scholarism, to participate in the New School for Democracy in Taiwan (Solomon 2016). The offline space played a crucial role in facilitating interactions among these groups of youth activists and creating a group network. This relationship, which had been

nurtured for a year, bore fruit when these youth organized two significant demonstrations in 2014: the Sunflower Movement in Taiwan and the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong. For example, the Hongkonger activists diffused the occupy strategy from the Sunflower Movement occupying the Legislative Chamber's campaign (Taiwanese #1, pers. comm.), and Joshua Wong spoke after the prerecorded video speech by Lin Fei-Fan, a Sunflower movement leader, before announcing the surprise sit-in at the Central government office that started the Umbrella Movement (Ho 2019, 93).

Unlike the connection between Hong Kong and Taiwan, the network between the Thai activists and those from Hong Kong and Taiwan was very personal and informal in nature. The informal network between Thai and Hongkonger activists was established in 2016 after Netiwit Chotiphathpaisal met Joshua Wong in Hong Kong.<sup>3</sup> At that time, Netiwit and his friend had planned to hold the fortieth-anniversary commemoration of the Thammasat Massacre on 6 October 1976 at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, and they wanted Wong to be the keynote speaker at the event (Wasserstrom 2023).<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, Wong did not reply to his invitation email, which prompted Netiwit to take a risk and travel to Hong Kong to invite Wong in person. Finding Wong was not difficult at that time, as it was the electoral campaign season, and Wong was actively participating in Nathan Law's campaign for a legislator position. When Netiwit found Wong, he informed him of the commemoration and the political situation in Thailand, after which Wong immediately accepted his offer to join the event in October (Netiwit, pers. comm.). However, Wong never had a chance to participate in the event in person since he was detained by the authorities after his arrival, and was sent back to Hong Kong (Cheung, Phillips, Holmes 2016). Netiwit mentioned that Wong's deportation significantly changed his perception of domestic and international politics, and led him to become involved in transnational activism. This is illustrated by his later campaigns such as the 1989 Tiananmen Commemoration in Bangkok, solidarity campaigns to support Hongkonger activists, and the publication of several translated books related to human rights issues in China when he established the Sam Yan Press (Teeratanabodee, Prommongkol 2023; Phattharathanasut 2024). This demonstrates that despite Wong

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**3** This study refers to Thai activists by their full name when they are first mentioned. Subsequently, they are referred to by their first name, as it is more common in Thai culture to address others by their first name.

**4** The Thammasat Massacre was a violent crackdown led by military and a number of radical conservative groups against student protesters who were demonstrating against the return of Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn, a former military dictator, to Thailand from exile. The massacre was named after Thammasat University, where the violent crackdown occurred.

failing to enter Thailand, the personal tie between Netiwit and Wong had already been established.<sup>5</sup>

Netiwit first learned about Taiwanese politics in 2017 after a Taiwanese student in Thailand invited him to visit Taiwan. The ties between Netiwit and Taiwanese youth activists were further strengthened in 2019 when he visited Taiwan as a speaker of the Oslo Freedom Forum. It was during this visit that he reconnected with his old friend, Akrawat Siripattanachok, whom he had previously met at the Anti-2014 Coup Campaign in Thailand (Phattharathanasut 2024, 12). Both agreed that there was not much Thai civil society overseas and decided to establish the Thailand-Taiwan Friendship Organization to support democracy in Thailand and foster connections between Thai and Taiwanese activists. Akrawat quickly introduced this idea to other Thai students in Taiwan, activists, and scholars based on his personal connections (Netiwit, pers. comm.; Akrawat, pers. comm.). They also invited the Vice-President of the National Taiwan University Student Association (NTUSA) to serve as Vice-President of this organization, a role he happily accepted (Taiwanese #2, pers. comm.). The attempt to establish the organization helped different actors combine their networks together, leading to a larger network that includes more nodes. Regrettably, the organization faced several struggles and was quickly dissolved, leaving an infrastructure that would facilitate further cooperation between Thais and Taiwanese in the near future.<sup>6</sup>

I chose not to label this network as a group network, despite it involving three groups of youth activists, because they did not necessarily communicate or collaborate with each other simultaneously, and the focus was on only a few key actors. Strong ties between the Hongkonger and Taiwanese youth activists did not include the Thai activists. Netiwit, who went to Hong Kong to meet Wong, also did not ask Wong to help him connect with the Taiwanese; instead – as I shall show – it was due to another reason that helped him connect with the activists in Taiwan. Netiwit’s connection with the Hongkonger activists appeared to be more personal, as he preferred to communicate directly with Wong rather than through the Demosisto Party or other organizations. Furthermore, Hong Kong and Thailand interacted with different groups of activists in Taiwan. Hong Kong contacted the Sunflower Movement activists, while Netiwit and his friends connected with post-Sunflower university student activists.

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**5** In the end, Joshua Wong virtually attended the Thammasat Massacre Commemoration via Skype.

**6** For more details about Netiwit’s connections with Hongkonger and Taiwanese activists, refer to Phattharathanasut 2024.



## 2.2 The Network of Young Democratic Asians (NOYDA)

NOYDA first came to public attention on 5 October 2016, when Joshua Wong posted on his Facebook fan page to thank his Thai friends, including Netiwit, and NOYDA who supported him after he was rejected from entering Thailand by the Thai authorities while traveling to join the Thammasat Massacre Commemoration. The next day, NOYDA issued a collective urgent statement to condemn the Thai government's violation of Joshua Wong's personal security and freedom of movement by detaining him without any legal reason (Law 2016). Many members and people in their networks across the region posted and shared this statement. However, NOYDA did not emerge after Wong was detained. Rather, it had already been established for a while, but had been maintaining a low underground profile.

NOYDA was first established in April 2016, six months before Wong was detained in Thailand, as a result of a three-day congress held in Manila, the Philippines. It was the alliance of committed young people and activists in Asia with the goal of

achieving a peaceful, equal, and sustainable society through democratic processes and people-oriented development. By confronting common challenges, we defend human rights, stand in solidarity with civil society and the oppressed in the region. (NOYDA 2018, n.p.)

It also aimed to help connect activists in the region to facilitate mutual understanding and support. NOYDA had 14 official members, two representatives from each of its seven member countries or territories, including Hong Kong, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam (Solomon 2016). Furthermore, NOYDA had observer members, such as Myanmar. NOYDA included activists from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Thailand, similar to the triangular network discussed earlier. However, this study considered the two networks separately because they consisted of different groups of activists, even though some members overlapped. For instance, Wong and Netiwit were not part of NOYDA.

NOYDA was disassembled sometime during the last quarter of 2017, due to lack of funding and disagreement about its agenda (Thai #1, pers. comm.; Taiwanese #3, pers. comm.). The NOYDA Facebook page occasionally posted political situations in East and Southeast Asia, such as demanding a free and fair election in Thailand (NOYDA 2018) and condemning the Hong Kong government for a violation during the 2019 Hong Kong protest (NOYDA 2019), but there were no official conferences or events that gathered members together. This minimal interaction gradually transformed the nature of the NOYDA network into an informal type, as activists remained connected but rarely communicated or interacted.

The existence of the triangular network between Hongkonger, Taiwanese, and Thai activists, as well as the NOYDA, demonstrates that the new generation of youth activists in East and Southeast Asia had attempted to build transnational networks and begun conducting transnational activism many years before the rise of the MTA. In the next section, I will reveal how these two pre-existing networks contributed to the emergence and development of the MTA.

### 3 The Role of the Personal Triangle Network in the Dawn of the Milk Tea Alliance

The meme war between Thai and pro-CCP Internet commentators began on 4 April 2020, after Vachirawit Chivaaree, known as Bright, a Thai celebrity who is famous in China for being a main actor in the *Boylove* series, liked a tweet containing a photo of Hong Kong, and called it a 'country'. This conflict later expanded when, on 9 April, the pro-CCP found that Bright's girlfriend, Weeraya Sukaram, known online as Nnevvv, commented on her Instagram photo during her trip to Taiwan that she considered her fashion style to be more like that of a young Taiwanese woman rather than that of a Chinese girl. This topic suddenly became a hot issue in China when the hashtag #Nnevvv reached more than 1.4 million posts and four million views on Weibo (Global Times 2020). The posts condemned her and her boyfriend while demanding an apology. In response, Thai netizens fought back with humor and sarcasm to protect their celebrities, even when Chinese netizens insulted Thailand and its monarchy. Bolotta (2023) observed that the Thai youth responses were not merely fans fighting to protect their celebrities, but rather a way for Thai youth to struggle against 'age-patriarchy' and 'monarchical paternalism' that has suppressed them for many years.

Most Hongkongers and Taiwanese were unaware of the meme war until 12 April when Nathan Law and Joshua Wong, two prominent Hongkonger activists, tweeted about it [Fig. 1 and Fig. 2]. These tweets demonstrated their support for the Thai netizens and condemned the attacks by the Chinese nationalist Internet users. They also attached a photo from *Phro Rao Khu Kan เพราะเรารักกัน* (2gether) to demonstrate that they were also fans of this series, and to express their support for the LGBTQI+ community. The posts by Wong and Law significantly changed the landscape of the conflict, from a bilateral tension between Thailand and China, to a multilateral conflict, as it was joined by Hongkongers and Taiwanese netizens. It quickly made the hashtag overwhelmed with anti-China posts, and transformed what was previously perceived as a fandom fight into a transnational political confrontation. So, what prompted them to tweet in support of the Thai netizens?



**Figure 1** Law, N. So Funny Watching the Pro-CCP Online Army Trying to Attack Bright. 2020. <https://x.com/nathanlawkc/status/1249219916323942400>



**Figure 2** Wong, J. I. Hong Kong stand with our freedom-loving friends in Thailand against Chinese bullying! #nnevy. 2020. <https://x.com/joshuawongcf/status/1249254158538072064>

According to Netiwit, the Hongkonger activists were not aware of the ongoing Internet war; it was he who made them know about it by using his personal tie with Wong. He said:

I had no idea about the Internet war between the Thai and Chinese until my junior at Chulalongkorn University informed me. After learning about it, I decided to contact Joshua and ask him to take some action about it. (Netiwit, pers. comm.)

Soon after, Wong shared this information with Law, and both tweeted to condemn the pro-CCP Internet accounts and to support the Thai side on the same day. The tweets by Law and Wong helped raise awareness in Hong Kong about this online conflict, and many of them decided to join the Thai side to push back the pro-CCP Internet commentators. At the same time, these tweets also drew attention from Taiwanese society, given Wong and Law had been developing ties with Taiwanese activists since 2012. Many Taiwanese news outlets and politicians, such as Hsiao Bi-Khim and Cheng Weng-Tsai, started publicizing this Internet conflict. This topic also gained significant attention on Dcard, a popular social media and networking platform in Taiwan. Shortly thereafter, many Taiwanese netizens also decided to join the meme war against the Chinese nationalists.

Thus, the examination of the communication between Netiwit and Wong, as well as the networks between Hongkongers and Taiwanese

activists, shows that the spread of the meme war into Hong Kong and Taiwan, and the transition from fandom conflict into transnational solidarity, were not spontaneously achieved solely through digital communication technologies. Instead, they were facilitated by the triangular network between activists from three different geographical locations, which had been nurtured for many years. Without the existence of this pre-existing network, the Internet conflict might never have gained full awareness in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and the MTA might not have subsequently occurred.

The term Milk Tea Alliance was first coined by @ShawTim, who posted, “#nnevy we are the #MilkTeaAlliance” (quoted in Dedmen, Lai 2020, 2), one day after Wong and Law’s tweets. The term became viral after the Statement by the Spokesperson of the Chinese Embassy Concerning Recent Online Statements Related to China was posted on the Embassy of the People’s Republic of China Bangkok’s Facebook page on 14 April 2020. The statement mentioned the Chinese government’s concern about the ongoing conflict between the Thai and Chinese netizens, and tried to claim a longstanding family relationship between China and Thailand by repeatedly emphasizing the phrase “*Zhong Tai Yijia Qin* 中泰一家亲” (China and Thailand as one family) (Chinese Embassy Bangkok 2020). Responding to the statement, the youth promoted “milk tea as a counter concept” (Schaffar, Wongratanawan 2021, 17) to reject the blood relationship propounded by the Chinese Embassy. The campaigners chose ‘Milk Tea’ as a symbol not only due to the shared passion for the drink among urban middle-class youth in the region, but also as a cultural marker distinct from the Chinese way of drinking tea, as Chinese people traditionally drink tea without milk. This turned China into a symbol of authoritarianism, while Milk Tea became a symbol of democracy, justice, and human rights through the message that “where you drink tea with milk you fight for democracy” (Bolotta 2023, 295). They also used hashtags such as *Cha Nom Khon Kwa Lueat* ชานมข้นกว่าเลือด (Milk Tea is Thicker than Blood) and #MilkTeaAlliance as the centerpiece of the campaign to show their unity.

Following the meme war, various MTA groups across Asia were founded with minimal collaboration. This dynamic shifted when the Thai youth anti-government protests resumed on 18 July 2020, prompting MTA members to organize parallel rallies in solidarity with the movement in Thailand.<sup>7</sup> For instance, the Hongkonger activists rallied in front of the Royal Thai Consulate-General in Hong

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**7** The 2020-21 youth movement in Thailand can be separated into two waves. The first wave, between February and March 2020, began immediately after the Constitutional Court dissolved the Future Forward Party (FFP) on 21 February 2020, since the party had accepted a loan from Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, the party leader. However, with the outbreak of the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) in mid-March, the

Kong to show their support for the protests in Thailand (Bangkok Post 2020). Many held banners that read “Stand with Thailand”, and prominent Hongkonger activists such as Joshua Wong frequently cited #StandWithThailand when discussing Thai politics on their Twitter accounts. Before the campaign, Wong contacted Netiwit and asked him to help promote the campaign on his social media account to inform the Thai protesters that Hong Kong was supporting them (Netiwit, pers. comm.)

On the other hand, in Taiwan, the solidarity movement was prominent and was perceived as a model for MTA collaboration. An alliance of Thai students, Taiwanese students, and other foreign allies established the Taiwan Alliance for Thai Democracy (TATD). They immediately declared themselves part of the MTA and frequently organized parallel campaigns in Taipei to show their solidarity with the movement in Thailand. During the first event held in front of the Thailand Trade and Economic Office (Thailand’s de facto embassy) in Taipei on 2 August 2020, most of the participants were Thai students in Taipei with a majority from National Chengchi University (NCCU) and the National Taiwan University of Science and Technology. The event was quickly organized by two Thai students from NCCU and served as a catalyst for further action. At the event, they were not yet a formal association, but a number of participants who met that day gathered over dinner a few days later to discuss how to sustain their actions of solidarity with the protests in Thailand. It was then that they decided upon the TATD as their group’s name (Chen-Dedman, pers. comm.; Akrawat, pers. comm.).

To prepare their largest campaign event on 16 August at Taipei Main Station, held in parallel with a large protest in Thailand, TATD received extensive support from the Taiwanese activists, primarily current and former students of the National Taiwan University.<sup>8</sup> These activists were mostly those whom Netiwit and Akrawat had contacted when they planned to establish the Thai and Taiwanese student organizations in 2019. According to a personal interview with Akrawat, a co-founder of TATD, Taiwanese authorities initially denied them permission to hold a solidarity campaign due to concerns it could harm Taiwan-Thailand relations and warned that campaigners might be deported from Taiwan if they continued their campaign.<sup>9</sup> However, with assistance from local activists, TATD eventually obtained permission to organize the event. Moreover, these Taiwanese

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campaign was temporarily suspended. The protests resumed on 18 July when the Free Youth group organized the protest at Democracy Monument.

**8** For more details, refer to Dedman, Lai 2021.

**9** To clarify, like many countries, Taiwan has no official diplomatic relationship with Thailand due to the ‘One China Principle’ of the Beijing government.

activists helped expand the TATD network by linking them with many scholars from renowned universities, members of political parties including the Green Party and the New Power Party, and local civil societies and media outlets such as Amnesty International (Taiwan), Hong Kong Outlander, and New Bloom (Akrawat, pers. comm.). As a result, the TATD's events were very successful, as they could invite many speakers and audiences from diverse political groups in Taiwan, thanks to a pre-existing network between Thai and Taiwanese students that was built a year earlier. This event was also covered by TV outlets in Thailand. After the event at the Taipei Main Station ended, Akrawat told Reuters that:

This is the first physical expression of the Milk Tea Alliance [...] We don't want to just talk about it online. We want a pan-Asian alliance for democracy. (Tanakasempipat, Chow 2020)

In the early days of the MTA phenomenon from April 2020 to early 2021, most of their significant campaigns were launched within the triangular network among Hongkonger, Taiwanese, and Thai youth activists. The personal tie between Netiwit and Wong helped the meme war expand into Hong Kong. Meanwhile, the dense network between Hongkongers and Taiwanese activists made this online conflict more prominent in Taiwanese society, causing many Taiwanese netizens to join the Thai side to push back the Chinese. It was not until the resurgence of the Thai youth movement in July 2020 that the MTA began to clearly demonstrate its influence in the offline world. Both Hong Kong and Taiwan organized parallel protests with the protesters in Thailand, especially in Taiwan, where a strong coalition operated under the name of TATD. However, this triangular network suffered a setback after most Hongkonger activists were arrested or forced into exile following the implementation of the 2020 Hong Kong National Security Law. Taiwan's network also became less active following the declining trend in the Thai protests from late 2020 to early 2021. In the next section, I discuss how the NOYDA network stepped in to inherit the legacy of the MTA and transformed this phenomenon into a more solid political action after the military coup in Myanmar in 2021.

#### **4 From the NOYDA Network to the Milk Tea Alliance of Myanmar**

The NOYDA network disbanded in late 2017, but the members maintained informal ties and occasionally contacted each other. For example, some activists who were part of the network issued a solidarity statement to support the youth protests in Thailand when the police

attempted to crackdown on the rally and arrested Parit Chiwarak, known as Penguin, who participated in the NOYDA meeting. Then, the 2021 military coup in Myanmar became a critical juncture that transformed the NOYDA network from informal ties back to formal ties, as it created routine communication among the network actors and led to their re-emergence as the #MilkTeaAlliance Friends of Myanmar (MTAFoM).<sup>10</sup>

Although Myanmar did not officially become a member of NOYDA since it did not join the first congress in the Philippines, it earned observer member status with the help of the Thai activists (Thai #2, pers. comm.). This reflects the important role of Thai activists in linking Burmese activists with the NOYDA network. Thai and Burmese activists had been friends since the late 1980s when many Burmese students fled to Thailand after the army brutally cracked down on the pro-democracy movement led by students in 1988. This tie was passed down from generation to generation of civil society workers. The political transition in Myanmar that began in 2010 facilitated interaction between the two countries' activists with many knowledge exchange events and training programs being held during the decade of Myanmar's quasi-democratic political system (Burmese #1, pers. comm.; Thai #3, pers. comm.). For instance, the group of Burmese student activists who organized the Anti-Education Law Movement in 2015 came to Thailand and shared their resistance experiences with Thai activists (Burmese #2, pers. comm.; Thai #1, pers. comm.). As a result, NOYDA members developed strong ties with the Burmese activists, thus fostering friendships and mutual understanding for many years. This has led to increased awareness and concern for the sociopolitical situation in Myanmar among activists of the NOYDA network, as they see the issue as affecting old friends.

The attempt to create a solidarity group to support the pro-democracy campaign in Myanmar occurred after the military coup when a Burmese activist reached out to a Filipino friend, both of whom were NOYDA members, to inquire about accessing the MTA network. While the Filipino friend did not have access to the MTA, as it was still a very loose network at that time, mainly centered in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Thailand, they decided to create their own MTA group to support their Burmese and other ethnic group friends inside Myanmar. To build this network, they utilized the existing infrastructure

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**10** On 1 February 2021, the Myanmar army, under the command of General Min Aung Hlaing, staged a coup to halt the opening day of the newly elected parliament. They also detained several important civilian government and National League for Democracy (NLD) leaders, including President Win Myint and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi. Mass demonstrations immediately broke out in major cities on the first weekend, and soon spread to many cities and towns across the country. The uprising was later named the 'Spring Revolution'.

of NOYDA by gathering many ex-NOYDA members into the group. Simultaneously, they also extended the network by recruiting activists and civil societies who were not part of NOYDA (Burmese #3, pers. comm.; Filipino #1, pers. comm.). This significantly expanded the NOYDA network and made it become active again after its disbandment in late 2017. It was then that they decided upon the MTA-FoM as their new group's name. According to an ex-NOYDA member from Thailand:

One day, my friend decided to choose the MTA as the group name. First, I opposed them using this name because it might cause conflict with other groups that also used the name MTA. However, my friend said, "It is okay. Everyone can be the MTA". Therefore, we became the MTA. (Thai #1, pers. comm.)

This conversation reflected the flexibility of the MTA as a term and how everyone could be part of this solidarity movement, as no one could claim to be the owner of this campaign, and there were no clear criteria for membership (Huang, Svetanant 2022, 134). The renaming also transformed the MTA from a phenomenon to a more formal network due to its clear agenda and routine communication.

Before NOYDA named their group MTA FoM, there were several MTA groups based in different countries and territories who conducted online activism. Most country-based groups worked independently and only helped each other share information on social media, mainly on Twitter (renamed X). After NOYDA became the MTA FoM, they attempted to invite all country-based MTAs to join their group (Thai #1, pers. comm.). Even though they failed to recruit many country-based MTA groups, as many of these online groups were not interested in offline activism, the MTA FoM could be considered the very first 'international Milk Tea Alliance' since it included members from various countries and regions and took solidarity actions in the offline world. Shortly after, the MTA became a symbol of support from neighboring countries for Myanmar activists fighting against the authoritarian government.

The MTA FoM has been assisting Myanmar since the military coup occurred, and one notable campaign they are working on is the Blood Money Campaign (BMC). The BMC was a campaign initiated in 2021 by the collective efforts of Burmese and other ethnic groups, including members of the General Strike Committee of Nationalities (GSCN). They intended to stop revenue from reaching the military government by pressuring foreign companies that were still doing business with the military, both directly and indirectly (Burmese #4, pers. comm.; Burmese #5, pers. comm.). The main BMC campaign focuses on the oil and gas industry by targeting the Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE), which was owned by the Ministry of Finance and the



state-owned bank. The industry is the most significant income source for the junta, accounting for at least 20% of the export products in value terms (Nikkei Asia 2023). By targeting one of the main economic sectors in the country, this campaign directly involved many foreign firms doing business with MOGE, such as TotalEnergies, Chevron, and the Petroleum Authority of Thailand Exploration and Production (PTTEP). In order for this campaign to be possibly successful, it was necessary to gain support from civil societies outside the country. This is when the BMC campaigners discovered the MTAFoM.

The BMC campaigners reached the MTAFoM due to strong ties between the GSCN and a group of Burmese activists who had been participating in NOYDA and, later, the MTAFoM (Burmese #4, pers. comm.). This shows how individuals can play a role in linking their own network into the broader network. One of BMC's main campaigns was to pressure the PTTEP, the largest petroleum company in Thailand and one of MOGE's leading business partners, to stop doing business with the junta. The MTAFoM crucially assisted the BMC campaign by lobbying the Thai government and educating the Thai people about human rights violations in Myanmar. Although the BMC campaign in Thailand had yet to succeed since PTTEP had not stopped doing business with MOGE, stating that their business was not related to human rights violations in Myanmar (The Nation 2022), the collaboration of the MTAFoM on this issue helped these activists gain experience in transnational activism. It has also strengthened their relationships and prepared them for campaigns in the upcoming future.

NOYDA established a network infrastructure for youth activism, enabling collaboration in support of Myanmar following the 2021 military coup. This collaboration led to the reformalization of the network, evolving NOYDA into the MTAFoM - a transnational political solidarity group with a working agenda and weekly routine communication on the Myanmar issue. Thus, the case of NOYDA demonstrates network fluidity and the role of personal networks in expansion. It also highlights that MTA's expansion to the Myanmar issue resulted from pre-existing networks, not spontaneous action, as mentioned by an anonymous Burmese activist during a personal interview, "If they were not NOYDA, we would not have the #MilkTeaAllianceFriendsofMyanmar" (Burmese #3, pers. comm.).

## 5 Conclusion

Through network theory and a transnational historical approach, this study found that the MTA phenomenon and solidarity campaign under its name did not simply arise due to the information technology algorithm. Instead, it resulted from a transnational youth activist network in Asia that had gradually developed over the years. Specifically, two

networks played an essential role in the MTA. The first is the triangular network among young activists in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Thailand. This network originated in 2012 when new generation activists from Hong Kong and Taiwan began to collaborate, and later expanded to Thailand when Netiwit invited Wong to Thailand in 2016. This network played a crucial role at the initial stages of the MTA because it facilitated the spread of the meme war between the Thai and pro-CCP Internet commentators into Hong Kong and Taiwan, and subsequently across Asia. The first physical expression of the MTA also occurred via this network when the TATD and Hongkonger activists organized a parallel protest with the protesters in Thailand.

After the role of the triangular network weakened and the MTA phenomenon declined due to the implementation of Hong Kong National Security Law and the decline of youth protests in Thailand, the NOYDA network stepped in. It reformalized its network under the name MTAFoM after the military coup in Myanmar. MTAFoM transformed the MTA into a more formal entity by establishing a weekly communication channel and physical workshops. This was different from the earlier version of the MTA, which only had occasional contact and no comprehensive working agenda. Additionally, it provided more tangible assistance by supporting Burmese and other ethnic group activists in the BMC campaign to cut off revenue to the Myanmar junta. This campaign shifted transnational activism in Asia beyond solidarity statements and expanded a solidarity movement into a more extensive support campaign.

Since the end of the Internet war, the importance of the MTA has fluctuated in many activism contexts. We observed its decline in significance in the context of Hong Kong and Taiwan, its continuity in supporting activism in Myanmar and Thailand, and its rise in new places such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Japan (Phattharathanasut, Teeratanabodee 2024). The MTA has also extended its importance outside Asia, as the hashtag was adopted by diaspora communities in the United States and the United Kingdom to support resistance campaigns in Myanmar (Wang, Rauchfleisch 2022, 595-6). This dynamic could be further investigated in future studies to understand how the MTA expands beyond its original members, is run by non-youth activists, and extends outside the region where it originated. Such investigations could enhance the understanding of this transnational network beyond the scope of this study, as well as shed light on cross-regional connectivities and inter-generational linkages.

Undoubtedly, the rise of the MTA has transformed milk tea into a meaningful symbol for youth activism in Asia, and has opened up new possibilities for resistance, interaction, and cross-national/regional collaboration between activists in Asia and beyond. It has also created a new political space for both young and older activists to engage with their peers from other countries and regions. Even

though this transnational alliance has yet to achieve its goal of bringing democratic change to the region, it has built cross-national ties between activists in East and Southeast Asia that should and will continue, even as the hashtag is forgotten or this network is transformed into another name.

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