Understanding the #MilkTeaAlliance Movement

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Abstract

#MilkTeaAlliance is a pan-Asia online civil solidarity movement that began in April 2020, but observers identified two distinct elements driving this movement: anti-China sentiment and a pro-democracy spirit. This project analyzes 3 million #MilkTeaAlliance tweets between April 2020 and December 2021, trying to disentangle how East and Southeast Asian netizens communicated and mobilized through this hashtag across borders. The results show that Thai-speaking Twitter users contributed to more than 50 percent of all #MilkTeaAlliance tweets globally, and several waves of hashtags in 2020 mostly reflect the political challenges Thai people faced. Network and keyness analysis show that discussion through the #MilkTeaAlliance hashtag was mainly about counterarguments to China's narrative of globalization in its early stages and was tweeted in English. Months later, attention gradually shifted to human rights and supporting detained and repressed activists, and the tweets were mostly not written in English. While the shift and decline in the number of hashtags reflect the limitation of this online movement, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, the dynamic and mobilization in #MilkTeaAlliance also evidence the desire and necessity of a durable platform for exchanging experience and enriching the narratives among activists and netizens in East and Southeast Asia.

Implications and Key Takeaways

- The dynamic in the #MilkTeaAlliance movement indicates that activists and netizens in East and Southeast Asia desire and need a platform for exchanging experiences and learning from each other. A durable and better-organized platform can help them accumulate information, experience, and resources.

- Analysis of the geolocation and language used in tweets shows that many active members in #MilkTeaAlliane have a strong connection to both the United States and the alliance member countries, possibly their countries of origin. A U.S.-based durable platform may facilitate collaboration among the #MilkTeaAlliance members.

- The formation of counterarguments against China's narrative of globalization in the early stages of #MilkTeaAlliance suggests that cross-country collaborations indeed benefit the activists across Asia. This movement serves as a means to empower civil society in democracies and counter China's ideological expansion through international organizations.

- The surge and decline of the #MilkTeaAlliance movement imply that international attention plays an important role in supporting democratization in Asia, but democratization needs more than just international attention.

Introduction

#MilkTeaAlliance is a pan-Asia online civil solidarity movement that began in April 2020. It originated from an internet meme war between Chinese and Thai fans over Vachirawit Chiva-aree, a Thai actor whose girlfriend implicitly indicated that Taiwan and China are different countries under her Instagram photo. Chinese netizens made 1.4 million posts on Weibo demanding the actor apologize, while Thai netizens tagged the girlfriend's name "#nnevvy" more than 2 million times on Twitter to show their support.

Given that this internet brawl was caused mainly by China's One China Principle, many Taiwanese and Hong Kong netizens quickly joined the virtual battleground. They explained the story in the most popular forums in Taiwan and Hong Kong and recruited thousands to support the Thailand couple on Twitter. For example, on April 13, a Hong Kong-based Facebook page, MilkTealogy, illustrated the cooperation among Thailand, Taiwan, and Hong Kong netizens as the Oath of the Peach Garden—all with a milk tea in their hand—and calling the three countries the #MilkTeaAlliance.[1] This picture and the related hashtags were quickly shared on Facebook 13,000 times and reposted by many Twitter activists, including Joshua Wong, the most prominent activist in Hong Kong.

#MilkTeaAlliance did not just trend for a few days. Instead, it quickly became a symbol of cross-Asia civil solidarity beyond the original three members. Netizens from India, Australia, and the Philippines joined the alliance within a few months. As of December 23, 2020, there have been seven major waves of movements related to #MilkTeaAlliance:

- On April 15, Thai netizens used this hashtag to invite Twitter users from Taiwan and Hong Kong to support the anti-Mekong Dam movement, which protested against China's plan to build several upstream dams that would negatively impact the environment and economy of Thailand.

- On May 1, the U.S. Department of State initiated a #TweetforTaiwan movement to advocate for Taiwan to join the World Health Assembly. As a result, tens of thousands from Thailand, Hong Kong, and India posted the same hashtag and referenced #MilkTeaAlliance.[2]

- On May 1, the Australian government called for investigating the origin of COVID-19 in Wuhan and was boycotted by China in return. Many netizens welcomed the investigation and supported Australia with the #MilkTeaAlliance hashtag.

- On May 20, Taiwanese and Indian Twitter users used both #MilkTeaAlliance and #HindiTaiwaniBhaiBhai to support India during its territorial dispute with China.

- In late August, 12 activists were arrested and sent to China when they were fleeing to Taiwan in a speedboat. The #Save12 movement was quickly spread along with the #MilkTeaAlliance.

- Also, in late August, netizens from the Philippines used #MilkTeaAlliance to call for international support to investigate the shooting of human rights activist Zara Alvarez.

- Starting in October, hundreds of thousands of students in Thailand have been occupying the streets and demanding political reform, especially from the royal family. During the protest, they frequently used #MilkTeaAlliance to garner support from Hong Kong,[3] Taiwan,[4] and India.

Debating the Interpretation of the #MilkTeaAlliance Movement

#MilkTeaAlliance has a clear anti-China element given its origin in the internet brawl between China and Thailand. During the later waves of the movement mentioned above, however, the usage of #MilkTeaAlliance as a mobilization banner seems to shift from anti-China sentiment to a globalized pro-democracy narratives. Schaffer and Praphakorn argue that the shift is partly driven by the international environment.[5] The #nnevvy episode in April 2020 was followed by June Fourth (Tiananmen massacre day), the Black Lives Matter protest in the United States, the disappearance of 12 activists in Hong

Kong, and repression campaigns in Thailand and Myanmar. As time goes by, the network bridged by the #MilkTeaAlliance movement may shift its attention from the anti-China episode to the pro-democracy movement in general.

As a result, it is not surprising that existing studies render opposite interpretations of the movement. Schneider,[6] Yang,[7] and Chang[8] summarize #MilkTeaAlliance as an anti-Beijing movement initiated by Thailand, Hong Kong, and Taiwan from nationalist sentiments. Mölder and Shiraev further suggest that the movement was driven to counter China's narrative on the COVID-19 pandemic.[9] The anti-China sentiment in the movement causes the belief among many activists that countries and regions in Asia will collaborate through the #MilkTeaAlliance hashtags against the expansion of the Chinese empire—regardless of their political or cultural backgrounds. This belief and imagination of the anti-China sentiment embody some of the online artworks made by the activists.[10] Moreover, the choice of milk tea as the symbol also reinforces the imagined boundaries of the out-group (China, without its "own" milk tea) and in-group (each country with "its own" version of milk tea).

Meanwhile, Sombatpoonsiri,[11] Thein-Lemelson,[12] and Chachavalpongpun,[13] based on their analyses of Thailand and Myanmar, summarize this movement as a pro-democracy coalition in East and Southeast Asia.[14] Chachavalpongpun further shows that the movement inspired other democratic movements in other continents, such as a yogurt movement in Belarus led by young activists.[15] Indeed, a recent wave of #MilkTeaAlliance during the repression in Myanmar in July 2021 was mainly responded to by Twitter users in other democratic countries, including the United States and the United Kingdom (will be discussed later).[16] On April 7, 2021, Twitter also announced to create an emoji for the #MilkTeaAlliance movement, calling it "an online solidarity alliance first started in April 2020 as a Twitter meme which has grown into a global pro-democracy movement."[17] This argument suggests that the desire for democracy and human rights is the main motivation driving people across these countries to collaborate under the umbrella of #MilkTeaAlliance.

However, these two camps of explanations have limitations theoretically and empirically. From the theoretical perspective, nationalism or democracy is insufficient to represent the whole solidarity movement. On the one hand, if nationalism is the main motivation to bring out the #MilkTeaAlliance, na-

tionalism should be expected to consolidate the in-group patriotism and the out-group denigration by the border; the border of the imagined community should be strengthened, and people would have the rally-around-the-flag effect and support their own government. Nevertheless, these nationalism-driven predictions did not appear in this movement. For example, when Thailand netizens defended #nnevvy and fought against the Chinese counterpart, they also blamed their government and the royal family at the same time. Moreover, nationalism would not motivate people to care for the institution of democracy in other countries. On the other hand, if the belief in democracy is the main motivation for the #MilkTeaAlliance, it cannot explain why this movement originated from the One-China Principle, which China required all other countries to follow.

Understanding the #MilkTeaAlliance Movement through the empirical data

Empirically, the usage of the #MilkTeaAlliance hashtag and the interpretation ignore the effectiveness of using this hashtag. To be specific, once this hashtag has established its reputation, everyone can exploit it for its own gain. Meanwhile, not every usage would draw the same amount of attention. For example, the abovementioned discussion proposed two important elements—anti-China and democracy—behind the movement. It is possible that the majority of the tweets overwhelmingly focus on one, two, or the combination of these two factors. Empirical observation can help us reconcile the two factors through how people really react to them. One possible approach is to investigate the content accompanied by the #MilkTeaAlliance hashtag across time and locations. If most of the hashtags appear disproportionally to focus on one of the factors, we would suggest that factor as the main motivation in this movement.

Two related indicators on the effectiveness of the #MilkTeaAlliance discussed above are the number of tweets and the length of each wave. If the tweets only surged over one day without further consolidation, one may argue that attention shifted quickly. Similarly, if the numbers of hashtags are significantly different across similar events, we may argue that people pay different amounts of attention across these events.

Another quick tool to evaluate the effectiveness of the hashtag is to explore the language used along with the tag. To be specific, which language people use in the #MilkTeaAlliance tweets may reflect their intentions and actions in this movement. Segesten and Bossetta argue that there are three stages of online political participation:[18] information, mobilization, and action. When political repression happens in Country A, and people in Country B tweet about this repression in English, it is more likely that the tweet is to show support across the border or provide suggestions to the victims in Country A. On the other hand, if the tweets are posted in Country B's official language (which is usually not English in the countries in this movement), the tweets are mostly about spreading information to Country B. Hence, we can roughly observe how people across countries exploit the #MilkTeaAlliance through the language they choose in the discussion.

The third method is to examine what other hashtags appeared along with the #MilkTeaAlliance. It indicates how people planned to use this hashtag to communicate with each other. For example, Rauchfleisch et al. (2021)[19] developed a method to collect and detect all tweets in Switzerland and then show that people dramatically shifted their attention to the pandemic after the outbreak in early 2020. The basic idea of this keyness analysis[20] is to compare whether many new hashtags appeared in a given period are significantly different relative to the previous period. By comparing the change of hashtags and the #MilkTeaAlliance across time, we can analyze how people exploit this hashtag and the evolution of this movement.

## Case 1: The main analysis, April 2020–December 2020

Since the beginning of the #MilkTeaAlliance movement in April 2020, there have been a series of hashtag waves on Twitter. The archive contributed by Dr. Adrian Rauchfleisch and Dr. Shih Hsien Hsu at the National Taiwan University includes 2,719,573 #MilkTeaAlliance tweets in 2020.[21] The distribution is shown in Figure Case 1-1. In this figure, the X-axis is the timeline, and Y-axis is the number of tweets; the two peaks capture the first #nnevvy dispute in April and the Thailand repression in mid-October. The other two peaks last August 2021 and in late April were about the 12 Hong Kong activists being sent to China and Taiwan's effort to join the WHO,

FIGURE CASE 1-1: Distribution of the #MilkTeaAlliance tweets per day in 2020 (n = 2,719,573).
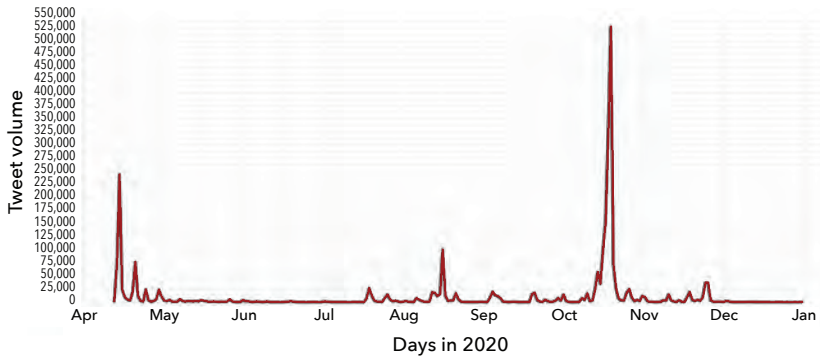
FIGURE CASE 1-2: Language used of the #MilkTeaAlliance tweets per day in 2020 (n = 2,719,573)
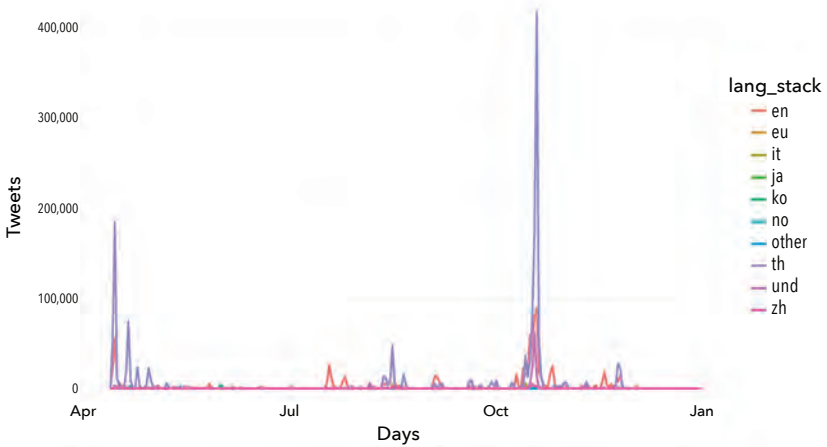
respectively. One observable phenomenon in Figure Case 1-1 is that each #MilkTeaAlliance peak did not last long. Most of the tweets emerged on a single day, and then the trend plummeted within a few days.

Who contributed to these 2.7 million tweets? Figure Case 1-2 shows the distribution of the language used in these tweets detected by Twitter ("und" means that Twitter cannot categorize the language, such as an emoji or emoticon). The X-axis is the timeline, the Y-axis is the number of tweets, and each color line refers to a language used for the tweets. Overall, Thai constitutes 57.2 percent of all #MIlkTeaAlliance tweets (1.55 million), followed by English (34.5 percent, 0.94 million), undefined (5.8 percent, 0.16 million) and Chinese (1.06 percent, 0.03 million). All other languages count for <1 percent of the overall tweets.

The distribution of the self-reported geolocation of the users shows a similar but less obvious trend. The majority of these tweets do not reveal the location (2.04 million, 75.0 percent). For the remaining tweets in which location can be identified with the platform OpenStreetMap,[22] 11.7 percent are from Thailand (318k), 3.2 percent from Hong Kong (88k), and 2.1 percent from the United States (58k). These are followed by the UK (0.8 percent), Japan (0.6 percent), India (0.5 percent), South Korea (0.5 percent), France (0.4 percent), China (0.4 percent), Germany (0.4 percent), Taiwan (0.3 percent), Canada (0.3 percent), and Australia (0.3 percent). In other words, the #MilkTeaAlliance tweets from Thailand account for about half of tweets whose locations are identifiable, and the proportion is similar to the distribution of the language used.

In the end, Figure Case 1-3 shows the distribution of hashtags along with the #MilkTeaAlliance in each week in 2020. Again, we follow Rauchfleisch et al. (2021)'s method and find 8 "overrepresented" hashtags in each weak compared with the distribution of hashtags last week. Meanwhile, the X-axis refers to the timeline in 2020, while the Y-axis is the number of unique tweeter users mentioned in these hashtags. In other words, these hashtags that appeared in Figure Case 1-3 are the first appearance of the most popular hashtags along with the #MilkTeaAlliance during 2020.

There are two important trends in Figure Case 1-3. First of all, the topics people discussed along with the #MilkTeaAlliance hashtag shifted dramatically with time. Specifically, the topics gradually shifted from issues related to

FIGURE CASE 1-3: Concurrent Hashtags with #MilkTeaAlliance per week in 2020

China to protestors and human rights issues. Before August 2020, we can find #stopmekongdem, #boycottmulan, #southchinasea, #taiwanisnotchina, #freehongkong on the upper left corner of Figure Case 1-3. These topics are related to fighting against China's expansion, geographically or ideologically. There is already a clear negative attitude in these hashtags and they include a verb, so these tweets are mainly about the mobilization of other allies through the #MilkTeaAlliance, instead of discussion (as in Segesten and Bossetta 2017).

After August 2020, however, the hashtags are mainly about protesters and human rights: #savehk12youth, #police, #savejoshuawong, #whatishappeninginth, #thaiprotestor, and #fightforfreedom all appeared on the top right corner of Figure Case 1-3. This trend reflects the urgency of domestic politics in Thailand and Hong Kong. Meanwhile, it is clear that the discussion about the expansion of China—such as the Belt and Road Initiative or the South China Sea—declined during this period. Therefore, in the next section, we will zoom in on April and October 2020 to further analyze the agenda shifts.

The second noticeable trend in Figure Case 1-3 is the increasing number of Thai-language keyness hashtags in late 2020. Indeed, Figure Case 1-2 shows that most of the #MilkTeaAlliance tweets were written in Thai. Nevertheless, in early 2020, most of the keyness hashtags were written in English, as is shown on the left-hand side of Figure Case 1-3. It indicates that the alliance members are much more likely to discuss China-related issues across the border in the early stage of the movement. However, many issues discussed in this period,

such as the Mekong Dem and the South China Sea, are cross-national issues and need cross-national attention and collaboration. The #MilkTeaAlliance hashtag serves as a platform for alliance members from different countries.

In later 2020, however, Thai-language tweets dominate the #MilkTeaAlliance hashtags (in Figure Case 1-2) and in other hashtags accompanied with #MilkTeaAlliance (in Figure Case 1-3). The combination of these results suggests that the hashtags in later 2020 mainly served as an information source for Thai people to receive information from other countries (e.g., #hk12youth) and to mobilize other Thai readers globally (e.g., #police or #whatishappeninginTH). In Case 2 to 4, I will provide further evidence for this inference.

Case 2: Zooming in on April and October 2020

One major weakness of the keyness in Figure Case 1-3 is the small number of keyness hashtags week by week, so the relationship among the hashtags remains unclear. In Figure Case 2-1 and Figure Case 2-2, we draw the relationship between the 100 most popular hashtags in April-May 2020 and October-November 2020, respectively. In these two figures, all hashtags are translated by Google Translate. Ff the translated hashtag is shown, it starts with capital letters (e.g., "TH"). The color indicates the clusters of hashtags, and the lines indicate the concurrent appearance of the hashtags.

In Figure Case 2-1, the network illustrates the anti-China sentiment in the early stage of the #MilkTeaAlliance movement and shows how the alliance members communicated through English: the majority of the hashtags are English with a few exceptions in Chinese and Thai. At the center of the network, we can find clear anti-China hashtags such as #nmsl,[23] #chinazi, #boycottchina, and #china_is_terrorist. Based on this anti-China sentiment, three groups of discussion can be found in this figure, including the pro-Taiwan mobilization, pro-Hong Kong tweets, and Thailand-related issues. Even though some Thailand and Hong Kong issues were not tweeted in English, the core anti-China discussions were all written in English.

Six months later, the rhetoric of the #MilkTeaAlliance changed. In Figure Case 2-2, the center of the discussion is about the repression in Thailand and the protesters detained in Hong Kong. More than half of these hashtags were written in Thai (as indicated by TH at the beginning of the hashtag). The

FIGURE CASE 2-1: Hashtag network in all #MilkTeaAlliance tweets, April–May, 2020

FIGURE CASE 2-2: Hashtag network in all #MilkTeaAlliance tweets, October–November, 2020

subgroups of the discussion are all developed from the ongoing repression in Thailand, which links to the criticism of the Thailand authorities and the desire for human rights and freedom. Even though the Hong Kong issue still accounts for a considerable proportion of the discussion, the tone is mainly to the Hong Kong protesters instead of the China government. Compared with the previous figure, Figure Case 2-2 does not have the same level of anti-China sentiment; it also did not cover any other China-related topic except for the protest in Hong Kong.

## Case 3: Repression in Myanmar and Thailand, July 2021

In the midst of July 2021, thousands of protesters in Thailand came to the streets and demanded that Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha resign for mishandling COVID-19, but the police responded with tear gas and water cannons.[24] In Myanmar, hundreds of anti-coup activists marched in Yangon and accused the military government of hoarding oxygen supplies despite the worsening pandemic.[25] However, during the violent repressions in Thailand and Myanmar this July, the #MilkTeaAlliance spell seemed to lose its power.

During this period, we found only 61,994 tweets sent between July 13th to the 19th. Indeed, about half of these were tweeted on July 18th when wide-scale repression was launched. The number of hashtags after this outbreak of protest is much lower than the similar waves in 2020, as is shown in Figure Case 1-1.

We then located these tweets using geographic information provided by Twitter users. After data cleaning, we successfully located about half of these tweets (many did not reveal their locations in their profile), and the distribution is shown in Figure Case 3-2. Apart from those in Myanmar (MY) and Thailand (TL), where protests are ongoing, the number of tweets from other traditional members in the #MilkTeaAlliance is low. For example, about 300 #MilkTeaAlliance hashtags were from Hong Kong, 100 from Taiwan, and 50 from India. In Thailand, one million people tweeted #WhatIsHappeninginThailand, #saveสิทธิโชค, and #banfoodpanda, but only 600 called for support from the #MilkTeaAlliance this time.

The two protests in Thailand and Myanmar are domestic political issues with no China dimension. Even though international advocacy and collaboration are important factors in supporting the democratic movement within

FIGURE CASE 3-1: Number of #MilkTeaAlliance hashtags between July 13–19, 2021
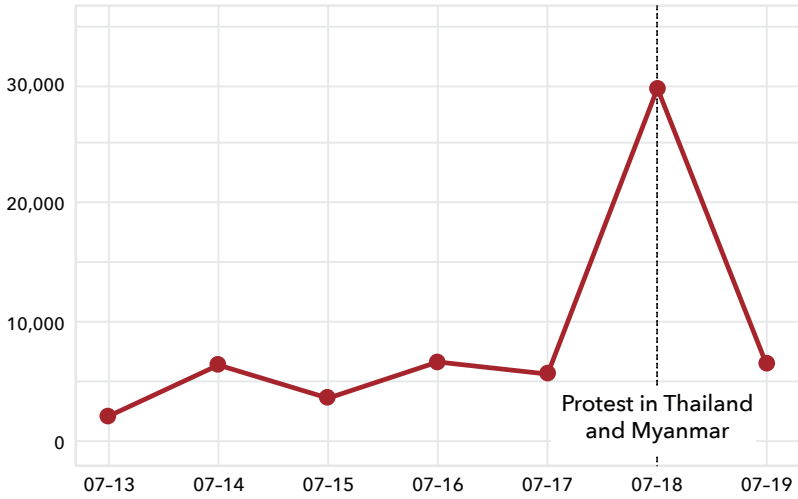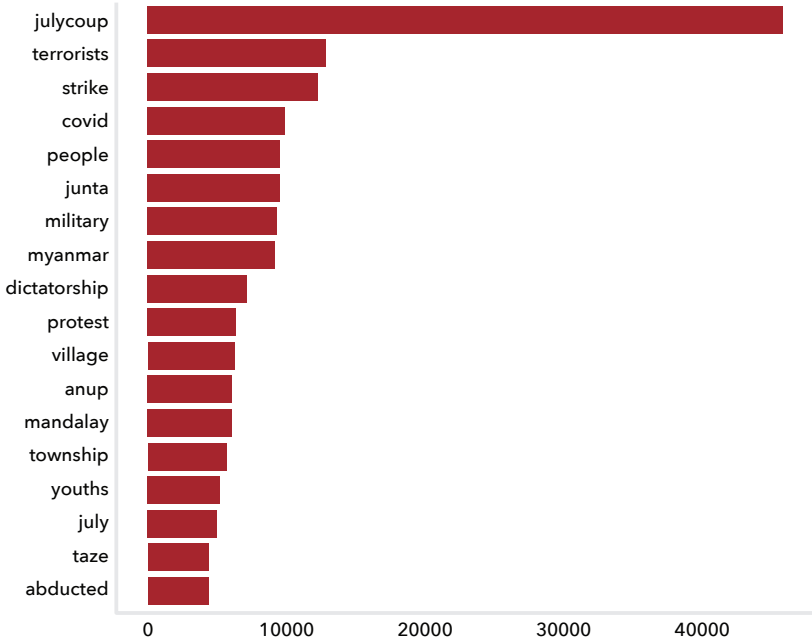

N of MilkTeaAlliance hashtag on Twitter by day (n=61994)

FIGURE CASE 3-2: Locations of #MilkTeaAlliance hashtags on Twitter between July 13–19, 2021
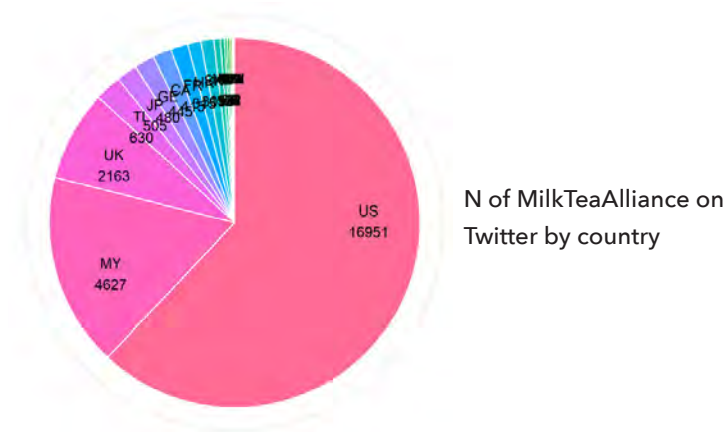
N of MilkTeaAlliance on Twitter by country

FIGURE CASE 3-3: Content analysis of #MilkTeaAlliance hashtags July 13–19, 2021 (n=61994)

each country, netizens in other countries were not motivated to join without a link to China. The feeling of a shared fate may not be strong enough without a common enemy. Indeed, when these 62,000 #MilkTeaAlliance tweets were analyzed in Figure 3, 90 percent of them were about the anti-coup movement in Myanmar. The main theme is pro-democracy but not anti-China in this wave of the #MilkTeaAlliance movement.

Meanwhile, Figure 2 shows that most of the hashtags were tweeted by netizens in the United States, United Kingdom, Japan, Germany, Canada, and France. Even more #MilkTeaAlliance tweets emerged from the United States than Myanmar and Thailand combined. Admittedly, some of these tweets were made by political asylum-seekers or their relatives located in those established democracies, but others reflected a certain level of attention from

the public in these countries. Hence, this timely support from the established democracies is complementary in continuing the #MilkTeaAlliance movement. For example, @NunesAlt, a prominent U.S. Twitter account with 130k followers, closely followed and retweeted the development of the anti-coup movement in Myanmar.[26]

In short, this wave of hashtag movement did not gain international support from the assumed alliance members. However, the language used in these tweets is mostly English, and it indeed gained the attention of netizens in the United States and the United Kingdom.

Case 4: The Pillar of Shame, December 2021

At the end of 2021, we searched and collected the #MilkTeaAlliance on Twitter for the last time for this project, and we found an additional wave of tweets. Right before New Year's Eve, 12,845 #MilkTeaAlliance tweets appeared. The surge was composed of two waves of tweets, as shown in Figure Case 4-1: the first wave appeared before Christmas, which was driven by the removal of Pillar of Shame at the University of Hong Kong.[27] The Pillar of Shame stood as a memorial to the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre victims, which had stood for 20 years. The removal is believed to be another piece of evidence that China strengthens its control over Hong Kong. The second and much smaller wave appeared on December 26, when 31 victims, including women and children, were found dead in Myanmar. The military government in Myanmar was accused of killing the victims.[28] Both waves only lasted for one day. Once again, the peaks are much shorter than the main waves in 2020 as shown in Figure Case 1-1, and are also shorter than the previous wave in July 2021 in Figure Case 3-1.

We then analyzed the features of these 12,845 tweets. Among these tweets, 90.3 percent were written in Thai, only 7.5 percent were written in English, and all others were less than 1 percent. We then translated and categorized all tweets by the keyword list shown in Table Case 4-1. About 56.1 percent of these tweets are about China, 11.3 percent are about Myanmar, and 66.8 percent are about democracy and human rights. Some tweets do not belong to either of the categories, such as tweeting the hashtag only, or introducing some beautiful scenes or food in some other countries.

FIGURE CASE 4-1: #MilkTeaAlliance tweets in December 2021

Tweets mentioning "#MilkTeaAlliance" by day, (n=12845)
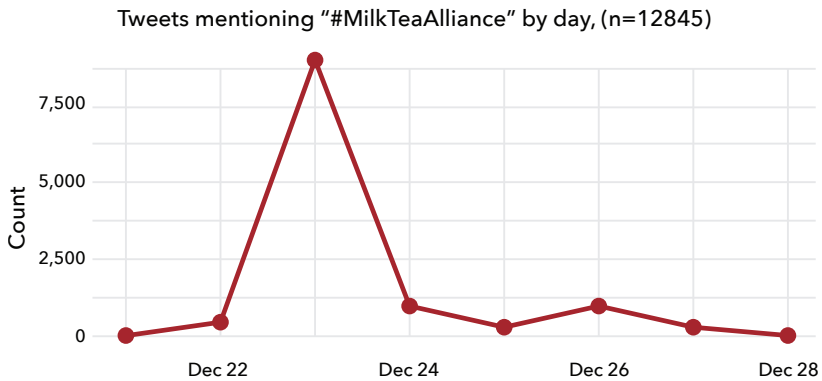
Source: Twitter API

The distribution is more informative when we intersect the two factors. The majority of the #MilkTeaAlliance tweets in this wave mainly criticize the removal of the Pillar of Shame (both democracy-related and China-related). It drew less attention when the tweets were only about China but had nothing to do with democracy or human rights. Meanwhile, there is also considerable attention to the repression in other countries (1,490, 11.6 percent). Most of these tweets were about the killing of women and children in Myanmar. Nevertheless, it also drew disproportionally less attention compared with the concurrent episode in Hong Kong. In this wave, when people tweeted content not about China, it was also usually not about human rights or democracy (4,144, 32.3 percent).

In the end, among these 12,845 tweets, most of their users did not indicate their location (10,871, 84.6 percent), which is a lot higher than in the previous waves. Among those with an identifiable location, three-fourths of them were in Thailand (1,485, 75 percent), and the others were in the United States (122, 6.2 percent), Philippines (67, 3.4 percent), Hong Kong (57, 2.9 percent), and Japan (56, 2.9 percent). Since most of the tweets outside Thailand were also

Table Case 4-1. Keywords list and categorization of the #MilkTeaAlliance tweets on Dec 2021

	Keyword list	Number of tweets (percent)
China-related	CCP, HK, Taiwan, TW, Xi, China, Chinese, Chinazi, Hong Kong, hongkong, Tibet, Xinjiang	7,211 (56.1 percent)
Myanmar-related	Myanmar, Burma, Yangon, Mandalay, Naypyidaw, Taunggyi	1,456 (11.3 percent)
Democracy-related	repress, jail, kill, rebel, beat, arrest, army, police, soldier, remove, removal, detain, freedom, democracy, right, activist, massacre, victim, activist, bomb, military, gun, dictator, authoritarian, authority, prison	8,588 (66.8 percent)

Table Case 4-2. Two factors of the #MilkTeaAlliance tweets on Dec 2021

	Democracy-related	Not Democracy-related
China-related	7,098 (55.3 percent)	113 (0.9 percent)
Not China-related	1,490 (11.6 percent)	4,144 (32.3 percent)

made in Thai, the distribution may not reflect the true level of support from other countries.

Overall, considering the distribution of language used, the locations of the tweets, and the interactions of the two factors, we may summarize this last wave of the #MilkTeaAlliance movement as mainly composed of Thai people informing each other about China government's new transgressions of human

right in Hong Kong (and to a smaller proportion, the Myanmar government's violence). There is not much about the mobilization or international calls for support in these hashtag waves, and therefore it did not last long. Compared with the previous wave in July 2021 and 2020, the number of tweets this time also implies that netizens across the #MilkTeaAlliance were less likely to pay attention to or be mobilized by the hashtag.

Discussion

Through Cases 1 to 4, the empirical data, including 2.7 million tweets, shows that this #MilkTeaAlliance movement generally reflected the political challenge faced by the Thai people and their solid support of and desire for democracy and freedom. At the beginning of the movement, the #MilkTeaAlliance hashtags successfully mobilized anti-China sentiment to deal with the expansion of Chinese ideology and the Chinese vision of globalization. As a result, this hashtag won the support of nearby countries, which provided counterarguments written in English against the propaganda of the One China Principle and the nine dash line in the South China Sea. However, when repression in Thailand and Myanmar worsened, the main challenge people faced became their own governments. In this scenario, the #MilkTeaAlliance hashtag served as a platform for domestic mobilization and information consumption; the alliance members learned the experience of repression from others and spread it through their domestic networks with their own languages.

These findings can partly be explained by the number of Twitter users in different countries. For example, in 2021, Thailand has about 11 million Twitter users,[29] Hong Kong has about 1 million,[30] and Taiwan has about 1.34 million.[31] So it is not surprising that the majority of the #MilkTeaAlliance tweets came from Thailand. Nevertheless, as is shown in the choice of language, concurrent hashtags, and the geolocation in the four cases, the main focus and the rhetoric also shifted mostly with the ongoing domestic challenges within the alliance members.

How do we interpret these changes? Group psychology suggests that people tend to form groups with a minimum cue,[32] but the development and the strength of the group depend on the function performed as a group.[33] The formation of the #MilkTeaAlliance was highly symbolic. It originated from the

China-Thai Twitter conflict and quickly developed into a border discussion of the wrongdoing of China's expansion. This anti-China sentiment drew a clear in-group/out-group boundary. It is worth noticing that the choice of milk tea as a symbol of this movement emphasizes that this movement is driven by un-armed ordinary people: they do not have a weapon to attack or rebel with, nor do they have the resources to purchase one, but they have a cup of tea to remain optimistic.

Generally speaking, forming a group may provide for survival needs, psychological needs, or informational needs to its members. However, since the #MilkTeaAlliance is composed of members from several countries, highly decentralized, and happened during the COVID-19 pandemic, this platform can hardly redistribute resources across the border. Therefore, this group may not be able to service the survival need.[34] It is possible that activists use this hashtag for collaboration, such as exchanging strategies or calling for international sanction, but these efforts may not be enough to balance the disparity in strength between the protesters and the authorities.

On the psychological need, this hashtag features the "alliance" and the humor to use milk tea to counter repression, which offers (online) social interaction across borders and positive emotions. Moreover, the existence of this alliance implies that "you are not alone" to the activists. In the end, this hashtag provides a platform for the alliance members to inform what was happening in other countries to fulfill the informational need. Such information provision is crucial for grassroots activists, especially when their opponents also learn from each other and evolve.[35] Through the analysis of this article, we noticed that the #MilkTeaAlliance movement might speak to the latter two motivations of the alliance members.

Another important finding in this study, especially in Cases 3 and 4, is that most of the #MilkTeaAlliance tweet waves lasted only one day. Indeed, people may quickly shift their attention in today's information-rich world, but my previous study in the #TweetforTaiwan movement suggests that the social movement with cross-country collaboration may be trending for several days.[36] My analysis of the 40,000 tweet #TweetforTaiwan movement in May 2020 shows that the three-day trend was boosted by tweeter users in the United States, Hong Kong, India, and Thailand over three consecutive days. The delay may reflect the time zone difference, the time delay in the

spreading of news, and the responses from other countries. Nevertheless, we did not see a similar pattern in the concurrent #MilkTeaAlliance movement. One possible interpretation is that Twitter users were more likely to use the #MilkTeaAlliance hashtag to consume information, and the hashtag itself is not like the #TweetforTaiwan in encouraging the reader to take action. As a result, even though we indeed observed that some people in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Thailand rallied on the street with the #MilkTeaAlliance hashtag, the hashtag did not play a major but rather a minor role in mobilization.

Admittedly, one possible research limitation is the internet crackdown during the protests and repression campaigns. For example, the Myanmar government blocked the internet and communication in February 2021,[37] and Thailand seriously punishes online discontent about the royal family.[38] Moreover, the Thailand government was also accused of manipulating content on Twitter.[39] Hence, it is possible that our analysis may underestimate the willingness of the #MilkTeaAlliance participants by merely checking the number of tweets. Nevertheless, since the majority of the #MilkTeaAlliance members were not blocked, we believe that our analysis still reflects the trend in the change of this movement.

Policy Implications

The first policy suggestion is that a durable platform is needed for information exchange among activists and netizens in the alliance countries in East Asia and beyond. In our empirical analysis, netizens across the countries exploited the #MilkTeaAlliance hashtags to 1). expand and discuss counterarguments against China's narratives in its early stage and 2). keep updating on the repressions in other alliance countries in the later stage. In the early stage, Twitter users from Taiwan and Hong Kong played an important role in transforming the nationalist conflict between China and Thailand into a review and reconsideration of the One China Principle and the Belt and Road Initiative. In the later stage, Thailand netizens kept spreading word about the repressions in Hong Kong and Myanmar through its Thai-speaking network worldwide, which helped draw attention to the global audience and the United States. Nevertheless, as can be seen in Cases 1 to 4, the number of #MilkTeaAlliance hashtags kept declining from 2020 to 2021. The alliance members gradually

chose to use it as a channel of information consumption instead of a platform for discussion or mutual exchange. After all, the hashtag itself can hardly be used to redistribute resources, maintain information, or organize people.

A durable platform could effectively respond to the desire for information exchange among the activists and citizens in this #MilkTeaAlliance movement in East and Southeast Asia. To be specific, in Cases 3 and 4, the evidence shows that some members of the movement reside in the United States but had a strong connection to the alliance countries. Therefore, organizing these #MilkTeaAlliance members in the United States may offer an opportunity for further cooperation in resources and information and ensure that such cooperation is cumulative.

Moreover, this platform can help to develop counterarguments against China's narratives of globalization. In recent years, China tried to promote Xi Jinping Thought through the United Nations, especially in the Human Rights Council.[40] The narrative is composed of two parts: 1). the Right to Development, where each country has the right to develop its own economy based on its unique historical and natural background and no other country can intervene such a right of a country; and 2). Developmental Human Rights, which argues that since it is costly for a government to provide human rights, the level and scope of human rights protection depend on each country's economic development. Combining these two parts offers a leeway for authoritarianism and dictators to justify their repression and human rights transgressions. This narrative is welcome by the authoritarian regimes whose main threat to their rule is foreign intervention,[41] and it is widely implemented and spread through the negotiation and establishment of the Belt and Road Initiative. Moreover, the ongoing pandemic further strengthens the legitimacy and the capacity of the government to restrict individual rights in the name of disease control.

This Chinese narrative about globalization renders the right of the authorities to isolate itself from foreign intervention and maintain their asymmetric power against citizens within their borders. This narrative partly explains the ongoing protests in East and Southeast Asia, but it also explains the decline of the #MilkTeaAlliance in the long run. In this scenario, a durable platform offers the opportunity for citizens to learn and debunk such a narrative and restore belief in liberal democracy. In Case 3-2, the inclusion of Taiwanese and

Hong Kong netizens plays an important role in countering the One-China Principle in the early stages of the #nnevvy incident. The argument made by Taiwanese and Hong Kong Twitter users was quickly absorbed, retweeted, and forwarded by Thai netizens, which illustrates the information sharing function of the #MilkTeaAlliane. Such a mechanism could be replicated if a durable platform can keep these cross-country networks supported by the #MilkTeaAlliance and render timely counterarguments against the ongoing expansion of China's narrative of globalization.

The views expressed are the author's alone, and do not represent the views of the U.S. Government or the Wilson Center.

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