

The Fourth Year of the Milk Tea Alliance

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April 13 is celebrated as a traditional New Year's Eve in Thailand, and it also kicks off the vibrant festivities of the Songkran Water Festival. During this holiday period, Thai people who work away from home often visit their hometowns and reunite with family. However, in 2020, as travel restrictions were imposed, the digital realm buzzed in what later became the #MilkTeaAlliance viral hashtag on Twitter (today's X). Although the memory of the Milk Tea Alliance may have faded for some, it was only four years ago that it sparked an internet 'war' between Thai and Chinese netizens over a controversial issue related to China's sovereignty – specifically the status of Hong Kong and Taiwan.

The Alliance symbolized a unique transnational coalition among netizens on social media platforms as it gained traction among anti-government and anti-regime activists in Hong Kong, Thailand, and Taiwan. Hong Kong and Thailand were grappling with mass movements in their localities at the time, while Taiwan struggled to gain international recognition of its sovereignty. However, as the protests in Hong Kong, Thailand, and Myanmar, who later joined the Milk Tea Alliance discourse following the military coup in February 2021, subsided, and further political consequences unfolded, the popularity of this Alliance seems to have subsequently declined.

On April 4, 2020, a seemingly innocuous retweet by Vachirawit Chivaaree, also known as Bright, a Thai celebrity, ignited a firestorm online. He liked a tweet that included a photo of Hong Kong and referred to it as a "country." This retweet suddenly garnered online attention due to the scope of Bright's fandom, causing an online uproar, particularly among his Chinese fans. The controversy further extended after Chinese fans discovered Bright's girlfriend, known online as Nnevy, had retweeted a post alleging that COVID-19 originated from a lab in Wuhan, China. Additionally, a comment on Instagram during her trip to Taiwan was perceived by Chinese nationalist netizens as supportive of Taiwanese independence and disrespectful of mainland Chinese people.

Instead of remaining passive, Thai netizens reiterated before netizens from other places, notably Hong Kong and Taiwan, joined the Thai side to push back against Chinese nationalists. Soon after that, the term 'Milk Tea Alliance' was coined by a Hongkonger netizen in the early morning of April 13, a term that later played a part in an attempt to forge and strengthen cross-border interaction between activists and protesters in the region.

Thanks to existing transnational networks between activists in the region, the Alliance transcended the digital realm and made its mark in offline spaces. Pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong and Thailand incorporated Milk Tea Alliance-related discourse into their domestic movements, leveraging its symbolism and messages to amplify their cause. When the Free Youth movement in Thailand began in July 2020, Milk Tea Alliance-related symbols and messages, including concerns about the influence and policies of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), were featured in the movement. Moreover, transnational solidarity campaigns under the banner of the Alliance sprang up in other places.

Furthermore, when the Spring Revolution in Myanmar broke out in February 2021 against the military coup, Milk Tea Alliance netizens immediately welcomed Myanmar as a new member and initiated several solidarity campaigns. The period from 2020 to 2021 could be seen as the peak of the Milk Tea Alliance as it gained widespread public attention and was featured in several protests and campaigns. However, its prominence gradually declined and disappeared from media space and street politics following significant developments, such as the implementation of Hong Kong's

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National Security Law on June 30, 2020, the decline of youth protests in Thailand, and the transition from peaceful protests into civil war in Myanmar.

Though the Milk Tea Alliance has faded from the spotlight and the public consciousness, pockets of dedicated activists persist in keeping its flame alive. In Thailand, where the movement originated, some groups of activists are still working on advocating agendas associated with Milk Tea Alliance discourses. This can be seen in original and translated monographs published by Sam Yan Press, a student-run Bangkok-based publishing house. Dedicated to promoting democracy, justice, and human rights, the press continuously publishes books that inform readers about issues related to the Milk Tea Alliance, such as China's foreign policy and human rights issues.

Apart from publishing and raising political awareness, some form of activism related to the Milk Tea Alliance still takes place primarily online. For instance, the account '#MilkTeaAlliance Friends of Myanmar' on X, comprising activists from various ethnic backgrounds within Myanmar as well as foreign activists, continues to advocate for human rights issues in Myanmar and beyond. They issue several statements, organize weekly online meetings, and occasionally gather in person to strengthen networks and collaborations among the network of activists in the region. Similarly, Milk Tea Alliance groups in other Southeast Asian countries, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand, also continue to advocate for their struggles for democracy and causes from their localities. Moreover, they extend their support to global human rights concerns, exemplified by the more recent advocacy for peace in Ukraine and Palestine.

In Hong Kong, however, the Milk Tea Alliance or, in fact, anything related to political resistance and civil disobedience can hardly be seen following the implementation of the National Security Law in 2020. While the Alliance symbols and conversations have disappeared from the city's public spaces, they have arisen in a new place – Japan. In Japan, a place that saw no involvement in the Milk Tea Alliance at the early stages, there is a surprising attempt to establish the "Milk Tea Alliance – Japan". Spearheaded by a group of individuals from Japan, Hong Kong, Myanmar, and Thailand residing in Japan, this initiative aims to strengthen diaspora activism there. Moreover, the Taiwan Digital Diplomacy Association continues to foster the Milk Tea Alliance project, by providing technical support and facilitating collaboration and communication among places that appeared to be key sites of the Alliance, including Thailand and Hong Kong. Through these efforts, the Association also aims to raise global awareness about Taiwan and promote democracy in the region.

After four years, the Alliance has seemingly faded from general public attention, and many groups of activists have dropped the term from their campaigns. This decline is particularly evident in places like Hong Kong. Despite this wane in popularity, there are still dedicated groups who continue to work and define themselves as part of the Milk Tea Alliance, and a rise in activity is seen in new countries like Japan, Indonesia, and Malaysia. These movements have internalized the Alliance and turned it into part of their activism work to foster transnational collaboration and support human rights and democracy in Asia. In other words, the Alliance has transformed from a widespread hashtag and online movement into a more localized form of activism with a transnational character and a symbol of transnational solidarity.

The Milk Tea Alliance offers a fresh perspective to observe and examine international relations in East and Southeast Asia, from a bottom-up perspective. Unlike a more common approach with nation-states as the primary level of analysis, the alliance highlights the significance of people-to-people connections in shaping regional and international politics. By tapping into the topic of public diplomacy, the Milk Tea Alliance serves as an expression of public sentiments towards China's policies, as well as broader issues such as nation branding and public diplomacy efforts.

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