

# DIGITAL SOLIDARITY MOVEMENT OF NON-STATE ACTORS AGAINST AUTHORITARIANISM: MILK TEA ALLIANCE OF HONG KONG AND THAILAND

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper is a study of the recent online social media of Thailand and Hong Kong with their resistance against their authoritarian states. Both of the two countries have faced similar political repression from their states which generates political coalitions of non-state actors. The help of social media platforms that are easily accessible to people from all walks of life, allows these non-state actors to grow stronger in numbers and propel their protest forward. Both of these movements from two different states moreover have shown support for each other through social media and formed the movement called the Milk tea alliance which received a lot of attention in the press. The primary objective of this article is to introduce a significant and arising online transnational alliance challenging existing authoritarian states by taking a closer look at two different movements of non-state actors and to give a detailed account of how the coalition came about and what are their shared goals. Furthermore, this paper explores how social media has opened new horizons and given a meaning-making space for non-state actors to create their own narrative and eventually brought them more opportunities for the fight for democracy in their countries. Excerpts of different accounts, studies, and reports from online news sites, statements of both states actors and other individuals, and academic articles in various disciplines are gathered and analyzed as supporting sources of this paper. In addition, this paper will explore the power of these nation-states and their reactions to these online movements that were formed by their people.*

**Keywords:** Social Movement, Social Media, Non-State Actors, Digital Transnational Coalition, Authoritarianism, Protesters, Political Repression, China, Hong Kong, Thailand

## INTRODUCTION

Milk Tea Alliance is an online democratic movement of netizens that consists of three Asian countries; Hong Kong, Taiwan, India, and Thailand. This movement has started with a social media post on Twitter from a Thai actor which received a backlash from many Chinese internet nationalists. The conflict started when a Thai actor tweeted to show off his photographs from different places and captioned the photos “4 different countries.” This shouldn’t be a problem if one of the places in the picture isn’t Hong Kong and he didn’t call it a country. Chinese fans got really upset with his choice of word. Chinese fans started to dig up more posts on this actor's online media account. Some of the posts were perceived as something that goes against the beliefs of the power of China and their policy. This leads to the online movement by some Thai, Hong Kong, and Taiwanese citizens with the online hashtag #Milkteaalliances. Milk tea is a very popular beverage amongst the citizens of Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Thailand. Each country has its own version of the beverage however in this case milk tea is not only about the consumption aspect. These three countries share a similar political struggle. Food culture referenced movement has developed into a political coalition of cross-national democratic agendas with a shared goal to resist against authoritarianism.

This article would like to give a detailed account of the phenomena of online pro-democratic movements focusing on Hong Kong and Thailand which both are demanding a more democratic ruling system from their states. The reason this article will focus on these two countries is that there

are some striking similarities in their online movement processes of both countries and the two countries also deal with similar political repression. The main objective of this article is to present an important and emerging digital transnational coalitions challenging existed authoritarianism by looking at two collective bodies of non-state actors (that seems to come together for the same goals and beliefs) through the use of social media and hope to be a small contribution for further research on a topic related to the social movement of non-state actors and the uses of social media as a communication tool in politics.

### **Digital Solidarity Movement of Thai and Hong Kong Non-State Actors**

Many questions have followed this solidarity coalition of these netizens such as how did it all start? What do they want? Who are these people? What role does a social medium play in the story? From an article by Tufekci Z., we have seen many social movements happening all over the world and these "social movements have integrated digital connectivity into their toolkits, especially for organizing, gaining publicity, and effectively communicating." (Tufekci, 2014) There are crucial reasons why it is now becoming more apparent that we need to look beyond the realism and international system conception of states. (To look beyond the power of states, the survival of states, the power of the states, and the system of anarchy.) This article wishes to take a closer look into this emerging phenomenon through the alliance of these people using social media as their tool to fight the authoritarianism of their states.

Milk Tea Alliance is made up of internet users in three main countries: Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Thailand. It started in the digital sphere of Twitter and Facebook. Social Media has taken over every corner of the world, there are many controversies regarding the use of social media but one thing that comes out of social media is that it creates new channels- or even a meaning-making space- for users. Ideas, meanings, and beliefs no longer come from a few media sources anymore where only a handful of so-called intellectuals or media practitioners are in charge. Rather social media has given the spaces for individuals to create their own meanings and distribute their ideas and eventually socially shaped the structure that we live in. In Thailand which has been under political repression for hundreds of years, the government bans many media that goes against its own ideology, from books to films and many academic writings. With the internet, this is no longer the case, the Thai government has no control over this opposed discourse anymore. Many generations of Thai students who had been under this censorship were allowed only school textbooks that had been approved by the government. Now they can read, watch and hear more variety of beliefs and narratives they wish using digital connectivity as a channel and not only the stories that were approved by their absolutism states. An excerpt from a 2012 book about social media and democracy of Loader B. and Mercea D. proposes that "Whilst no longer 'new' as communication technologies, the World Wide Web and its concomitant array of social media platforms, such as Facebook, Wikipedia, Youtube, and Twitter, continue to stimulate our collective imaginations for strengthening democracy and/or fears of oppression through surveillance." (Loader & Mercea, 2012) Looking at the use of social media by one of communication theory, agenda-setting theory, it is harder for news agencies to report biased news with the rise of digital media, and these reporters have to be more accountable to the story that they put out for the audiences. Audiences and customers have more chances to check the credibility of their news and reports online where the ability of their government is limited.

Furthermore, social media emphasizes individualism by allowing people to create their own narratives. This creates a distinct separation of individual's narratives from society's narratives as a whole. People now care less about their nation-states. The digital world has opened up new possibilities for them. This has an important implication for the state's power. States are no longer the main focus of their citizens. For these reasons, the rise of digital media can perpetuate the solidarity movement of Hong Kong and Thai citizens who are under political repression by their states, and China's political and cultural hegemony and their dominant ideas are being challenged by new sources of power with more innovative tools (use of social media). If we look at Nye and

Keohane and their approach to transnational relations which is a framework for investigating the role and importance of non-state actors in the global system (Nye & Keohane, 1971). Online social movements of non-state activists can become more important, instead of the domination by the states in the global system.

This transnational alliance of Thai and Hong Kong netizens has started from a meme of Thai actor Bright Wachirawit on Twitter. He is a young and upcoming actor. He had gained huge followers from TV series called together the Series, his romantic partner in the series was played by Win Metawin. This TV series exploded in both Thailand and China. As a result, Bright and Win have gained many Chinese fans and followers. The drama started when Chinese fans found that Bright has a girlfriend named "New Weeraya", and they have been dating for a long time. Later, Bright retweeted a picture of 4 different scenes of 4 different countries with a caption saying this picture was taken from "4 countries", one of which is an image of Hong Kong. Chinese fans saw this tweet and became very dissatisfied because as Chinese nationalists, Hong Kong is a part of China and not a country of its own. This is a very sensitive issue to Chinese people. The story is far from finished because of the dissatisfaction from calling Hong Kong a country. Chinese fans continue to dig up old pictures in New Weeraya's social media account and found a picture when she had a trip to Taiwan and in that post, Bright commented, "You're so beautiful, like a Chinese woman." New Weeraya replied, "What?", which for Thais, this 'what?' can be simply understood as a straightforward response somewhat with a naive and shy manner, but Chinese fans took New Weeraya's answer in a different manner and concluded this 'What?' implies a refusal of looking like a Chinese girl. In that same post, a friend of New Weeraya commented on the post, "What style is this?" New Weeraya replied to the comment "Taiwanese lady style." Now, Chinese fans put together these two comments and interpreted that New Weeraya is not satisfied with Bright saying that she is as beautiful as a Chinese woman because they interpreted all these as New Weeraya is Pro-Taiwan and presumed that New Weeraya supports Taiwan's separation from mainland China. All of this has sparked a massive battle on Twitter between the Thai and the Chinese. Most Thai people said that Taiwan is a country that goes against the Chinese belief. The Chinese netizens made a counterattack about the Thai monarchy and said that Thailand is an underdeveloped country. The Chinese fans also asked the Thais to give back the mask that the Chinese government has donated to Thailand during the start of the COVID 19 pandemic. And finally, the Chinese fans wish for Thailand to be under the military dictatorship's control forever. As for the people of Hong Kong and the Taiwanese people they have shown support for the Thai in this digital battle. Things escalated quickly in this battle that the hashtag #nnevvy which is the name of New Weeraya's Twitter and instagram account surged in popularity and has about 1.7 million tweets on the topic.

This issue can be more deeply analyzed from the global media and global fandom aspects. An article called *Imagining Transcultural Fandom* by Annett S. which studied animation and global media communities suggests that "transnational fan culture is a way of conceptualizing national identities and fandom... transnationalism takes into account some frictions as a key feature of globalization. For examples friction of Japan's economic influence on Southeast Asia is the awkward, unequal, unstable and creative qualities of interconnection across difference." (Annett, 2011). There is some friction in this case as well. Friction can arise from the inequality of accessibility in the forum or channel for exchanging thoughts. However, friction can bring progress as it can open up space for discussion between media fans to discuss any social issues through the channel that those media have opened up.

The result of such a battle prompted the Chinese Embassy in Thailand to issue a statement online that "The One China Principle" is a principle that both Thai and Chinese have long adhered to. Some choices of words from the embassy are that One-China Principle is "irrefutable" and China is "firmly opposed" to anyone who thinks the other way. The spokesperson statement and the word used show that this is the only way and no other way is acceptable or possible. This emphasizes the Chinese communist party and their international relations practice with other countries that they are willing to protect the power and the state of their hegemony through authoritarianism. China, then, can be classified as offensive realists were to maintain state's security

they need to maximize its power until they reach superiority and small states can coexist in peace as long as they are on the same page as the superior state's beliefs and principles. People who express their opinions contradict this principle and those who refer to Taiwan and Hong Kong as countries are considered as someone who is prejudiced and they think it reflects ignorance of these people. The statement also devalues any online statements that go against its belief by using words like "online noises" and that these statements do not reflect the mainstream belief of all Thai people.

The Chinese Embassy also said that there are some people on the internet who take this opportunity to amplify the scale of the story. These same people are trying to plan a malice story to stir up dissolution and disagreement but they will certainly never succeed. The embassy also emphasized that "China and Thailand as one family." The friendship of the two countries has been around for a long time. In the past, no matter what crisis Thailand and China have always helped each other. Including the COVID-19 crisis. This time too where the virus has no borders so the spokesperson suggests that holding hands (of China and Thailand) is the only way to help get through the pandemic. The term friendship is an interesting choice here as how do they define friendship? Does friendship mean to let someone take control over you without your consent? This article would like to propose another way of looking at this important issue by using a de-centered approach which centers on "the social construction of patterns of rule through the ability of individuals to create meanings in action." (Bevir & Rhodes, 2011) and "a stateless theory where people shouldn't accept the formal state structure that can be understood separately from its people beliefs and traditions." In this view even though Hong Kong and Taiwan are de jure part of mainland China however the beliefs and traditions of its citizens do not reflect that. Hong Kong and Taiwan protesters engaged in a fight for their autonomy. Individuals' beliefs and traditions should be taken into account in this case, not just the structure and the narratives of the superior state.

This issue advanced deeper because many Thai youths are also fighting for their own democracy in their own country as the junta has been in power for already 7 years. Thai student-led movement is showing their support for Hong Kong and Taiwan in their fights for their own independence and the rights for their own autonomy. The young Thais are fighting against authoritarian rule and also adopted many protesting strategies from the Hong Kong 2019 protest. It is important to point out the similarity and difference between the Thai authoritarian control and the one of the Chinese. The rise of China has been discussed endlessly in recent times but one of the things that come hand in hand with the power of China is its control system. The main demand of Thai and Hong Kong protest is the fight against authoritarian rule. However for Hong Kong, it's a fight against authoritarian rule from one dominant state to another but for Thai, it's a fight against the cultural hegemony of the authoritarian system of the Thai monarchy and military dictatorship. However, both of these movements demand a more horizontal system of governing instead of a vertical system of control.

Hong Kong was handed back over to China in 1997 with the then "one country, two systems" policy. This policy allowed Hong Kong to possess a high level of territorial autonomy in its own right. The policy also allowed Hong Kong to continue having its own government and power to control itself in terms of administration, juridical aspect, and freedom of its press which sets Hong Kong as different from mainland China. There were many protests against the communist power of China in Hong Kong before 2003, 2012, and 2014. Hong Kong has long been more pro-democratic than most mainland Chinese. The problem started with a murder. In 2018, a 20-year-old pregnant Hong Kong lady was murdered by her beau while out traveling in Taiwan. The suspect Chan Tong Kai traveled back to Hong Kong and has been prosecuted for lesser crimes. Since Chan is a Hong Kong citizen, there is no way he could be prosecuted for his crime outside of Hong Kong jurisdiction territory and he couldn't be sent to Taiwan to be tried for his crime. And this is the start of Carrie Lam attempting to support a bill that will allow for Chan to be extradited. But this raised many concerns as if this bill was successful it would allow for Hong Kong courts to have the power to send suspects to jurisdiction territory not only Taiwan but also to China. This means that anyone who is considered a threat to the Chinese communist party can be transferred and be prosecuted by the Chinese courts which posed a major danger to Hong Kong people's rights. This beginning has

given way for pro-democratic Hong Kongers to come out and demonstrate their dissatisfaction with the China system of control.

For Thailand, Prime Minister General Prayuth Chan-Ocha came to power under the military coup d'état in May 2014. After five years in power, he was voted back as a prime minister in 2019 by a newly formed parliament government. Prayuth won the vote with the help of 250 Senate members elected by himself. The result came 10 weeks after the general election which was rigged in support of Prayuth (Ellis-Petersen, 2019). This struggle to stay in power by royalist Prayuth and repeated intervention of the military-backed by the Thai monarchy has upset many students and people in general. Thailand also has the strictest lese-majeste law where commoners are forbidden to criticize the wealthiest royal family in the world (Lese-majeste explained: How Thailand forbids insult of its royalty, 2017). From a statement of UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, they are very concerned with how this law is used in Thailand since 2014 and the severity of its sentencing a man named Wichai Thepwing was found guilty of posting online contents that deemed as defamatory to the royal family and were sentenced to 70 years in jail and later reduced to 35 years after his confessions (Colville, 2017). All of this is an important catalyst for the 2020 students who led the protest in Thailand. One of the highest percentages of inequality in Thailand and the economic crisis during the COVID 19 pandemic has accelerated the discontent and frustration with the authoritarianism of Thailand.

Both of these movements started off with some "leaders" that we can often see in news headlines. For Hong Kong, the most recognized "leader" of the movement is Joshua Wong aged 24, a Hong Kong student and politician. For Thai protesters, the movement has started off with some "leaders" such as Mike Panupong aged 24, Penguin Parit aged 22, and Rung Panusaya aged 22, these people have something in common which is that they are students and also activists (Thailand protests: three pro-democracy leaders hospitalized after a melee outside the police station, 2020). Even though some would consider them as "leaders" because we can see them deliver speeches of their demands on the stages at the beginning of the movement, the movement will go on without them. As we can see clearly in the recent Thai protests where the dictatorship government arrested them on sedition charges, but this doesn't stop the movement to continue and flourish. After these anti-government protesters were arrested, the movement continued without these so-called leaders. One way to put it is that the protest in Thailand can continue without a public leader. Leaderless social movements are seen to have proliferated in the 21st century. We see a pattern of solidarity alliance of non-state actors across the world not only in Thailand and Hong Kong from France's "Yellow Vests", London's "Extinction Rebellions" and even the MeToo Movement in the United States (Graeber, 2018). Not having a 'face' or a leader is what these movements have in common and more importantly these movements heavily and practically rely on the use of social media (Bohlen, 2020). We can look at social media as a new tool for anti-government protests where it has become a big and integral part of how these movements advanced and propelled. It allows people to connect more easily amongst the protesters who share the same ideology, narrative, and demands. With a few clicks, they can meet up for a flash mob in any location of the country.

Since the online coalition of Thai and Hong Kong protesters, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi has shown strong backing for Thai Prime Minister Prayuth through investments and economic support. Wang said that China bolsters Thailand's duty to "social stability, development and prosperity." (Scimia, 2020). From this statement, some could interpret it as China's support of Prayuth's ruling to use a state of emergency banning public protests. On the other hand, the alliance of online movements between Thailand and Hong Kong still continues and strengthens. Hong Kongers have shared protesting tactics and tips for Thai protesters to fight back the authorities that started to use unnecessary violence measures such as water cannons mixed with blue dye and tear gas against Thai protesters. Moreover, Joshua Wong has recently called for global support for the Thai protests by sending an email to US Company, Nonlethal Technologies, Inc. to stop exporting tear gas to Thailand. On Nov 21, 2020, Joshua Wong posted on his Twitter an open letter from Hong Kong protesters who are now in prison for their democratic causes that read "Our brothers and sisters in Thailand: "On this day last year, Hongkongers were at the frontline battling against an

authoritative regime the exact same way you do today. Futile as our resistance may seem, we have made the evildoers burn as we burn. This is already a success for us. Let's achieve the same goal each in our own ways." This text is one of the pieces of evidence that represents the solidarity between these two groups of protesters in Thailand and Hong Kong. The message suggests that the power that they are fighting against is unbeatable and 'evil'. Their movement might be useless but it is better than not fighting at all and the 'evildoers' will burn with them as they voice their discontent and show their anger towards the states and this already is a success. The text moreover acts as a motivational message and exhibits support for individualism that we will achieve the same goal each in our own individual ways.

We cannot predict what will happen to these movements in the future. Will they reach the victory as they wished is still to be revealed. The most apparent is that both the countries Thailand and China will not give in easily. Carrie Lam, China appointed Hong Kong leader has come out with a statement "We are a very free society so for the time being, people have the freedom to say whatever they want to say" (Hong Kong resignations 'blatant challenge' to authority: China, 2020). This statement can imply that the future is uncertain but for now Hong Kong is still very free. Lam is granted the power to remove any legislator who is not patriotic enough in her eyes without having to appeal to the city's court. She has all the power to get rid of any opposition to China's power. From Aljazeera's report, the findings from many polls indicate that the majority of Hong Kongers support this pro-democratic protest and something has to be done about these people's dissatisfaction. Joshua Wong is facing five years in prison if he's found guilty of instigating unlawful protests (Hong Kong: Joshua Wong remains defiant in face of potential five years in prison, 2020). For Thai protesters, similar discourse is also used to describe the movement as being unlawful and the Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-Ocha has recently declared to use all forms of laws and legislation to prosecute the 'unlawful' protester.

## CONCLUSION

The 21st century brings about many interesting global political phenomena. One of them being the global social movement of non-state actors using social media as an integral tool to achieve the same goal. For Thai and Hong Kong, this is the struggle against their authoritarian states. The article acts as a detailed overview of the Milk Tea Alliance by showing what initiated the coalition, the reason behind these protests, non-state actors that are involved. There are apparent similarities between the two movements which enable these people to form a coalition through the use of social media. Social media has both good and bad aspects however for this particular incident, it gives space for individuals to show and voice their narrative and discontent. Social media in this way has a powerful implement for non-state actors to modify the political landscapes according to their ideologies and beliefs. Their struggles are far from over, the concept of territorial states with guaranteed security and power is not the only solution in the world that we live in now. The world is not what it used to be, the internet has a great impact on humans and the media are not only being reproduced by only a handful of people. Political institutions and states need to value the diversity and inclusion of these individuals which we believe eventually will lead to peace. After all, the state's role is to treat everyone impartially and to ensure freedom and right.

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