

How East Asia's Milk Tea Alliance Has Succeeded, and Why It May Fail

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The Milk Tea Alliance has made waves, even in the physical world. But its impact will be capped by authoritarian governments across the region.

When Hong Kong pro-democracy activist Joshua Wong pled guilty to his charges on 23 November, there was an outburst of support among Thai netizens. The hashtag #StandWithJoshuaWong trended on Thai Twitter, as users highlighted Wong's solidarity with the Thai pro-democracy cause. The next day, around a dozen members of the Anti-One China Policy Thailand group congregated in front of the Beijing embassy in Bangkok, protesting Wong's arrest. The power of the Milk Tea Alliance, virtual in its creation, was manifested in a concrete way.

It began, as most things do on the Asian internet, with a celebrity. On April 10, Actor Vachirawit "Bright" Chiva-aree mistakenly liked a tweet that (also mistakenly) suggested Hong Kong was a country, and was forced to apologise by his Chinese fans. Thai netizens came to his defence but were attacked by Chinese keyboard warriors that took to insulting Thailand.

However, Thai netizens – most opposed to the government of Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha which emerged from the 2014 coup – relished the opportunity to insult their own country and responded with self-deprecating and witty memes. Internet users from Taiwan and Hong Kong soon chimed in, forming an anti-China internet front they called the Milk Tea Alliance. It has since attracted the attention of anti-Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and pro-democracy movements elsewhere, with the Chai Masala Alliance in India promoted by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and the Ryazhenka Alliance formed in solidarity with Belarus.

Protesters are now forming an "umbrella shield" at the barricades, a tactic they apparently learned from Hong Kong protests. [#MilkTeaAlliance](#) [#16](#) [#Thailand](#) [#KE](#) [#whatshappeninginthailand](#) [pic.twitter.com/pstrG8DHq3](#)

— Khaosod English (@KhaosodEnglish) [October 16, 2020](#)

The Alliance is primarily a social media phenomenon and is largely leaderless. Yet it has proved remarkably durable, with offline implications. The Anti One-China Policy group has organised a number of protests in front of Beijing's embassy in Bangkok. The continued Thai pro-democracy protests (recently put on a [year-end hiatus](#)) prominently featured Milk Tea Alliance symbolism, and continues to see strong support from Hong Kong netizens.

A Leaderless Movement Captures Leaders' Attention

Though a movement coming from below, the Milk Tea Alliance has garnered the attention of Chinese, Taiwanese and American leaders. The day after the Alliance was formalised on April 12,

Taiwan President Tsai Ing-Wen [took to Twitter](#) to wish Thailand a happy Thai New Year – in Thai. The Chinese embassy in Thailand responded with a [public statement](#) restating the irrefutability of the “One China” policy. Additionally, the Chinese government has been accused of disinformation campaigns that paint the Milk Tea Alliance as an “[American-engineered ‘color revolution’](#)”, with fake documentation of correspondence between Taiwanese and American government officials.

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The Alliance has drawn support from politicians in the United States, specifically through Senators Dick Durbin and Robert Menendez’s support and a recent Senate Foreign Relations Committee [resolution](#) expressing support for Thailand’s pro-democracy movement. A staffer on the Committee was [anonymously quoted](#) referencing the Milk Tea Alliance.

The interaction of online netizens with important international actors reveals the potential potency of the alliance as well as new forms of resistance to Chinese influence in the region.

However, resistance to China is far from the only thing that holds this alliance together. Thailand’s protests are aimed squarely at the junta government and the royal family, while Hong Kong’s was aimed at the CCP. In that sense, Thais and Hong Kongers are not bonded primarily by opposition to China, but by the act of resistance itself as it manifests on social media.

“We Hong Kong-ers are acting as if the Thai protests are our protests, because in China or in Hong Kong, it’s just not possible to do so anymore,” confesses Chinese dissident and cartoonist Badiucuo. “[Thai protests] help us to sustain that dream of freedom or democracy.”

The protest-sharing on Twitter provides a vicarious window for others to live through, whether the protest is in Thailand, Belarus or India. Resistance to authoritarianism becomes a cause celebre in and of itself – regardless of its target – because it fuels the dream of democratisation and freedom elsewhere.

In some ways, the Milk Tea Alliance has already created impact in a brick and mortar world – catalysing offline protests and creating new ways to think about international alliances among leaders and protesters. However, its impact will remain curbed by the strength of the CCP and the authoritarian governments it aligns with across the region.

In Thailand, Xi and Prayut tout the policy of “[Thailand and China as one family](#)”. In 2020, China has become Thailand’s [top source](#) of foreign investment. Through its economic might, China can choose to ignore these expressions of dissent – especially from people it doesn’t consider its citizens. But this is not to say that hard power, traditionally defined, necessarily always wins. As Assistant Professor Wasana Wonguwat declared in an [interview on the Milk Tea Alliance](#): “I think we actually have a lot of hope ... I don’t think Beijing is invincible.”

For the near-term, all eyes are on Thailand’s pro-democracy movement. In the unlikely event that authoritarianism can be defeated by one member of the Milk Tea Alliance, it can send a resounding message across the region about the stability of authoritarians elsewhere. Even if it does not, the rise of the Alliance provides yet another case that social media movements can make waves in the real world.

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