

Continuity and Change in Transnational Youth Activist Networks: From the Network of Young Democratic Asians to the Milk Tea Alliance

Tuwanont Phattharathanasut, PhD, Waseda University; Visiting Fellow, Academia Sinica¹

Abstract

This study aims to explore the evolution of transnational youth activism in Asia by situating the Milk Tea Alliance (MTA) within the context of its predecessor, the Network of Young Democratic Asians (NOYDA). It examines these movements through three forms of transnational collective action: transnational advocacy networks, transnational coalitions, and transnational social movements. I argue that despite opportunities to restructure modes of transnational collective action, such as during protests in Thailand and Myanmar, the MTA remains primarily a transnational advocacy network due to the experiences of youth activists with NOYDA. This illustrates that the current state of transnational youth activism in the region has yet to progress significantly toward becoming a transnational coalition or social movement. Ultimately, this study underscores political activism as a long-term process that represents the interplay between past movements and current activism.

Introduction

In the evening of April 13, 2020, @ShawTim, a Twitter user from Hong Kong, introduced the term “Milk Tea Alliance” to describe a loosely formed coalition supporting the Thai side in a meme war against pro-Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Internet accounts. This meme war was sparked by controversial social media activity and virtual interactions between a Thai celebrity, Bright – Vachirawit Chivaaree, and his girlfriend, known online as Nnevvvy, which were interpreted by Chinese nationalists as support for Hong Kong and Taiwan independence. After the meme war ended, the term Milk Tea Alliance (MTA) quickly extended its influence from online to offline spaces, becoming a component of youth movements across East and Southeast Asia.

The MTA recalls a preceding effort from four years earlier to establish transnational youth alliance and platforms to foster cross-border collaboration under the banner of the Network of Young Democratic Asians (NOYDA), which briefly existed from 2016 to 2017.

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NOYDA and MTA reference each other in the sense that they both include youth members from similar geographical locations. Additionally, both networks emerged during the prolonged wave of youth activism in East and Southeast Asia that started with the Sunflower Movement in 2014 and continued until the Spring Revolution in 2021.

This study examines the evolution and dynamics of transnational youth activism in East and Southeast through a processual perspective, using case studies of the conjunction between NOYDA and MTA, two transnational alliances of youth activists in the region that emerged in different periods. Specifically, it investigates the factors that influence shifts in their relationship and how these alliances navigate three forms of transnational collective actions—transnational advocacy networks, transnational coalitions, and transnational social movements—between 2016 to 2021. Two main research questions will be addressed: first, “How have the forms of transnational collective action among youth activists in East and Southeast Asia evolved over time” And second, “What dynamics have shaped the development and interaction of transnational alliances?” By situating MTA within the broader history of transnational youth activism in the region, the study views it as part of a continuous process, illustrating the connectivity between past and present modes of political activism. Ultimately, this study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the current state of transnational activism in the region.

Current studies of the MTA often frame this loose transnational alliance as an exclusive and unique online phenomenon, distinct from earlier forms of transnational collective action in the region (e.g., Kreutz and Makrogianni 2024; Sastramidjaja 2023). While some research has identified pre-existing infrastructure (Phattharathanasut 2024; Teeratanabodee and Prommongkol 2023; Wasserstrom 2023), there remains significant room for further exploration to better understand the complex interplay of factors across temporal sequences and how these shape the relationship between contemporary and historical activism. As Jackie Smith (2008, 4) noted in her study, many activists and observers overlooked the contribution of past transnational collectives to global change and failed to recognize how these earlier movements influence contemporary transnational mobilization. This underscores the importance of viewing activism as long-term—fluid, perpetually evolving, and interactively produced, rather than static or isolated event. As Beckerman (2022, 1) aptly stated, “Change—the kind that topples social norms and uproots orthodoxies—happens slowly at first.”

By adopting a processual perspective, this study argues that the form of transnational collective action under the banner of the MTA, characterized as a transnational advocacy network, has been influenced by the history of negotiation and alliance-building within the NOYDA. This reflects how past experiences of activists shape the modes of present-day activism. Since the establishment of NOYDA, the form of transnational collective action among youth activists in East and Southeast Asia have evolved through negotiations, tensions, and challenges, alternating between transnational advocacy networks and transnational coalitions. This legacy has profoundly shaped subsequent forms of collective action, like the MTA, which has remained a transnational advocacy network even when opportunities for restructuring, such as during the protest in Thailand and Myanmar. This demonstrates that the form of transnational alliance is not static but instead exhibits fluidity, change, and development over time, shifting between different forms of transnational collection action. Consequently, this study sheds light on the fluidity of activist networks at the transnational level and intersection between past and present activism. It also emphasizes the need for a careful examination of the multilayered relationships that shape forms and dynamics of transnational activism and relations.

This article is divided into four main sections. The first section will define the three forms of transnational collective action and outlines the study's theoretical framework and methodology. The second section provides a brief historical background of contemporary transnational youth activism in East and Southeast Asia and the establishment of NOYDA. In the third section, I will carefully analyze the evolution of transnational activism, focusing on the transition from NOYDA and MTA. Finally, the conclusion aims to discuss the current state of transnational activism and collective action in Asia, as well as the way forward.

The Fluidity of Transnational Collective Action and Processual Perspective

Collective action is a naturally evolving process. Social movements and political activism inherently involve a degree of contingency and fluidity, developing through sequences of events, episodes of change, and factors that shape alliances over time. Various elements play a role in shifting these relationships, including cycles of contention, tactical adjustments, culture, power structures, and class dynamics, which collectively foster collaboration, conflict, and learning (Tarrow 2022; Zajak et al. 2020). Operating within and across domestic and international arenas, transnational collective action is particularly

sensitive to shifts in the political environment in both spheres. This highlights that collective action does not emerge from pre-existing ideals or worldviews, nor is it static or unaffected by pre- and post-sequence events. Instead, it should be understood as a process that develops through the progression of complex and often contradictory projects.

As dynamic and evolving phenomena, transnational collective actions take on various forms, reflecting differing levels of coordination and shared perspectives in transnational activism (Smith 2008, 117). These actions can change, develop, decline, and resurge over time. According to Khagram, Riker, and Sikkink (2002, 6-9), transnational collective action can be categorized into three types: transnational advocacy networks (focused on information exchange), transnational coalitions (sharing tactics and strategies), and transnational social movements (joint mobilization).

Transnational advocacy networks are networks that link individuals, activists and civil societies across different countries and nations, “who are bound together by shared values, a common discourse, and dense exchanges of information and services” (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 2). They can be formed both formally and informally, though most are based on informal contacts, and operate in both offline and online spaces. The core of these network relationships is the exchange and use of information, which means that these networks are unlikely to involve sustained coordination or strategy sharing, nor do they engage in large-scale mobilization on the streets (Khagram, Riker, and Sikkink 2002, 7).

A transnational coalition is a set of activists based in different geographical locations who are linked and coordinated through shared strategies or sets of tactics. Compared to transnational advocacy networks, coalitions have a more formal level of interaction and involve more routine communication. They also usually have more clearly defined expectations and efforts at mutual support, a more explicit commitment to specific campaigns, and may engage in joint mobilization campaigns to achieve certain goals (Smith 2008, 118).

The last type is transnational social movements. According to Tarrow (2001, 12), transnational social movements are defined as “socially mobilized groups with constituents in at least two states, engaged in sustained contentious interaction with power-holders in at least one state other than their own, or against an international institution, or a multinational economic actor.” This form of relationship has the capacity to generate coordination and sustained joint social mobilization in more than one country through actions such as protests

and disruptive activities. Transnational social movements have the highest capacity for disruptive and formal levels of interaction compared to the two previously mentioned forms of transnational collective action. However, they are also the most difficult to sustain and rarely occur (Khagram, Riker, and Sikkink 2002, 8).

The forms of transnational collective action are not static or fixed entities; rather, they can develop and change over time. It is common for a transnational advocacy network to evolve into a transnational coalition or a transnational social movement. Conversely, a transnational social movement may be downgraded to a transnational coalition or advocacy network. Such changes often stem from inherent contingency and fluidity, tactical adjustments, or shifts in the political environment at both domestic and international levels (Diani and Mische 2015, 309). Additionally, internal conflicts, tensions, and disagreements within the cross-mobilization alliance can also drive these transformations. Thus, it is expected that the form of collective action will change and evolve based on the decisions of actors within the network, shaped by their experiences and situational factors they encounter.

To capture this fluidity and explore the linkages between transnational collective actions across different time periods, this study adopts a processual perspective. A processual perspective “seeks to reconstruct the temporal sequence of events, to identify significant steps (turning points) and patterns in the process, and to analytically specify how events in a sequence are connected to each other” (Bosi and Malthaner 2023, 3). This approach enables a more nuanced analysis of the dynamics of intersectional conflicts and alliances over time (Zajak et al. 2020, 7). It also allows us to view youth activism as a long-term process embedded in everyday life experiences, moving beyond the notion of youth politics as merely an expression of ‘youthfulness’ (Bayat 2013, 2017).

The emergence of NOYDA in April 2016 and the rise of the MTA in April 2020 present an excellent opportunity to examine the long-term dynamics and the evolving nature of transnational youth collective action. These two alliances emerged within the same wave of youth movements in East and Southeast Asia, spanning from Taiwan’s Sunflower Movement in 2014 to Myanmar’s Spring Revolution in 2021. Some activists have also been involved in both groups, highlighting the potential to identify patterns of continuity and connections across different temporal contexts. This makes them compelling case studies for understanding the fluidity and shifting relationships within transnational youth activism in Asia.

From 2023 to 2024, I conducted several in-depth interviews with youth activists and observers from Hong Kong, Japan, Myanmar, the Philippines, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam who have been involved in either or both NOYDA and MTA, using a snowball sampling strategy. These interviews aimed to explore their experience in participating in transnational activism and to draw the connections and the development of collective action and the episodes of change that have shaped transnational activism into the region. Additionally, document analysis of primary and secondary sources was employed to connect the narrative, verify the data gathered from the interviews, and refine the analysis of the long-term processes at play.

The Rise and Decline of the Network of Young Democratic Asians

Before the establishment of NOYDA, youth activists who began engaging in political activism after 2010 had already expressed interest and interacted with like-minded youth abroad on several occasions. However, most of these efforts were bilateral or limited to one specific region, either East or Southeast Asia. In East Asia, after the end of the anti-National Education Campaign in Hong Kong, a group of high school student activists known as Scholarism visited Taiwan in 2012 to interact with Taiwanese youth who had just concluded the anti-Media Monopoly Movement.² This interaction built a network between the new generation of young activists from these two places and paved the way for protest diffusion and inspiration during the Sunflower Movement and the Umbrella Movement, both in 2014 (Ho 2019, 92-93). Later, this connection extended to other places when Hongkongers and Taiwanese visited Japan to interact with the student leaders of the Students Emergency Action for Liberal Democracy (SEALDs), who were campaigning against the amendment of security-related laws that would enhance the capacity of Japan's Self-Defense Forces (SEALDs 2016).

In Southeast Asia, there are well-established bilateral networks between activists from countries like Myanmar and Thailand, and Indonesia and Malaysia, as well as efforts by individual activists to build personal ties with young activists in Hong Kong and Taiwan,

² The 2012 anti-National Education Campaign in Hong Kong was a movement against the introduction of a new school curriculum that was perceived as favoring the CCP narrative and strongly criticizing the democratic system; The 2012 anti-Media Monopoly Movement in Taiwan was a series of protests urging the Taiwanese government to reform laws preventing media monopolies, following the Want Want China Times Group's aggressive acquisition of print media, cable, and digital television markets in Taiwan.

such as the case of Netiwit Chotiphathaisal (Phattharathanasut 2024). A regional framework to promote regionalism below the state level also emerged prominently through several platforms, such as the ASEAN Civil Society Conference and the ASEAN Youth Forum, established in 2004 and 2009 respectively. These platforms serve as spaces for Southeast Asian civil societies and activists, both adults and youth, to exchange knowledge and build cross-national ties with each other (Rother 2015, 113). They have become a springboard for activists in the region to expand their regional network, discuss socio-political issues, and explore ways to collaborate on addressing these issues. However, multilateral and cross-regional interaction between post-2010 youth activists from East and Southeast Asia did not really occur until the establishment of NOYDA in 2016.

NOYDA was established as a result of a three-day meeting in April 2016 in Manila, the Philippines. This meeting was initiated by a Vietnamese activist who was inspired by a series of youth movements in East and Southeast Asia that continued from 2014 to 2015, including well-known movements like the Sunflower Movement in Taiwan, the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong, and the SEALDs Movement in Japan. He considered this period as “the most hopeful time” for democracy and human rights in the region (Anonymous interview with Vietnamese #1). This wave was particularly special for him and other Vietnamese activists because Vietnam had also just experienced the anti-China protests, which was the first large-scale mobilization in many years.³ Consequently, they decided to initiate a platform that could connect youth activists from different geographical locations and establish infrastructure in preparation for upcoming protests.

When it was first founded, NOYDA included members from seven countries or territories, including Hong Kong, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam. Each nation had two representatives, resulting in a total of 14 official members. Furthermore, there were observer members, such as Myanmar and Tibet. NOYDA declared its objective to be an alliance of young individuals and activists in Asia working together to “achieve a peaceful, equal, sustainable society through democratic processes and people-oriented development. By confronting common challenges, we defend human rights and stand in solidarity with civil society and the oppressed in the region” (NOYDA 2018).

The NOYDA network was designed as a loose and informal network, assembling many components of transnational advocacy networks. It aimed to be a platform that gathered

³ The 2014 anti-China Movement was a series of protests in Vietnam sparked by the maritime territorial dispute between Vietnam and China in the South China Sea.

a new generation of youth activists in East and Southeast Asia to build trust, establish communication channels, and cultivate relationships in preparation for future transnational collective action campaigns and solidarity when movements arose in parts of the region (Interview with Vietnamese #1). The result of the first meeting was the establishment of NOYDA, the appointment of members, and the creation of a Facebook group to establish a channel for communication and information sharing among the members. However, the infrastructure to operate NOYDA was perceived by members as “not well-crafted” (Interview with Hongkonger #1), as it still lacked a sustainable collaborative framework, a long-term working plan or strategy, and the capacity to launch joint mobilizations. Indeed, the members rarely communicated with each other after the meeting in Manila, notwithstanding the existing means of communication (Interview with Taiwanese #1).

After the meeting in Manila, NOYDA members gathered for two additional meetings: one was a field trip to observe legislative elections in Hong Kong from late August to early September 2016, and a conference meeting in Taiwan in September 2017. It was during the meeting in Taiwan that the NOYDA attempted to transform itself from a transnational advocacy network into another form of transnational collective action by becoming a more formalized and consolidated coalition. During the meeting, NOYDA members and participants mainly focused on establishing a structured framework, instituting a long-term working strategy through the initiation of a 10- to 20-year aspiration plan, and creating a monthly communication channel via Skype to update their work progress and discuss future collaborative campaigns (Interview with Filipino #1; Interview with Taiwanese #1). They also formed working groups and assigned them to appropriate members, including those focusing on human rights, foreign investments, diversity, and peace and conflict-resolution (NOYDA 2017). As a result, NOYDA evolved from a transnational advocacy network into a transnational coalition after the meeting in Taiwan because they developed into a more formal level of interaction and involved more routine communication, as well as clearly defined expectations and efforts at mutual support.

Rather than fostering a more comprehensive framework for collaboration, the transition into a transnational coalition introduced significant challenges for NOYDA in sustaining its cohesion, ultimately leading to its dissolution sometime between late 2017 and early 2018. The first major challenge NOYDA faced was establishing a mutual working agenda, particularly given the diverse perceptions on international politics among its members, despite their common commitment to human rights and democratic values.

Following the conclusion of the first meeting in Manila, issues related to China and CCP issues began to dominate the alliance's agenda. This trend became even more pronounced when the second and third meetings were held in Hong Kong and Taipei, respectively, causing NOYDA's discussions and activities leaned heavily towards domestic campaigns in these two places that focused on China and CCP-related issues.

This narrow focus caused members from countries and territories whose advocacy campaigns were unrelated or only indirectly connected to China and the CCP to become disengaged and unmotivated to participate actively in NOYDA's activities. Over time, some members gradually disengage as they saw little relevance or benefit in continued involvement. For instance, Japanese activists, whose campaigns primarily focus on opposing the US-Japan military alliance, found NOYDA's agenda misaligned with their movement, especially since the expansion of US-Japan military cooperation was viewed as a response to China's rising influence (Interview with Japanese #1). Similarly, Thai activists perceived NOYDA as an attempt to create a frontline against the CCP, which did not align with their priorities (Interview with Thai #1). These dynamics highlight not only a significant perception gap among youth activists in the region but also the relatively low level of skepticism towards China and CCP during that period.

The second reason is the structure of NOYDA, which made it difficult to expand and operationalize. NOYDA was perceived as a selective and exclusive club because they tended to recruit new members based on existing ties with current members, making their activities relatively close-knit, with only a few individuals having access to participate (Interview with Taiwanese #2). Furthermore, most of the activists invited to join the alliance were internationally well-known or frontline youth activists in their respective domestic movements, leading many to consider NOYDA an elite transnational activist group where only famous and select activists could be involved. As one activist recalled, "We used to joke with each other about whether we were famous enough to join NOYDA" (Interview with Filipino #2).

Consequently, NOYDA faced difficulties in expanding and sustaining their group, as well as in engaging many low-profile activists and observers who wanted to join the network and dedicate themselves to transnational activism but were unable to do so due to a lack of connections or status within their own domestic movements. Recruiting well-known activists also made it challenging to sustain their programs and arrange routine meetings, as these

activists are on the frontlines of their own domestic movements and could not actively engage in transnational activism. They were also more likely to become the first targets of state repression and harassment, face imprisonment, have their ability to travel freely restricted, and be closely surveilled by foreign governments when traveling abroad.

Last but not least, NOYDA faced a resource shortage in operating the coalition. After the conclusion of the third meeting, members actively sought financial assistance and funding to operationalize its programs and arrange regular in-person meetings, allowing members to interact, discuss human rights issues in their local contexts, and explore ways to extend cross-border collaboration. However, NOYDA was unable to secure sustainable, large-scale financial support, which prevented them from organizing further meetings to bring members together and continue the planned projects (Interview with Taiwanese #1). The failure to acquire funding reflects the limited skill sets and experience of young activists, who were more familiar with domestic activism and had just started engaging in transnational activism at the time, in accessing international funding.

The rise and decline of NOYDA illustrate the dynamics of transnational collective action, which can evolve or regress over time based on the mutual interests of the alliance, tension, and resource availability. Initially conceived as a transnational advocacy network for youth activists, NOYDA later restructured into a transnational coalition to encourage greater collaboration among its members. Unfortunately, this shift contributed to its decline, as it exacerbated existing challenges and introduced new ones. After its dissolution, NOYDA's Facebook page occasionally issued statements on regional human rights issues, such as condemning human rights abuses by authorities in Hong Kong and Thailand. However, no events or meetings were held to bring members together or initiate joint campaigns for collective action, as they were unable to secure sufficient funding to gather all members in one location for another meeting. The lack of activity and interaction among members led to NOYDA's eventual decline and disappearance from activist discourse and public recognition. Despite this, NOYDA left behind a legacy and experiences that will continue to influence the dynamics of transnational activism and collective actions in the future.

The Milk Tea Alliance and Its Dynamics

The Birth of the Milk Tea Alliance and the Thai Youth Movement

After the decline of NOYDA, the MTA emerged as the next transnational collective action among youth activists in East and Southeast Asia. MTA arose during a meme war involving Thai and pro-CCP Internet commentators in the early of April 2020. This conflict began when Bright – Vachirawit Chivaaree, a Thai celebrity, liked a post referring to Hong Kong as a ‘country,’ and his girlfriend, Weeraya Sukaram, known online as Nnevvvy, posted content perceived by Chinese nationalists as expressing support for Taiwan’s independence. Subsequently, Hongkongers, Taiwanese, and other Asian netizens joined the Thai side to counter Chinese nationalist attacks, expanding the conflict to a multilateral level.

At this stage, most of MTA’s activities take place on social media platforms, especially Twitter. The #MilkTeaAlliance hashtag was primarily in English and focused on anti-China and anti-CCP discourse, as well as counterarguments to Beijing’s globalization narrative (Wang and Rauchfleisch 2022, 592). This reflected not only netizens’ anger toward China’s ultra-patriotic supporters but also the shifting global perception of China following the outbreak of COVID-19, which fueled anti-Chinese sentiment globally. Furthermore, civil society groups increasingly questioned the CCP’s influence on human rights and democratic values in the region, especially after the emergence of the Uyghur issue in 2018 and the deportation of Hong Kong activists traveling to Southeast Asia (Phattharathanasut 2024). These escalating tensions have led many activists to recognize the interconnectedness of human rights abuses across the region and the need for collaboration.

In its early days, the MTA could be seen as a loosely organized digital transnational advocacy network, as it primarily focuses on information exchange and online collective action rather than conducting campaigns in the offline world. The role of pre-existing structures in transnational activism, such as NOYDA, also plays a very limited role. Netizens used the hashtag and digital space to discuss and exchange information regarding cross-national issues related to China and the CCP. It began with Thai netizens inviting Hongkongers and Taiwanese to join the anti-Mekong Dam Movement under the hashtag #StopMekongDam, a campaign against the construction of several dams along the Mekong River, which could negatively impact the ecology and economy of Thailand and other Southeast Asia countries. This was followed by the sharing of information on other China-related issues, such as the South China Sea dispute, the boycott of the *Mulan* movie, the status of Taiwan, and political movements in Hong Kong.

The youth-led protests in Thailand began after the dissolution of the Future Forward Party on February 21, 2020, which resulted from the party accepting a loan from its leader, Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit. The protests continued until mid-March but were temporarily suspended due to the outbreak of COVID-19. They resumed on July 18, 2020, when a group of activists and supporters, operating under the name “Free Youth,” gathered at the Democracy Monument. This second wave of the Thai movement marked a shift in the dynamics of transnational collective action under the banner of the MTA.

One significant impact was the reframing of the narrative of #MilkTeaAlliance. Initially centered around anti-China and -CCP issues, the narrative shifted to focus on protesters and human rights issues. The language used also transitioned from predominantly English to Thai, with more than half of the tweets written in Thai. These tweets highlighted political repression in Thailand while still addressing a considerable amount of content about the situation in Hong Kong (Wang and Rauchfleisch 2022, 592-594). This shift illustrated that the protests in Thailand not only expanded the scope of discussion beyond China- and CCP-related issues but also redirected the MTA focus from socio-political issues in East Asia to those in Southeast Asia.

The second impact was that the movement in Thailand provided the MTA with an opportunity to increase its visibility and extend its influence into the offline world by becoming a symbol for Thai protesters to express solidarity with their friends abroad, while overseas Thai and other supporters rallied around the Thai cause. In Thailand, the protesters waved the Hong Kong pro-democracy flag, the Taiwan independence flag, and the flag of Tibet to show solidarity with their peers in these three regions (Everington 2020). After the police began using tear gas to crack down on the movement, some Hong Kong activists sent necessary protest gear to Thailand (Wasserstrom 2023). Leaderless mobilization was first adopted on October 17, inspired by the 2019 Hong Kong protests. The following day, October 18, saw widespread discussions of Hong Kong-related concerns and MTA issues during the rally (Chetpayark and Boonritsak 2021, 76).

Outside Thailand, solidarity campaigns have emerged by Thai students in major cities around the world to express support for the movement in Thailand (BBC 2020). Hong Kong and Taipei have garnered significant attention as examples of the MTA’s success, particularly the latter, where the Taiwan Alliance for Thai Democracy (TATD)—an informal alliance of Thai students, Taiwanese students, and foreign allies in Taiwan—was seen as a model for

future MTA collaborations. The TATD received significant support from Taiwanese partners, including students and civil society groups, and frequently emphasized its role as part of the MTA, fighting authoritarian expansion alongside Taiwan and Hong Kong to gain public attention in Taiwan (Ho and Chen 2024, 12-13).

The emergence of the youth-led protests in Thailand significantly contributed to changing the narrative and focus, while also creating new operational spaces for the MTA. Despite these changes, the structure of relationships and form of transnational collective action remain the same as they were before July 2020, characterized as a loosely organized transnational advocacy network. It is undeniable that protest knowledge from overseas, especially from Hong Kong, has significantly influenced the Thai movement, and some Thai youth activists have direct connections with Hong Kong activists. However, the relationships between Thai and Hongkonger activists are more on a personal level, centered around few activists rather than between the movements themselves (Phattharathanasut 2024). These activists also did not fully leverage their personal connections to gain support from Hongkonger activists during the mobilization period, as they were preoccupied with their own struggles against authorities and frequent arrests (Interview with Thai #1). Moreover, learning and adopting Hong Kong's protest knowledge occurred through internet searches and information sharing on social media rather than through direct interaction and consultation with Hongkonger activists (Interview with Thai #3, #4).

Solidarity campaigns abroad were primarily organized by Thai students and members of the Thai community, with the exception of the campaign in Hong Kong, which was initiated by Hongkonger activists (Bangkok Post 2020). The collaboration between these diaspora movements and the movement in Thailand was minimal, involving only occasional communication and focusing mainly on organizing simultaneous rallies in response to large-scale demonstrations in Thailand. Moreover, Thai diaspora movements did not perceive themselves as genuinely connected to the MTA, viewing it instead as a discourse used to attract attention. A former Thai student in Taiwan who participated in the Thai diaspora movement there shared that neither he nor other participants knew any MTA members and could not truly consider themselves part of the alliance. Instead, they regarded themselves and TATD as symbolically associated with the MTA, representing cross-national solidarity and serving as a strategy to draw broader public attention in Taiwan and globally (Interview with Thai #5). In this sense, it can be argued that most Thai campaigners abroad had only a

tenuous connection, if any, with the MTA, and their collaboration—both with one another and with the movement back home—was limited and loosely coordinated.

Similar to the meme war period, NOYDA played a very limited role during the Thai protests and made no efforts to reshape the structure of the transnational alliance. The only notable action was the issuance of solidarity statements for Thai protesters by student groups and civil society organizations that had previously participated in NOYDA's activities. This limited role can be attributed to Thai activists' minimal engagement with NOYDA, despite their participation in all three NOYDA meetings. This disengagement stemmed from NOYDA's legacy as a perceived ineffective group with a China- and CCP-oriented focus, which diverged significantly from the Thai movement's agenda. Although issues related to Hong Kong and Taiwan occasionally surfaced in the movement, they were promoted by other activists who had no prior involvement with NOYDA. Additionally, the only Thai individual who had previously been involved with NOYDA and held a leadership role in the movement was neither actively engaged nor particularly interested in participating in transnational activism. However, these dynamics began to shift with the military coup and the onset of the Spring Revolution in Myanmar.

The Spring Revolution in Myanmar

The Myanmar military coup on the morning of February 1, 2021, under the command of General Min Aung Hlaing, marked the beginning of a series of resistance campaigns in the country against military junta rule, known as the Spring Revolution. This event not only changed the political landscape within Myanmar but also affected the dynamics of transnational collective action in the region. First, the Myanmar coup reignited global attention on the #MilkTeaAlliance (MTA), bringing it back into the spotlight of global media and activist discourse. This resurgence followed a decline in late 2020, driven by the downturn of movements in Hong Kong after the implementation of the New National Security Law and in Thailand, where rally participation had significantly decreased. Secondly, by mid-2021, discussions within the MTA became increasingly focused on Southeast Asian issues—primarily political repression in Myanmar and Thailand—overshadowing topics related to East Asia (Wang and Rauchfleisch 2022, 594). This shift highlights the growing importance of the MTA among Southeast Asian activists, even as its relevance diminished among East Asian activists.

The coup in Myanmar also changed the mode of collective action under the banner of the MTA, making it more serious and better structured. Immediately after the coup, a Burmese activist contacted his Filipino colleague, both of whom were NOYDA members, to discuss international solidarity campaigns to support the Myanmar movement and how to access the MTA. However, the Filipino activists explained that the MTA is a very loose network and everyone becomes part of it. As a result, they decided to establish their own MTA group, with assistance from a Hongkonger activist, also a NOYDA member, and recruited other ex-NOYDA members to provide solidarity and support to the mass demonstrations in Myanmar (Interview with Burmese #1; Interview with Filipino #1). They later named the group “#MilkTeaAlliance Friends of Myanmar (MTAFoM).” This effort revived the NOYDA, though in a different form and name, as described by the Filipino activists: “NOYDA relationships carried over to the Milk Tea Alliance,” and further emphasized by the Burmese activist: “If it were not for NOYDA, we would not have the #MilkTeaAlliance Friends of Myanmar.”

MTAFoM developed its group characteristics based on the experience from NOYDA, as many members in this group were also involved with NOYDA, to ensure the sustainability and functionality of the group. MTAFoM chose to apply an open and inclusive network structure by recruiting everyone interested in human rights issues and transnational activism, regardless of their status in the domestic movement or experience (Interview with Burmese #2; Interview with Filipino #1). They also approached all existing MTA groups, mostly nation-based groups such as MTA Philippines and MTA Thailand, and invited them to join the group to enhance relationships and collaboration among all loosely connected MTA groups. Furthermore, despite its name, which suggests a focus on Myanmar, MTAFoM also diversified their campaigns to tackle human rights issues and democratic situations in other places, not just Myanmar, as shown in their campaigns supporting human rights in Hong Kong, Palestine, the Philippines, Thailand, Ukraine, and beyond. This decision was based on the experience of NOYDA, where focusing on country-specific issues could potentially harm long-term collaboration and lead to the withdrawal of members whose activism goals did not align well with a particular issue.

Attempts to connect all MTA groups for more solid collaboration after the coup in Myanmar transformed the nature of transnational collective action under the alliance from a loose digital transnational advocacy network into a more organized and offline one. The solidarity campaign for Myanmar established a more formal channel for communication and

information exchange, as well as coordinated efforts to pressure Myanmar's military junta, along with physical workshops to foster in-person interactions between members (Interview with Filipino #2). However, the activists decided not to develop the network into another form of collective action, such as a transnational coalition or movement, as the legacy of NOYDA proved inherently difficult. This led participants to settle for maintaining a loose network, informed by their earlier experiences with formalization attempts.

The experience with NOYDA made MTAFoM members—many of whom were involved with both NOYDA and MTA—realize the challenges of conducting concrete transnational collective actions, leading them to design MTA as an advocacy network. The transformation of NOYDA into a transnational coalition highlights the difficulty of developing a comprehensive framework that facilitates shared strategies, tactics, and agendas in both the short and long term, while also designing a coalition structure that meets the demands and expectations of youth movements in different places. MTAFoM has built its network based on “relationship-oriented” approach, focusing on building it on friendship and care in order to maintaining strong relationships among member and balancing agendas to ensure that the political issues in one locality do not overshadow those in other places (Interview with Filipino #1). It aligns with Banerjee's (2020, 113-115) observation that cross-mobilization is still possible if it is based on friendship, care, and affinity, rather than a strong common identity.

Furthermore, creating a more formalized organization that requires substantial funding and significant commitment of time could lead members to withdraw due to workload and obligations to their own domestic movements. As one activist explained, “We create transnational networks to help each other when movements happen. But the problem is when it really happens, the movement that needs assistance the most is also the one that is the busiest” (Interview with Taiwanese #1). This reality not only illustrates what is happening in Asia but also reflects the nature of transnational activism worldwide, as Tarrow (2005, 43) observed that most transnational activists primarily commit to their domestic movements and view transnational activism as voluntary.

Last but not least, securing sustainable and sufficient financial resources to support long-term collaboration, joint mobilization, and in-person interactions among activists is particularly challenging for transnational collective action. Operational costs are higher than those of domestic campaigns due to the need for air travel, and the legal process is often

complex, as some activists must apply for visas to travel abroad or are living in exile. Consequently, many youth activists believe it is more appropriate and effective to maintain the MTA as a transnational advocacy network, focusing primarily on exchanging information and fostering relationships among participants.

Conclusion

Subsequent to the downturn of street movements and the escalation into armed conflict in Myanmar, transnational activism and collective action, including the MTA, appear to have lost momentum and become marginalized from public sentiment and discourse in East and Southeast Asia. Amidst this decline, many groups of activists continue to work on these issues and maintain relationships with each other. MTA FoM persists in advocating for human rights values in Asia and beyond, the Sam Yan Press has dedicated numerous monographs to promote issues related to the MTA such as human rights and China's global narrative, and there is a rise of new transnational solidarity movements in places not previously involved in the MTA campaign, such as Indonesia, Japan, and Malaysia (Phattharathanasut and Teeratanabodee, 2024). These dynamics raise questions about the future of transnational activism in the region.

From the rise of NOYDA to the emergence of the MTA, this study found that form cross-national and cross-regional collective action among youth activists in East and Southeast Asia is the dynamics process shaped by sequences of interaction, collaboration, and tension. Transnational advocacy networks, focused on information exchange and dissemination, represent the primary form of transnational collective action, with a brief period in late 2017 when NOYDA attempted to restructure itself into a transnational coalition. The transition from an advocacy network to a coalition during NOYDA's evolution proved challenging, demonstrating that digital communication technologies alone are insufficient to sustain robust transnational collective action in the long run. Structural factors, such as limited resources, domination of more powerful groups, the primacy of domestic political concerns, and differing stances on international politics, continue to play a significant role in determining the success or failure of such effort, often hindering closely connected transnational activism. NOYDA's failure to transition to a new model of transnational collective action underscored these challenges, leading its members to adopt a transnational advocacy network for the MTA after becoming more actively involved

following Myanmar's military coup. This highlights how lessons from past experiences continue to influence the dynamics of present movements.

The question that remains is whether conducting transnational activism independently and maintaining transnational collective action as transnational advocacy networks is sufficient for advancing transnational activism for democratic values and human rights in the long run. The experiences of NOYDA and MTA have shown that while transnational advocacy networks are effective in raising societal awareness, they may not be enough for long-term campaign success. Many nations in the region that actively engage in these cross-border relationships continue to struggle with their own causes, and some have even faced setbacks. Perhaps the formalization of these networks into either transnational coalitions or transnational social movements is necessary to create more solid and comprehensive campaigns, thereby providing greater support for both domestic and transnational activism in the region.

Ultimately, the findings of this study suggest that transnational activism is a long-term process of development and evolution, shaped by the complex interplay of domestic and international factors, as well as online and offline structures. The experiences of the past, whether successful or not, will guide activists in their future engagements in transnational collective actions and will be passed down to the next generation of activists to develop better structures, agendas, and activities for advancing democracy, human rights, and social justice. This brief yet fruitful experience of a transnational coalition between East and Southeast Asia underscores the potential of these networks to contribute to positive social change not only within the region but also globally.

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