

# The #MilkTeaAlliance: A New Transnational Pro-Democracy Movement Against Chinese-Centered Globalization?

Wolfram Schaffar<sup>a</sup> & Praphakorn Wongratanawin<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>University of Passau, Germany; <sup>b</sup>Stiftung Asienhaus, Germany

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In April 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, memes addressing the Thai monarchy in a critical way appeared on Twitter under the hashtag #MilkTeaAlliance, which for a couple of days trended worldwide. Initially, the Twitter account of a Thai TV star was attacked by Chinese nationalists. But, different from similar incidents in the past, a new pan-Asian solidarity of Twitter users emerged, fought back the attack, and defeated the Chinese nationalists through highly self-ironic, witty, and political memes. In our article, we will discuss the meme war in its historic, political, and social context. Firstly, we claim that it can count as the inception of a new transnational movement comparable to the *globalization-critical movement* of the early 2000s, in so far as it targets the present, Chinese-led version of globalization. Secondly, we will challenge the dominant interpretation that the meme war was a confrontation between young Thai, Hong Kong, and Taiwanese pro-democracy activists versus state-sponsored trolls from the People's Republic of China. Despite all distortions caused by censorship measures from the side of the Chinese government and Twitter, the meme war seemed to have opened a transnational space for debate.

**Keywords:** #MilkTeaAlliance; Fragmentation of the Internet; Meme War; Social Media; Transnational Pro-Democracy Movement

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## INTRODUCTION

In April 2020, in the midst of the Corona crisis, memes addressing the Thai monarchy in a critical way appeared on Twitter under the hashtag #nnevy, which for a couple of days trended worldwide.

The pictures (see figure 1 & 2) were part of a meme war, which erupted on the microblogging platforms Twitter and Sina Weibo and that involved more than 1,5 million entries and several billion clicks in the first two days on Weibo alone (Al Jazeera, 2020). Initially, the Twitter account of a Thai TV star – Vachirawit “Bright” Cheva-aree, who plays the main character on a homoerotic boy love (BL) series – was attacked by Chinese internet users because he had carelessly re-tweeted a message in which Hong Kong was called “a country” (ประเทศไทย). Moreover, his real-life girlfriend, who goes by the name *Nnevy* online, had posted a message saying that she considered herself looking like a Taiwanese

## The #MilkTeaAlliance



**Figure 1** (left). Meme on the Thai King “NMSL! Your King is trash – Yes! he is.” (Twitter, anonymized tweet, 12 April 2020).



**Figure 2** (right). Meme on the Thai King “Please don’t say bad things about ur king”. (Tayn. HK, 2020).

girl, not like a Chinese one. These postings were interpreted as questioning the One-China policy, and triggered a cyber-attack on their social media accounts from the side of Chinese nationalists. Different from similar incidents in the past, however, an alliance of Twitter users from Thailand, Hong Kong, and Taiwan emerged, fought back the attack, and defeated the Chinese users through highly self-ironic, witty, and political memes. Under the hashtag #MilkTeaAlliance – and also under a Thai and a Chinese hashtag #ชาวมชนข้นกว่าเลือด (milk tea is thicker than blood), #奶茶聯盟 (milk tea alliance) – the crowd started discussing various taboo issues like the question of Taiwan’s and Hong Kong’s sovereignty, a Chinese hydropower dam project at the Mekong river, and the crackdown of the Tian’anmen protests of 1989; they even openly criticized the Thai monarchy and the Thai government – as shown in the memes cited above. This incident is one of the predecessors of the Thai democracy movement, which gained pace in July 2020, and opened the floodgates for an explicit, critical discussion of the monarchy for the first time since 1932.

As the meme war escalated, it drew the attention of established (off-line) media and was covered by many regional newspapers in Asia (*South China Morning Post*, *Liberty Times Net* 自由時報 from Taiwan, *Hong Kong Free Press*) and in the Arab World (*Al Jazeera*, *Al Arabiya*), and also by international newspapers (*Reuters*, *Guardian*, *The Diplomat*, *Foreign Policy*)<sup>1</sup>. The dominant interpretation was that a “Twitter spat over the weekend created a new pan-Asian solidarity between young Thais and China’s foe” (Buchanan, 2020; on Vice), and that “Thais show how to beat China’s online army” (Teixeira, 2020; in *Foreign Policy*). The incident was interpreted as a “Twitter War Between Chinese Nationalist Trolls and Young Thais” through which “the fears of the Chinese and Thai governments eventually came true. The pro-democracy

1 For the first wave of media coverage, see Banka (2020), Buchanan (2020), Chan (2020), Al Jazeera (2020a), McDevitt (2020), Patpicha and Potkin (2020), Patpicha (2020), South China Morning Post (2020), and Teixeira (2020). The meme war was also taken up very quickly by media from the PRC, such as Global Times (2020a) – of course from a very different perspective. A second wave of media attention started in the end of October, as a result of the sustained pro-democracy demonstrations in Thailand.

youth movements in the respective countries have now taken a step closer together, bonded in spirit by their alliance in ‘the battle of #nnevvy.’” (Buchanan, 2020).

The meme war, its emergence, dynamics, and outcome were indeed remarkable in several ways:

- a. Inside Thailand, it marks a change in the content and style of political communication on social media. In contrast to earlier pics, which were circulated on social media to challenge the draconian *lèse-majesté* law, these new memes follow a style of sophisticated, self-ironic political communication, characteristic for the *meme-fication* (Bulatovic, 2019) or what can be called the *TikTok-ization* of political debate. It was further developed in the hugely successful Facebook group *Royalists Marketplace* by Pavin Chachavalpongpun (see Schaffar, 2020, this issue), and in the use of pop culture elements (Harry Potter<sup>2</sup> and Hamtaro costumes, drag fashion shows, etc.) during the street protests that started in July 2020.
- b. The incident also mirrors the emergence of a new generation of politically active young people. The trajectories of their politicization and the forms of their political activism differs from the rather middle-aged-based movements of the Redshirts and Yellowshirts, which used to be the dominant political polarization over the past 15 years. What is remarkable is the fact that the social base of the meme war came from a scene that many would have considered a-political: Social media-savvy young people who are united in their fandom for K-pop and homoerotic BL TV dramas.
- c. The alliance’s most interesting characteristic is its international or transnational scope, bringing together democracy activists and BL series fans from Thailand, Taiwan, Hongkong, and to a lesser extent also from the Philippines, South Korea, Japan, and India. These connections rest on the transnational structure of Asian pop business, with Taiwanese singers working as part of Korean K-pop groups, and actors of Thai BL dramas trending in mainland China. The issues that were taken up, however, were not pop-related topics. They also went beyond the original incident connected to the One-China policy, and included ecologic and economic issues as well as human rights problems. The Thai participants in the online rally characteristically drew parallels between the authoritarianism of the Chinese and the Thai governments and thus articulated a general demand for democracy.

This article discusses the meme war in its historic, political, and social context. The analysis is based on tweets, memes, and other postings from Twitter and Facebook, and to a limited extent from Sina Weibo, in a period between April and October 2020, written in English, Thai, Chinese, and Japanese. It also includes

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2 Elements of Harry Potter novels, especially pictures of Lord Voldemort – also known as “He Who Must not Be Named” – were already used during the Redshirt protests in 2010 to allude to the King of Thailand. Yet, it needs to be stressed that criticism of the monarchy was neither in consensus with the 2010 Redshirt movement, nor was it possible to openly address this issue.

a small number of interviews with activists as a base for interpretation<sup>3</sup>. The article argues that, firstly, the MilkTeaAlliance was triggered by the Corona crisis, and that the #MilkTeaAlliance can count as the inception of a new, transnational movement comparable to the *global justice movement*, or *anti-globalization movement*, which emerged in the early 2000s (also known under the name of *alter-globalization movement*, *globalisierungskritische Bewegung*, or *movimento altermondista*). The new movement targets the present, Chinese-led version of globalization, but it is crucial to note that it goes beyond a nationalistic anti-Chinese campaign.

Secondly, this article challenges the dominant interpretation that the meme war was a confrontation between young Thai, Hong Kong, and Taiwanese pro-democracy activists versus state-sponsored trolls from the People's Republic of China (PRC). The dynamics of the movements on both sides were more complex. In the wake of the protests by the Black Lives Matter movement in the USA that unfolded after the murder of George Floyd on 24 May 2020, memes from the side of Chinese nationalists started articulating a sophisticated criticism of the US political system. This debate, however, was put to a premature end by Twitter's decision on June 12 to delete 170,000 accounts from China, with the justification that they were identified as fake accounts. Against this backdrop, this article discusses the technical infrastructure and social base of the debate. While the #MilkTeaAlliance opened a transnational space for debate, the deletion of accounts and Chinese censorship measures are leading to an increasing fragmentation of the internet.

## CHINA AS THE NEW HEGEMON AND CHINESE-LED GLOBALIZATION

The world is currently in a phase of hegemonic transition from a US-centered world system to a new system with China as its economic and political center. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which was started as Xi Jinping's prestige project in 2013, has been discussed in this context. While the fact of a hegemonic transition is rarely doubted, the question of how to conceptualize the new era is highly contested.

### BRI as New China-Led Globalization

Many authors characterize the BRI as a new form of globalization (Hoering, 2018). While some voices welcome China as a new guarantor of free trade at times of rising protectionism, authors from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), such as Liu et al. (2018), or Liu and Dunford (2016), focus on characterizing the new globalization as explicitly anti-neoliberal. They highlight the principles of green development that they believe it incorporates, or alternatively, the fact that it is a form of South-South cooperation (for critical accounts, see Chun, 2018; Hoering, 2018; Rudolf et al., 2014). A second tendency in the literature, by contrast, sees the BRI as a sign of the rise of a new global power or even a new imperialism, which is accompanied by an aggressive and imperial foreign policy (Benner et al., 2018; Brady, 2017; Reeves, 2018).

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<sup>3</sup> About 10 interviews were conducted in a semi-formal setting, mostly at the occasion of protest events of Thai activists in Europe. The interviews also include longer exchanges with activists outside Europe, such as the interview with Pavin Chachavalongpong from end of August 2020, which is published in this issue (Schaffar, 2020).

A third line of argumentation can be distinguished in the work of authors such as Godehardt (2016), who take the view that the new international relations established in the course of the BRI are linked to the traditional system of tributary states. That the Chinese government increasingly perceives its own political role in terms of such categories is documented in Noesselt (2015).

Nevertheless, as Heilmann et al. (2014) point out, China increasingly established parallel structures to a wide range of existing international institutions that are, or used to be, the institutional backbone of globalization of the 1990s. A crucial difference between these views concerns the question of how far the hegemonic shift and the new round of China-centered globalization is accompanied by a shift towards authoritarianism. In March 2019, the European Union (EU) (and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy) released a strategy paper in which China is designated as a “systemic rival” that is “promoting alternative models of governance” (European Commission, 2019). The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) followed in December 2019 and – for the first time – used similar words.

### Chinese Style Authoritarianism and Internet Governance

An important element of the perceived “alternative mode of governance” can be seen in China’s internet regulation. For many years, utopists considered the Internet to be a realm of liberty and a catalyst for democratization. Several US presidents and secretaries of state, with regard to China, used the metaphor that trying to censor the Internet was like “nailing Jell-O to the wall” (Clinton, 2000). But in fact, the Chinese administration succeeded in developing a range of techniques to govern the Internet in such a way that it enables economic growth but does not strengthen political rights and liberties or encourage political organizing. As Allen-Ebrahimian (2016) puts it, the Chinese government effectively managed to “nail Jell-O to the wall”. Authoritarian governance of the Internet, thus, has a strong link to Chinese statecraft.

In the 1990s, the city state of Singapore served as a first laboratory for authoritarian internet regulation. Here, several techniques to induce self-censorship were developed and exported to Mainland China (George, 2007; Lee, 2010). What became known as the *Great Firewall* (GFW) is a strategy to seal off the Chinese internet from the rest of the world and provide domestic versions of popular social networks and media applications for the users inside the firewall. Originally, Chinese platforms like WeChat and Sina Weibo (新浪微博 xinlang weibo) were copies of the US-based global players Facebook and Twitter. Only recently, the platform TikTok (抖音 douyin), which was programmed by a Chinese company, managed to become successful beyond the Chinese Great Firewall (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2020).

In addition to technical provisions, China became known for optimizing the strategy of influencing public opinion through state-sponsored trolls, which became known as China’s *Five Cent Army* (五毛党 wumaotang) (Han, 2015). It is estimated that over two million government officials or paid trolls are posting more than 480 million messages per year, mostly on Sina Weibo and Baidu Tieba (百度贴吧, the most-used Chinese communication platform), with pro-government content (Kin et al., 2017).

These techniques were also exported to other countries as part of technical assistance and development aid programs under the heading of fostering *cyber sovereignty*.

For example, the internet infrastructure in Ecuador and Ethiopia and other countries in Latin America and Africa were developed based on Chinese technology, together with trainings for the administration of internet regulation techniques (Gagliardone, 2014; Mozur et al., 2019). Throughout Southeast Asia, cyber security laws were adopted, which were modeled after the Singaporean and Chinese blueprint. The Thai Cyber Scouts program of 2011 to monitor social media, and Rodrigo Duterte's trolls' army in the Philippines (Ong & Cabañes, 2019), can be seen as local adoptions of the Chinese Five Cent Army program with different characteristics.

### **The Corona Crisis and Its Impact on Chinese-Led Globalization**

The outbreak of the Corona crisis has not only accelerated global political processes. It also put the hegemonic transition of the economic center from the USA to China in a new context<sup>4</sup>. In March 2020, the German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier (2020) pointed out in a public interview that Germany's and Europe's reactions to the crisis will be part of a global contestation of political governance systems. Many analysts see China's version of rational authoritarianism (Atlanticist, 2020) on the winning side over the erratic, populist authoritarian governments of the USA or Brazil, or even over the European-style democratic approach. In any case, the Chinese government has stepped up its efforts to influence global public opinion in three respects. First, the government enhanced its material development and used it for public relations aims. The BRI is being combined with the concept of the Silkroad of Health (健康丝绸之路) (Ngeow, 2020; Rudolf, 2021). In what is dubbed 'mask diplomacy', medical equipment is sent to countries that suffer under the crisis and that are BRI partners, such as Italy, but also Thailand, and the Philippines (Loh, 2020).

Second, the Chinese administration is also stepping up its efforts in the field of internet governance and influencing global public opinion. Analysts have noted that internet governance has shifted from being primarily focused inward to more actively projecting outward (Fang & He, 2020; Segal, 2020; Zhong et al., 2020). To this end, Chinese trolls are being employed to spread the word that the Chinese reaction to COVID-19 was a success story, and to portray China as the solution, not the source, of the Coronavirus pandemic (Allen-Ebrahimian, 2020; Klabisch & Straube, 2020). At the same time, the success of Taiwan in containing the pandemic is silenced and a new round of restrictive legislation in Hong Kong is being enacted (The Epoch Times, 2020).

Third, China is using the paralysis of most countries and of the international system to push its expansionist agenda. This can be seen in new activities in the South China Sea, but above all in policy towards Hong Kong. After the extradition bill was blocked by mass protests in Hong Kong, the government in Beijing used the limbo of the Coronavirus pandemic to launch a security law that goes far beyond the extradition law, and effectively incorporated Hong Kong into the Chinese political and judicial area (Wong, 2020). Also, new, strong criticism against Taiwan was voiced at the occasion of the re-election of Tsai Ing-wen on 11 January 2020 and in connection with her inauguration on 20 May 2020 (Lee & Blanchard, 2020).

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<sup>4</sup> See Dunford and Qi (2020) for an early account, which also mirrors the view of the Chinese leadership. The paper was published in August, 2020. By the end of 2020, the authors' predictions and assessments had largely materialized.

In Thailand, Sino-Thai relations were an issue on different levels, and were highly contested even before the outbreak of the Corona crisis (Szumer, 2020). Economic connections to China and the question of who controls the implementation of the Belt and Road projects in Thailand have arguably led to an intra-elite contestation and triggered the coup d'état in 2014 that brought the present Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha into office. Waves of Chinese tourists came to Thailand and substituted the declining numbers of Western tourists, who stayed away after the coup d'état (Associated Press, 2014). On the military level, the new administration under Prayuth distanced itself from its long-term ally, the USA, in a highly symbolic deal to purchase submarines from China (Zhen, 2020). Most importantly, Prayuth's central economic project, the Eastern Economic Corridor project, was put under the umbrella of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2019 (Lin, 2019).

In general, this new orientation towards China on different levels of society, politics, and culture is unfolding on the basis of a renaissance of overseas Chinese heritage (Kasian, 2017; Pavin, 2016). Thailand's biggest economic player, the Charoen Pokphand Group Co. (CP), has evolved out of a family business with overseas Chinese roots. By today, it is the world's largest producer of animal feed, shrimps, and – among other sectors – also runs the top telecom company in Thailand. It is still controlled by the family, with Dhanin Chearavanont, son of the founder and the richest man in Thailand with assets estimated USD16,5 billion, acting as senior chairman (Straits Times, 2019). In October 2019, Thailand's government and a consortium led by Charoen Pokphand Group signed a contract for the country's largest-ever rail project, which will link three international airports around Bangkok with high-speed trains (Kishimoto, 2019; Schmidt & Natnicha, 2019). With this deal, which also involves the state-owned China Railway Construction company and that turned the project into an extension of the Belt and Road Initiative, China for the first time became the largest foreign investor in Thailand (Pimuk, 2020).

It was against this backdrop of rising Chinese influence on the military, cultural, and economic level, and of the closeness of the Prayuth administration to China, that the Corona crisis was interpreted in Thai society. In the first couple of weeks of the crisis, Chinese tourists and Thai migrant workers coming back from Wuhan were discussed as potential sources of infections. The scarcity of medical equipment, mostly imported from China, and cases of corruption in connection with the government's procurement of masks dominated the news for weeks. In the end, it was CP's senior chairman Dhanin Chearavanont who used his exclusive connection to China, chartered an airplane to transport mask making machines and raw material to Thailand, and started a domestic production of masks to be delivered for free to the medical sector and ordinary Thais as an act of charity in the crises (The Nation, 2020).

### THE EMERGENCE OF THE #MILKTEALLIANCE

This is the background against which the meme war under the hashtag #nnevy erupted on 10 April on the microblogging platforms Twitter and Sina Weibo, with more than 1,5 million entries and several billion clicks in the first two days on Weibo alone (Al Jazeera, 2020a). Apart from the prominence of Chinese issues in the media, the incident is connected to specific pop cultural phenomena and to the Corona crisis.

The Thai pop star, Bright, who was attacked by Chinese internet users because he carelessly re-tweeted a message in which Hong Kong was called “a country” (ประเทศ), plays one of the leading characters in the BL series *2gether – the series*.



**Figure 3.** Cover picture of the BL series **เพราะเราคู่กัน** (literally “because we are a couple”), official English title *2gether – the series*. (GMMTV, 2019).

The genre goes back to Japanese *yaoi* manga and anime, which featured male-to-male erotic or romantic stories. What used to be a specifically female sub-culture with limited audience throughout the 1980s and 1990s started spreading throughout Asia and developed into a pan-Asian pop genre (Lin, 2018). Thailand recently evolved as the main actor in this field.

Drawing on the rising popularity of BL novels, GMMTV, the producer of the series *2gether – the series*, was the first film production company to start dropping BL characters into heterosexual love series, and gained great success with its first BL series. The breakthrough, however, came with the Corona crisis. Line TV, a free streaming platform that had been broadcasting GMMTV’s BL series since 2016, jumped from a market share of 5% in 2019 to 34% in the first quarter of 2020 (Koaysomboon, 2020). With more than 30 different BL series in stock on Line TV, the genre left the niche of a subculture and has gone mainstream. *2gether – the series*, produced by GMMTV and aired by Line TV, brought a huge international success:

Throughout the 13 weeks of its airing, the #2gethertheSeries hashtag topped global trends on Twitter – the most favored social media of Boys Love fans – and triggered millions of virtual conversations about the series in various languages, from Thai to Chinese to English. The series was so popular that its lead actors, fresh-faced Vachirawit “Bright” Cheva-aree and Metawin “Win” Opas-iamkajorn, garnered more than a million Instagram followers from all over the world in just a few weeks. *2gether: The Series* became the global phenomenon no one expected. (Koaysomboon, 2020)

On the basis of this success, analysts expect that the BL series will become a key part of Thailand’s export strategy, comparable to Korea’s K-pop industry, which accounts for cultural content exports worth 9.55 billion in 2018 (Koaysomboon, 2020). The BL products and BL fandom has a transnational scope. The publishing house sold the

rights to their stories to Japanese, Korean, and Taiwanese companies, but also inside mainland China, where the BL genre arrived through the mediation of Taiwan. Bright and *2gether – the series* is followed by a large fandom and reached highest attention not only on Twitter, but also on Sina Weibo. For the producers of BL series, apart from future plans to expand to Europe and Latin America, the market in mainland China is actually the most important (Smith, 2021; Young & Xu, 2017).

This exceptionally high attention of the series is the reason why Bright’s posting on 9 April triggered such a large reaction. Since all of his moves and postings were closely followed, the single sentence “four pictures from four *countries* – Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore, Thailand” (emphasis added), which was actually part of a product placement for a Nikon reflex camera (see Figure 4), could draw so much attention. When Bright’s girlfriend published a posting saying that she considered herself looking like a Taiwanese, not like a Chinese girl (see Figure 6), this prompted a strong reaction by nationalist Chinese Twitter and Weibo users, who saw Bright’s and Nnevy’s comments as an attack on the One-China policy of the Chinese government. Despite Bright’s immediate apology (see Figure 5), their accounts were flooded.



**Figure 4** (left). Retweet by Bright, calling Hong Kong a country ‘ประเทศ’. (Poetry of Bitch, 2020a).

**Figure 5** (center). Tweet by Bright apologizing for his “mistake”. (Poetry of Bitch, 2020b).

**Figure 6** (right). Bright’s girlfriend Nnevy considering herself to look like a Taiwanese, not a Chinese girl. (Everington, 2020).

### The History of Cyber Mobbing Campaigns and Boy-Band Fandom

The exact sources of the attack against Nnevy and the identity of the people who mobilized are not known. In the mainstream media coverage of the event, two different explanations are given. On the one side, analysts speak of an attack from state sponsored trolls – the Five Cent Army. Others mention the so-called *Little Pinks* (小粉红 xiao fenhong) as the relevant group behind the attack – young girls from chat fora who normally exchange on BL series and K-Pop singers, but who have appeared as a driving force behind nationalist cyber-attacks, such as the *Diba* (帝吧) incident, since 2016 (Liberty Times Net 自由時報, 2020; Liu, 2019; Xu, 2020).

In January 2016, the Facebook account of the newly elected Taiwanese prime minister Tsai Ing-wen (Liu, 2019) was attacked in an orchestrated campaign. Her election was preceded by an incident in which the 16-year-old Taiwanese K-pop star, Chou Tzu-yu (周子瑜) was attacked by nationalist bloggers from China for having shown a Taiwanese flag in a TV show in South Korea. The attack against Chou helped Tsai Ing-wen, who was campaigning for a tougher stand for Taiwanese independence, to win. After her electoral victory, Tsai herself became the next target of the nationalist bloggers from Mainland China. They used the *blowing up the board* (爆吧 baoba) strategy against Tsai's Facebook account – a form of cyber war that chat forum users in China typically use against competing chat fora. This first nationalist cyber-attack by Little Pinks became known under the name of the chat forum from where it was launched – the Diba (帝吧) forum on Baidu (Liu, 2019).

The reaction against Bright's girlfriend Nnevy is also reminiscent of notorious K-pop fan wars. BTS, the most popular Korean boy group, call their fandom "Army"; "EXO-L" is the name of the fandom of EXO, another K-pop group. The fan groups perform their loyalty to their idols by trying to hype their band on social media with all the means and strategies possible – including mobbing of the competitor bands. The omnipresence of fierce cyber mobbing that is applied by the fans against the competitors are in contrast to the image of the stars themselves, who are portrayed as soft, gentle, non-violent, and caring for their fans<sup>5</sup>.

The parallels between the cyber mobbing of Bright and Nnevy and the Diba incident and K-pop fandom wars are striking. However, the case of Bright and Nnevy took an unexpected turn. During their campaign, Chinese nationalists tried to attack Thai Twitterers by insulting the monarchy – very much in the style of K-pop fandom wars – maybe assuming that this would be the utmost assault and would provoke a fierce reaction. However, Thai users agreed with such assaults – in an ironic way – and thus perplexed the nationalists and won the meme war.

### Memes as a New Communication Style

Deeper investigation into the meme cited in the introduction provides an illustration of the specific communication strategy that emerged during the incident. At first sight, the meme seems not very sophisticated. It is slightly skewed and contains misspellings. But a closer etymological reconstruction reveals quite a complex structure and an amazing level of *intertextuality*. It is derived from a drawing *Batman slapping Robin* – a common source for memes that goes back to a 1965 comic book, *World's Finest #153*. The story is based around an alternate reality in which Batman believes that Superboy and Superman are responsible for the death of his father. The parodies go back at least to 2008 (see Figure 7), and ever since, it has been used so often that a collection was started on Facebook, on a Pinterest page<sup>6</sup>, and on Reddit<sup>7</sup>, and new memes can be created automatically with the help of a ready-made

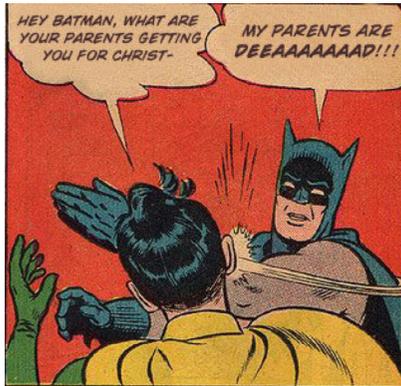
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5 The violence of cyber mobbing caught international attention after three K-pop stars committed suicide in only two months in late 2019 (Hahn, 2020).

6 <https://www.pinterest.de/danielh86/batman-slapping-robin/>

7 <https://www.reddit.com/r/BatmanSlap/>

template<sup>8</sup>. In the early parody of 2008, Robin asks what Batman will get from his parents for Christmas, and Batman answers: “My parents are dead” – a sentence that emerged as a secondary tag<sup>9</sup> for the parent pic on the internet.



**Figure 7.** Meme of the meme family “Batman slapping Robin” aka “My parents are dead”. (<https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/my-parents-are-dead-batman-slapping-robin>).

In the present parody form, the Thai flag was used to designate Batman as Thailand or the Thai bloggers, and Robin as Chinese bloggers or trolls. Robin attacks Batman verbally, saying “NMSL!”, and “Your King is trash”. “NMSL” is an insult typically used by Chinese bloggers when they are upset and run out of arguments – roughly the equivalent to the English “fuck off” (Urban Dictionary, 2018, 2020). It goes back to a Southern Chinese video blogger. One of his clips, where at one point he repeatedly shouted the curse “Your mother is dead” (你妈死了 *ni ma si le*), went viral in China, and later the initial letters of the Pinyin transcription “NMSL” became a fixed expression of cursing on Chinese social media (Fang, 2020).

With Batman’s answer, “Yes! He is.”, and Batman slapping Robin, the meme summarizes the strategy that was employed in the heated Twitter storm between Thai and Chinese bloggers: The Thai bloggers took the Chinese curse “NMSL” literally and used it as the bridge to the meme’s etymology and its meaning, “My parents are dead”. The current parody conveys the message that the curses and insults uttered by the Chinese about Thailand – including the criticism of the monarchy – are actually true. But admitting and reflecting upon this truth is a sign of strength and not of weakness. With this move, the Thai bloggers also rejected any simple idea of nationalism – the idea that an offence against symbols or representatives of the Thai nation (government and monarchy) could be used to offend someone personally. And – for the domestic context this is especially important – they rejected the idea that the monarchy is a sacred and taboo element of Thai national identity.

What is amazing is the new ironic and sarcastic style. The emergence of satirical memes and the shift towards a new form of political expression was noticed already at the occasion of the general elections in March 2019 (Teirra, 2019) – albeit not in

<sup>8</sup> <https://imgflip.com/memegenerator/Batman-Slapping-Robin>

<sup>9</sup> <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/my-parents-are-dead-batman-slapping-robin>

connection with the taboo issue of the monarchy. It can also be seen on TikTok, where it was extensively and very successfully used by Pavin Chachavalpongpun (see Schaffar, 2020, this issue) in his satirical Facebook group *Royalists Marketplace*, founded in April 2020. The first traces of satirical memes and the shift towards a new form of political expression, however, were already noticed at the occasion of the general elections in March 2019 (Teirra, 2019).

### Pop Culture, Transnational Political Mobilization and the Emergence of the MilkTeaAlliance

The campaign to fight back the attack on Nnevy's and Bright's social media accounts evolved spontaneously and unfolded within a few hours over the weekend of 10-11 April. Due to the transnational scope of Nnevy's and Bright's fandom, a young crowd from all over East and Southeast Asia got involved. Soon, key democracy activists and party leaders from Hong Kong took up the momentum, joined the campaign, and augmented its reach. Interestingly, they did not shy away from using explicit homoerotic pictures from the BL series in their postings as a sign of progressiveness.

Nathan Law Kwung-chung, a former student leader, founder of the *Demosisto Party* (香港眾志) and well-known democracy activist from Hong Kong, jumped on the meme war on 12 April and in one of his Tweets drew on the particularly ironic style: "So funny watching the Pro-CCP online army trying to attack Bright. They think, every Thai person must be like them, who love Emperor Xi. What they don't understand is that Bright's fans are young and progressive – and pro-CCP army always make the wrong attacks." He illustrated his Tweet with a homoerotic scene from the BL drama.



Figure 8 (left). Nathan Law tweets his solidarity with #nnevy on 12 April. (Law, 2020).



Figure 9 (right). Joshua Wong tweets his solidarity with #nnevy. (Wong, 2020a).

Joshua Wong, Nathan Law's fellow party leader, joined the debate and declared his solidarity on 12 April, also with a reference to the BL drama.

The Chinese Embassy in Bangkok reacted on 14 April with a statement published on Facebook. But by then, the meme war was already in full swing. The "Statement by the Spokesperson of the Chinese Embassy in Thailand Concerning Recent Online Statements Related to China" starts with the sentence: "First of all, I want to underline

that the One China Principle is irrefutable and China is firmly opposed to anyone making any erroneous statement inconsistent with the One China Principle anytime, anywhere.” The statement goes on underlining the excellent relations between China and Thailand by drawing on a well-known expression, which suggests a family relation between the two nations. “The friendship between China and Thailand dates back to ancient times, and the expression of ‘China and Thailand as one family’ is a genuine epitome of our bilateral relationship.”<sup>10</sup>

The claim of a family relationship has a long tradition in the modern history and diplomatic relations between the two countries (Kornphanat Tungkeunkunt & Kanya Phuphakdi, 2018). It was used to encourage the integration of overseas Chinese into Thai society at the beginning of the twentieth century and played a crucial role in the normalization of Thai-Chinese relations during the Cold War<sup>11</sup>. However, against the backdrop of the arrogant and authoritarian wording of the Embassy, the often-cited blood relationship was explicitly rejected by the bloggers. Instead, they promoted milk tea as a counter concept – a drink that is popular among young, urban middle-class kids in various countries around East and Southeast Asia<sup>12</sup>. The Thai hashtag #ชาวมั่นกว่าเลือด (milk tea is thicker than blood), alongside the English and Chinese counterparts #奶茶聯盟 (milk tea alliance), soon evolved as the central reference for the meme war, which earlier was tagged under the personal hashtags of #nnevy and #bright. According to #nnevy, the hashtag was first used by ShawTim, a Twitter user from Hong Kong, and took off the ground when the artists behind the Hong Kong-based café *Milktealogy* popularized it through heroic drawings that were published on the commercial Facebook account of their business on 14 April (Nnevy, 2020).



**Figure 10** (left). The promotion of the concept of Milk Tea Alliance. (ShawTim, 2020).

**Figure 11** (right). The café Milktealogy in Hong Kong promotes illustrations for the new concept. (奶茶通俗學 Milktealogy, 2020).

10 The Chinese wording is 中泰一家亲 (zhong tai ijia qin) (Chinese Embassy Bangkok, 2020).

11 The transnational success of the Thai BL dramas actually partly rests on this relationship, too. Bright is perceived as highly attractive, with white skin, typical for the Bangkokian middle class of Chinese descent. Nnevy is also perceived as integrated Chinese.

12 See Mak (2021) for a detailed account of the heritagization process of milk tea in Hong Kong and its different shades of meaning.

With the newly established name and the heroic drawings, the online movement got a framing and an identity. The comment by a young guy, which is one out of more than 1,200 comments reacting on the first drawing on Facebook, illustrates the formation of this identity<sup>13</sup>.

Let's call Thailand is part of Taiwan would make more sense than Thailand is part of China. Because Taiwan Milk Tea is every 500 meters and you can find it [in] any far away districts or villages. 555

And I really don't mind to make fun or insulted Thailand because even we're under Junta but our spirit is free.

And of course I support Democracy and Freedom in Hong kong & Taiwan!

(Comment on the posting of Milktealogy on Facebook, 14 April 2020)

The boy from Bangkok expresses a feeling of *cultural proximity* to Taiwan and Hong Kong on the basis of a common consumerist culture, of which milk tea is a symbol. In addition to the shades of meaning that Mak (2021) points out in the case of Hong Kong milk tea, the boy from Bangkok adds a political connotation, stressing the notion of having a *free spirit* – and being able to think independently and not be blinded by nationalism as a defining characteristic. And he subscribes to the fight for *democracy* and *freedom* in Hong Kong and Taiwan.

### Broadening the Agenda

At the beginning of the movement on Twitter, the core issue was the rejection of the nationalists' crusade against Bright and Nnevy. But very quickly, the range of issues addressed under the newly established hashtag broadened. This happened in two ways. First, the way the Thai and Chinese bloggers interacted naturally brought up different issues, and eventually led to a more general discussion about authoritarianism. Second, political activists and key actors of prodemocracy movements in Hong Kong, Thailand, and Taiwan took the initiative and actively fed in discussions and political campaigns to the news stream (Fung, 2020).

One example for the first process – this is, the interaction on the grassroots level of the campaign on both sides – concerns the issue of the COVID-19 crisis. Many early postings from Chinese nationalists, such as the one from 11 April cited in Figure 12, criticized Nnevy for being ungrateful towards China<sup>14</sup>.



**Figure 12.** A typical tweet criticizing Nnevy in the course of the nationalists' cyber-attack. (bbbbwwwy!, 2020).

13 The quote is given in its original wording and spelling – including elements from Thai internet language standards, such as “555”. In Thai, it reads “ha ha ha” and corresponds to “lol” or to the Emoji 😂.

14 This tweet was sent from a fake account, which no longer exists. This is why we did not anonymize it.

Such postings directly mirror the PRC public relations campaign, which tried to portray China as the solution and not as the source of the COVID-19 crisis. As a reaction to reproaches of being ungrateful, the Thai side countered with memes stating that COVID-19 was actually coming from China. Many of the memes used by the Thais were retweeted from other threads, such as the meme in Figure 13 from the US-based anti-CCP channel, *Political Energy* (天下政經), which combines the critique on China’s Corona crisis public relations’ initiative with notorious issues of Hong Kong’s and Taiwan’s sovereignty.



Figure 13. A meme used to counter Chinese nationalists’ attack on Nnevyv. (Donahue, 2020).

Yet other memes drew on existing pictures and symbols of ongoing conflicts. One example is a meme that goes back to the satirical drawing by the Danish cartoonist in the newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* on 27 January 2020, which used the Chinese flag and replaced the golden stars with sketches of the Coronavirus. Immediately after its publication in Denmark, China demanded an apology, since it considered the drawing “an insult to China” and said that it “hurts the feelings of the Chinese people”. This harsh reaction from the side of the PRC put the incident in line with the Muhammad cartoons in the same newspaper in 2005, and led to a broader debate on the Chinese influence on Western media (Orange, 2020). The meme used on #MilkTeaAlliance replaced the four small stars with the letters NMSL, expressing that China is not only the source of COVID-19 but also of hate speech. It is another example of the multilayered intertextuality and sophistication of the memes used for the #MilkTeaAlliance (see figure 14).

Examples for the second process of broadening the agenda – the use of #MilkTeaAlliance by activists in other fields – could also be observed from the very



**Figure 14.** Meme derived from a contested satirical drawing from the Danish Newspaper Jyllands Posten. (Onrush, 2020).

beginning. Already starting on 16 April, environmental activists used the hashtag to re-tweet several memes promoting the campaign against a Chinese dam construction at the Mekong River. The dam is being criticized for its potential to cause water scarcity in Southeast Asian countries downstream.

In June, activists posted about the forced disappearance of Wanchalearm, a democracy activist who – like many others opposing the coup d’état of 2014 – was in exile in Cambodia. His abduction is one of several incidents of forced disappearances of dissidents, some of whom were later found dead with traces of severe torture (Wright & Issariya, 2020). Among other scandals, this incident triggered the re-emergence of the street protests in Thailand in mid-July.



**Figure 15.** A retweet drawing the attention to the forced disappearance of the activist Wanchalearm. (Piyarak\_s, 2020).

The beginning of June saw another peak in activities, through which experienced democracy activists from Hong Kong and Thailand created new campaigns and events directly tailored for the #MilkTeaAlliance in order to re-invigorate and further develop the conceptual frame. One such example is the campaign for the commemoration of the 31st anniversary of the crackdown of the Tian'anmen demonstrations. The Thai pro-democracy group, *Delicious Democracy* (ประชาธิปไตยกินได้ edible democracy), headed by the political science graduate and well-known activist, Netiwit Chotipatphaisal, from Chulalongkorn University, produced milk tea-flavored cookies in the shape of the Tian'anmen Gate and of the Tank Man as giveaways for a protest event in front of the Chinese embassy in Bangkok (Khaosod, 2020). The event was covered by critical newspapers, and the video footage and photographs were tweeted under #MilkTeaAlliance through Joshua Wong in Hong Kong.

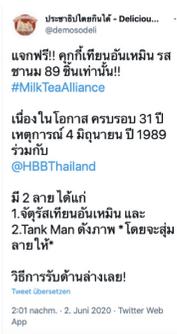


Figure 16 (left). Announcement of the protest event in commemoration of the Tian'anmen massacre, using milk tea flavored cookies. (Delicious Democracy, 2020).

Figure 17 (right). Joshua Wong retweeting a footage of the protest event by the Thai activists in front of the Chinese Embassy in Bangkok. (Wong, 2020b).

The group's name and the campaign itself show the features of self-ironic pop culture that later became a trademark of the Thai students' protests of July 2020. The Thai name of the Facebook group *Delicious Democracy* alludes to a political slogan of the Redshirt movement of 2009/2010, which called for a meaningful democracy beyond formal procedures, with a real, "edible" material effect (Pitch, 2009). The homepage of the group is registered under the Facebook commercial category of *dessert shops* and is a persiflage of the online promotion strategy of fashionable start-up cookie shops.

Through the involvement of experienced democracy activists, the hashtag #MilkTeaAlliance moved away from its original issue – the cyber-attack against Nnevy's and Bright's accounts – and was increasingly used for the coordination and framing of a transnational movement. Postings on specific issues and comments to the postings served to carve out commonalities between the emerging movements in the different countries. There were several attempts to include more countries – such as India, the Philippines, Australia, and Brazil – in the virtual alliance whenever activists challenged authoritarian practices in these countries or when conflicts with Chinese involvement occurred. One such example was the military stand-off at

the Indian-Chinese border; another example was the attempt of the Beijing government to intimidate MPs in Brazil in order to prevent them from congratulating the Taiwanese Tsai Ing-wen for her re-election (Fiallo Flor, 2020). However, until the end of October 2020, the hashtag was largely identified with the cooperation between movements in Thailand, Taiwan, and Hong Kong.

This alliance eventually spilled over to the off-line world. It has re-enforced pre-existing links between the Hong Kong movement and the movements in Thailand and Taiwan (Elemia, 2020). Not only did Netiwit organize a protest in solidarity with the Tian'anmen protests in Bangkok. During the recent protests in Thailand, Joshua Wong also staged a protest in front of the Thai embassy in Hong Kong and called for solidarity with the Thai protesters. When one of the central activists behind the Thai democracy protests, Francis Bunkueanun Paothong, was arrested on 15 October, possibly facing a life sentence, he addressed the Thai movement in an emotional video message: "Don't worry about me. I will fight, for the people of Thailand, for the people of the MilkTeaAlliance, I will fight for you." (Vice News, 2020).

### **A New Anti-Globalization Movement Targeting Chinese-Driven Globalization**

The invocation of "the people of the MilkTeaAlliance" by Paothong and the solidarity campaigns are part of a formation process of a transnational movement. The outcome is still open, but it shows some key commonalities with the early formation process of the *anti-globalization movement* (aka, *global justice movement*, *globalization critical movement*) of the late 1990s and early 2000s. The founding moments of the new transnational movement back then were the mobilizations against the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) of the OECD in 1995, or the mass demonstration against 1998 Ministerial of the WTO in Seattle. In both cases, a new alliance of initiatives, movements, and NGOs, addressing various issues such as ecological degradation, the problem of food sovereignty, access to land, or the erosion of public services, succeeded in derailing the meetings. What united the movements was their opposition to corporate-driven neo-liberal globalization, which was mainly pushed by the USA and Europe through the WTO and other multilateral institutions in a post-cold war world order, with the USA as only remaining super power (Mertes, 2004).

The MilkTeaAlliance shows striking commonalities. It is directed against China as an upcoming superpower. The common narrative is the opposition against authoritarianism, which appears in various shapes. Firstly, it targets authoritarianism directly connected to the government of mainland China, such as China's increasingly aggressive PR policy that directly intervenes into other countries through the export of censorship technology or trolls. Secondly, it targets authoritarianism that is more indirectly linked to Chinese influence, such as dam projects, or economic influence. And lastly, the movement addresses authoritarianism such as the Thai military regime, which is only indirectly linked to Chinese influence but mirrors the general tendency of de-democratization in the entire region.

In the same way as the anti-globalization movement was not anti-American, the framing of the MilkTeaAlliance does not draw on essentialist, ethnic/racist (Sino-phobic), or nationalistic perspectives. On the contrary, the movement started

from a reaction against Chinese nationalist bloggers and gained momentum through making fun of their blind nationalism. Moreover, a crucial part of the alliance are the democracy movements in Hong Kong and Taiwan, which discuss issues of sovereignty, but not in terms of an ethnic discourse. The movement can best be described as a new anti-globalization movement, targeting negative effects of the new, Chinese-style globalization – economic and ecologic problems connected to Chinese, large infrastructure and development projects, and, above all, the spread of authoritarianism. Tellingly, the formation of the alliance was triggered by the Corona crisis, which exacerbated and augmented Chinese influence on various levels.

The alliance is a genuinely transnational movement that emerged from the transnational K-pop and BL fandoms. These fandoms transgress national boundaries, with singers from Taiwan working in South Korea, Thai actors trending in mainland China, and fans from various countries uniting under the hashtag of their idols on Twitter or Sina Weibo. The base is a new generation of social media savvy young people, who make good use of and navigate between different apps and platforms and draw on a repertoire of protest forms based on pop culture in a creative and unexpected way. In this perspective, the MilkTeaAlliance looks like the late fulfillment of the utopist expectation that social media will bring about democracy, exactly through the emergence of new social movements. For a long time, this expectation was disappointed by the experience of Facebook and other apps, which turned out to be an arena for right-wing mobilization and authoritarian surveillance (Schaffar, 2016). The MilkTeaAlliance, finally, seems to emerge as an example for a genuinely social-media based, transnational pro-democracy movement.

### **FANDOM-BASED MOVEMENTS, FRAGMENTATION OF CYBERSPACE, AND GEOPOLITICAL ECHO CHAMBERS**

Despite some striking similarities, the MilkTeaAlliance also differs from the anti-globalization movement of the 2000s in crucial respects. In the case of the anti-globalization movement, protestors targeted the World Trade Organization (WTO), international institutions, transnational corporations, and banks. During their mass demonstrations, they clashed with the security forces of those states where negotiations were being held – the police force under the command of governments. In the case of the MilkTeaAlliance, the contestants on the ‘other side’ are a competing fandom – internet users whose backgrounds and motivations are largely unclear.

As discussed above, the mainstream media accounts of the meme war are not clear about the question of who exactly was behind the initial attack against Nnevy’s and Bright’s accounts. Most analyses see either state-sponsored trolls – the Five Cent Army – or Little Pinks – female young nationalists – as main actors. First of all, it is difficult to identify and characterize the protestors because of technical reasons connected to the Great Firewall. The tweet in Figure 12, for example, belongs to an account that cannot be traced; it has almost no followers and apart from four tweets from mid-April, it shows no activity. One plausible explanation is at hand: Since Twitter is blocked within mainland China, any person who wants to reach the Twitter account of Nnevy has to use a VPN channel and needs to create a fake Twitter account for this special occasion. Behind the traces we find on Twitter, there

can be any person – a payed Chinese official or a Little Pink fan. To avoid what Wu, Li, and Wang (2018, p. 32) call an elitist and biased analysis, a sound empirical study on the dynamics of the movement and the social backgrounds of the participants in mainland China would be needed. For the time being, we have to consider the findings of empirical analyses of the Diba incident of 2016.

### **Fandom Nationalism**

On the basis of an empirical investigation of the Diba case – the cyber-attack on the Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen in 2016 – Fang and Repnikova (2018) claim that Little Pink is a suggestive, gendered label largely projected from outside, while the real actors behind the campaign were mostly male trolls. Due to their investigation, these actors captured the chat forum of the female K-pop and BL fans and made strategic use of the image of Little Pinks. The authors, thus, question the existence of Little Pinks as an independent group altogether.

Other authors take the Little Pinks as real but see them as heavily influenced or even controlled by the Communist Party of China itself. One indication is the official endorsement of the Diba campaign by the Communist Youth League (Meisenholder, 2019). Another key indication are the recruitment programs of the Youth League, which were launched in 2015 to “reinforce youth belief in the CPC and pump vigor into the cause of national rejuvenation” (Lam, 2016; see also Wong, 2015). The recruiting program aimed to organize an online force for keeping the internet clean. These accounts suggest that the Little Pinks have grown out of the Youth League or are at least closely connected to it.

Following seminal ethnographic research, as in Liu (2019), in the case of the Diba incident as well as in the case at hand, the Little Pinks are real and deserve to be taken seriously as a collective actor in their own right. On the organizational level, the meme war against Nnevy suggests that the group developed independently and on the basis of the transnational K-pop and BL fandom (for a similar observation, see Wu, Li, & Wang, 2019). The popularity of Thai BL series is a very recent phenomenon, and the emerging fandoms transgress national boundaries and also the Great Firewall. There is no reason to assume that the fandom that attacked Nnevy is less real than the fandom that defended her.

The Little Pink movement also shows signs of organizational autonomy when it comes to the technical requirements of the attack. As mentioned above, in order to launch attacks against Facebook or Twitter accounts, they have to use VPN technology to overcome the Great Firewall and create fake Facebook and Twitter accounts. As documented in the Diba case, all this needs knowledge sharing and coordination, which is not organized, for example, by the Youth League, but achieved in chat fora like Diba. According to Yang et al. (2017, p. 115), this autonomous strategy even brings the Little Pinks into a dilemma. On the one hand, they want to use the tactics of Internet subculture to spread pro-PRC messages and to promote loyalty to the Chinese state. On the other hand, they are doing it by collectively transgressing technical and legal norms of the PRC.

Meanwhile, this strategic knowledge of the use of VPN technologies seems to have become general knowledge and practice. After the Nnevy incident, Tong (2020)

reports on another spontaneous movement, which organized transnationally across the Great Firewall. Professionals working in the creative industry launched the initiative to leave Weibo because of the increasingly restrictive environment inside China, and set up a new network outside the Great Firewall on Twitter under the hashtag #ACAC (A Catalogue of Artists from China). Such incidents show the organizational and strategic autonomy of social media-based movements inside the PRC.<sup>15</sup>

More importantly, the Little Pinks deserve to be taken seriously as independent actors because of their political views, which go beyond the stereotypical NMSL curse. According to a study of the think-tank MERICS, Little Pinks represent one strand among several competing clusters in the PRC internal debates about the political future of China. Shi-Kupfer et al. (2017, p. 41) characterize them as leftists and nationalists, who are mostly “young, tech savvy university students and young professionals”, of which many have travelled abroad more than average. They can be distinguished from other clusters, which the report describes as *party warriors*, *Mao lovers*, *China advocates*, *traditionalists*, and more. Shi-Kupfer et al. (2017), and Liu (2019) also account for the Little Pinks’ political positioning against the backdrop of their social and economic situation. Shi-Kupfer et al. (2017) discuss the personal living conditions, economic difficulties, and the resulting frustration with their economic situation. Such trajectories of politicization are also assumed for the supporters of populist authoritarian leaders such as Donald Trump, Marine le Pen, and the Alternative for Germany (AfD) (Hong, 2016). Interestingly, we are confronted with the same contradictions, which characterize the analyses of the social base of authoritarianism: On the one side, it seems that supporters are well educated and come from a middle-class background; on the other side, the feeling of economic deprivation seems to be a crucial factor for the political positioning.

From a slightly different perspective, Wu et al. (2019) discuss that the economic position of their home country, mainland China, gives the Little Pinks an inferior position inside the transnational fandom. This feeling of inferiority and jealousy – one might speculate – could be behind the initial outrage over Nnevy’s remark that she considers herself to be Taiwanese, and not Chinese, in terms of style, fashion, etc.

### New Debates and a New Fragmentation

The ideological independence can also be seen in the dynamics of the debates, which unfolded under the hashtag #MilkTeaAlliance. The murder of George Floyd and the emergence of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement led to a split in the Hong Kong democracy movement. Parts of the movement had sought the support of the USA and the Trump administration as an ally against mainland China. Some even went as far as holding up posters pleading for an intervention of the USA in the conflict (Li, 2020; Napolitano, 2019; Wong, 2019) (see Figures 18 & 19.)

During the Black Lives Matter protests, Chinese state media extensively covered issues such as racial discrimination and riots in the USA, and – drawing on historic connections – supported the Black Lives Matter concerns. This brought the Hong

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15 For another account of autonomous self-organization in the wake of the Corona crisis, see also Klabisch and Straube (2020).



**Figure 18** (left). Photo of Hong Kong prodemocracy activists demanding the invasion of Hong Kong by US troops. (Global Times, 2020b).



**Figure 19** (right). A splinter group of the Hong Kong prodemocracy demonstrators. (Hong Kong Autonomy Action, 2020).

Kong demonstrators into a difficult situation. The leadership declared their solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement and saw it as a likeminded movement against state violence, despite the fact that, with this declaration, they found themselves on the same side of their foe, mainland China. Other parts of the Hong Kong movement, however, kept silent in order not to snub the US administration (Davidson, 2020).

In social media, the difficulty of the Hong Kong movement to find a position was exploited by state propaganda and nationalists. Memes directly targeting the proximity of parts of the Hong Kong movement to Trump were also retweeted under the hashtag #MilkTeaAlliance and led to controversial debates.

With memes such as this, the framing of the MilkTeaAlliance as an anti-authoritarian, pro-democracy movement was questioned – at least as long as they referred to a discourse of human rights in the tradition of the United States.



**Figure 20** (left). A meme showing Joshua Wong asking the US security forces for intervention in Hong Kong. (Andrew Hans, 2020).



**Figure 21** (right). Meme showing a montage of the Statue of Liberty near New York with the scene of the killing of George Floyd. The tweet, which was answering to Joshua Wong's tweet from 12 April 2020, translates as “Take the freedom you want!” (你要的自由拿去!). (I Can't Breathe, 2020).

Even more, the tactics of Thai pro-democracy bloggers were partly copied and used against them. The meme in Figure 22, produced by state propaganda, with two juxtaposed video clips is an example for this.



**Figure 22.** Two juxtaposed video clips with the titles Tank Man 坦克人 and Autobot 汽车人 (car man). The original post, tweeted by a PRC propaganda account, comes with the suggestion/command “use this comparison” (要用这种对比图). (Shanghai Mental Health Center Dr Yang, 2020).

To fight back the attacks by Chinese nationalists, Thai users frequently pointed to the Tian’anmen massacre – a taboo in Mainland China – to expose the Chinese nationalists’ blindness for historical facts. These clips, however, show openly the famous Tank Man episode, recorded in 1989, when a desperate man walked in front of a tank. The clip shows how the tank approaches and stops. It does not show that the man was arrested by secret police and disappeared ever since. This video is juxtaposed with a scene from the Black Lives Matter demonstrations, where demonstrators are standing in front of a police car, climbing on its hood in order to stop it. Here, the car does not even slow down, but instead hits the protestors, speeds up, and drives off. Memes like this, which relativize and play down the Tian’anmen massacre or create *alternative interpretations* of it, were posted through various Twitter accounts and were also shared under the hashtag #MilkTeaAlliance. This had two effects. First, the iconic pictures of the Tian’anmen massacre were being reproduced and retweeted – different from the almost complete censorship inside the Great Firewall. Secondly, in the thread connected to the posting, fierce discussions unfolded about police violence and about historic facts. Sources and references were shared and discussed. What came about was a transnational space for discussion, which included fans from inside and outside of the Great Firewall – albeit distorted by the fact that from the inside of the PRC, the identity of the participants was hidden, since the discussants had to use VPN channels and fake accounts.

### Fragmentation and the Creation of Echo Chambers

Such debates, however, were muted from two sides. On Sina Weibo, inside the Great Fire Wall, a free debate on the issues discussed under the #MilkTeaAlliance never

unfolded. But also on Twitter, the debate was muted soon after the Black Lives Matter movement gained momentum. On Friday, 12 June, Twitter deleted about 170,000 accounts<sup>16</sup> which they saw as part of a Beijing-backed influence operation, on grounds of violation of the platform manipulation policies (Taylor, 2020). The number comprised 23,750 accounts that were highly active and according to Twitter constituted the core network of influencers, and 150,000 amplifier accounts. The accounts were identified through quantitative statistical data concerning their behavior and their activity. On this basis, they were identified as the same state actor responsible for the approximately 200,000 accounts suspended in August 2019<sup>17</sup>.

Moreover, Twitter cooperated with two research institutions that undertook a detailed analysis of the content of the tweets and the network of the accounts (Miller et al., 2020; Wallis, 2020). According to these studies, the network constituted largely “an echo chamber of fake accounts that spread geopolitical narratives favorable to the Communist Party, focusing on deceptive narratives about Hong Kong, the coronavirus pandemic and other issues” (Al Jazeera, 2020b).

A superficial overview of the deleted accounts and the debates reveals that the criteria for the deletion were a rather coarse grid. What was also deleted was the account of Milktealogy<sup>18</sup>, which was the creator of the visual identity of the MilkTeaAlliance – presumably because it fell under the category of high-performance accounts. Moreover, it is not known how many of the accounts that showed low activity were actually from Little Pinks, created in the course of their strategy to overcome the Great Firewall.

We want to argue that, instead of removing an “echo chamber of fake accounts”, the effect of the deletion on 12 June was the deepening of a split between two echo chambers, through the separation of an ongoing debate. Among other effects, the deletion cut off the publication of challenging memes (from the Chinese state propaganda) and hindered other active accounts from participating in the debate. The largest effect, however, was the exclusion of Little Pinks, who might have taken part in the debates, even if only as inferior and soon to be defeated participants.

## CONCLUSION

The current MilkTeaAlliance can be characterized as a new anti-globalization movement – reacting against the new, Chinese-dominated globalization process, which is unfolding in the wake of the current hegemonic transition. Different from the anti-globalization movement in the late 1990s and early 2000s, this new movement mainly reacts to the increasing authoritarianism in various forms, but also – to a lesser extent – addresses other issues, such as ecological issues connected to Chinese infrastructure projects.

The hashtag started in a bottom-up process, out of a spontaneous movement in a cyber war, typical for K-Pop and BL fandoms. It can be called a politicized fandom war. However, through the involvement of democracy activists, it was systematically

16 For another account of autonomous self-organization in the wake of the Corona crisis, see also Klabisch and Straube (2020).

17 [https://blog.twitter.com/en\\_us/topics/company/2020/information-operations-june-2020.html](https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/information-operations-june-2020.html)

18 [https://blog.twitter.com/en\\_us/topics/company/2019/information\\_operations\\_directed\\_at\\_Hong\\_Kong.html](https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2019/information_operations_directed_at_Hong_Kong.html)

developed and expanded. Currently, the sustained Thai pro-democracy movement is the most visible off-line effect – a movement that increasingly refers to the MilkTeaAlliance in terms of their concepts and ideology, as well as in terms of their strategic use of self-ironic and sarcastic forms of political communication and protest. Together with the huge success of the Facebook group Royalists Marketplace (see interview with Pavin Chachavalpongpun, Schaffar, 2020, this issue), or the TikTok Campaign against Donald Trump (Hahn, 2020), the MilkTeaAlliance is one example of a new cycle of social mobilization that rests on pop culture and fandom strategies. This is also the greatest difference to the anti-globalization movement of the 1990s/2000s. In the first accounts, which are available in the mainstream media, the movement appears as a youth movement on Twitter. This view leaves out the ‘other side’ – the movement inside of the Great Firewall on Sina Weibo, where the initial cyber battle was being planned. Due to the lack of empirical data and due technical reasons that make it difficult to reconstruct the actors inside mainland China, the competing fandom – the Little Pink movement, their political ideology and social background – remains largely unknown.

From this angle, the cyber battle of Nnevy and the emergence of the MilkTeaAlliance looks less like the birth of a new pro-democratic youth movement, but more like the articulation of a deep political polarization within the transnational fandoms of pan-Asian pop cultures, which is reminiscent of the political polarizations in the USA, UK, and other countries with rising populist authoritarian regimes. This (transnational) polarization partly follows or is an articulation of a split between media apps inside versus outside of the Great Firewall, with the Chinese nationalist views dominating the discourse on Sina Weibo and Baidu fora, and the liberal-democratic view dominating on Twitter and Facebook. The meme war was a clash between these two sides, with repercussions in the Twitter sphere as well as in the Weibo sphere.

The decision by Twitter to delete more than 170,000 accounts allegedly behind a state-organized disinformation campaign effectively led to a segregation of political discourses in two different spheres, to a further fragmentation of the cyberspace, and to the creation of two echo chambers. What we know about the MilkTeaAlliance is largely based on data from the echo chamber that comprises Thailand, Taiwan, and Hong Kong – the world outside of the Great Firewall. The future development of the new transnational pro-democracy movement will, to a great extent, be decided by the success or failure of the pro-democracy movement in the offline world – on the streets of Bangkok and Hong Kong. But it will also be decided by the questions of whether or not the fragmentation of the Internet can be overcome, and whether a transnational debate including the cyber space inside the Great Firewall can be organized.



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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Wolfram Schaffar is Professor for Development Politics at the University of Passau, Germany. Prior to this position, Schaffar has been working as professor for Japanese Studies at the University of Tübingen and as professor for Development Studies and Political Science at the University of Vienna, with visits as guest researcher at the Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, the Yangon University in Myanmar, and at the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) in Leiden. His fields of interest are social media and political movements, new constitutionalism and democratization processes, as well as new authoritarianism.

► Contact: wolfram.schaffar@gmx.de

Praphakorn Wongratanawin is member of the board of trustees (Kuratorium) of the Stiftung Asienhaus, Cologne, Germany.

► Contact: inzamam@web.de

