

# **Transnational Human Spatial Relations of Asian Youths under the Manifestation of ‘Milk Tea Alliance’ Movement: A case from Thai and Taiwanese activists’ experiences\***

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## **Abstract**

In accordance with the provocation and coercion of China’s hegemony in the region, Asian youths express their plausible discontent through forming a transnational civil society named the ‘Milk Tea Alliance’. Looming transnational human spatial relations have been shaped by the advancement of telecommunication. Hence, this study aims to elucidate the transnational civil society of the Milk Tea Alliance under the analytical manifestation of transnationalism to delve into the human spatial relations and their transnational identity across geographical boundaries between Thai and Taiwanese activists. A qualitative approach employing online face-to-face interviews with Thai and Taiwanese participants, 18 persons in total, were conducted. The results indicate that transnational civil societies as a virtual association require shared commonalities to engender the human spatial relations across geographical boundaries. The political downturn, the defiance of China’s political interference, and the demand for democracy are prerequisite collective impetuses and faiths in forging interconnectivities for the transnational civil society of Asian youths. In order to arouse the transnational identity as the mental attachment for transnational participants to this demarcated political entity, milk tea culture was rematerialized to become the ideological beacon and identity for Asian youths who collectively share the aforementioned impetuses and faiths.

**Keywords:** Milk Tea Alliance, transnationalism, human spatial relations, transnational identity, Asian youths

## **Introduction**

In 2020, Thailand was encountering the maladministration of COVID-19 due to the military junta style

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administration, and big corruption in purchasing armament due to its good bilateral ties with China; Thai youths who have yearned for democracy for years were on the street for demonstrations and discussed these issues publicly. While in Taiwan, the Taiwanese have beheld the political suppression, coercion, and intimidation of China for years from several practices whether with the protests in Hong Kong or the military provocation in Taiwan territory. The sense of insecurity among the Taiwanese led to the notion of the importance of democracy which should be safeguarded and enhanced regionally (Wongsurawat, 2021). With regard to the emergence of the Milk Tea Alliance, it was a beginning point for those who demand democracy and for the step-back of China as a hindrance to regional democratization. Therefore, these two countries' youths could sense common experiences due to the political interference of China and faith in a democratic society, they promptly embraced the Milk Tea Alliance inasmuch as the movement could share a similar impetus. Ostensibly, democracy and Chinese coercion became paramount factors that mobilize Asian youths to address political problems and form a transnational political entity in Asia.

Under the hashtags related to the Milk Tea Alliance whether #MilkTeaAlliance, #MilkTeaIsThickerThanBlood, #พันธมิตรชาวม (translated as #MilkTeaAlliance), or #奶茶聯盟 (translated as #MilkTeaAlliance), they comprise numerous supportive and positive posts about Hong Kong and Taiwan's democracy and independence. These hashtags were witnessed an incredible number of Tweets more than 11 million times from its beginning until April 2021 which have admittedly facilitated transnational interactional reciprocities (Tanakasempipat, 2021). They also encompass international political issues in the region which occurred owing to China's coercive and provocative practices, such as, the Mekong River, South China Sea disputes, etc. Apart from the popularity of a digital movement, the movements have been held physically in several countries whether Taiwan or Thailand. In Thailand, demonstrators chanted in supporting Hong Kong's youth-driven rebellion against the Chinese communist party (Barron, 2020). While in Taiwan, according to my participation, demonstrators had gathered to advocate both political crises in Thailand and Hong Kong. The transnational interactions in terms of a democratic alliance, an engagement of encountering authoritarianism in Asia, and a generation under China's burgeoning influence in the region were interwoven via both online and offline platforms.

These are empirical instances that participants' dialogues across geographical boundaries occur via both online and offline channels, solidarity has been building for months at the time. It constructs a facile debate platform and community for Asian youths who have shared commonalities in terms of political demands and political issues. According to extant literature on transnationalism and political-social movement, modern individuals tend to forge a new broad-based political coalition across geographical boundaries to address and proliferate their political demands, issues, identity, or even ideologies (Mitchell, 2017), for instance, feminism movements (Rupp & Taylor, 1999). To alleviate the physical connection burden, a virtual world is utilized as a means to facilitate political social movement across boundaries. Forming a virtual-based community is concerned with sociability and social interactions happened in this online space (Souza & Preece, 2004), this newly emerged space then embedded in existing praxis (e.g., information flows,

interactional conversations, or encouragement) and power relations of daily life and became a focus in academic fields (Wilson & Peterson, 2002). The actual praxis builds a collective notion amidst transnational participants regarding their political commonalities in every regard, thus constructing a collective identity. This virtual community is not parallelly and independently emerging apart from the real world, rather it is increasingly embedded in it (Agre, 1999, as cited in Wilson & Peterson, 2002).

This emerging transnational community in a virtual world should be scrutinized to appraise whether extant literature of the global north in terms of transnationalism can be applicable in the case of the global south. This could reiterate most extant literature, predominantly raised in the work of Vertovec (2001), that the development of telecommunication plays a significant role in constructing the transnational space as well as which conditions are essential in establishing the transnational space in the Asian context. Consequently, this research aims to demonstrate the transnational civil society under the realm of the Milk Tea Alliance to delve into the human spatial relations across geographical boundaries between Thai and Taiwanese activists' experiences. Therefore, the research question was proposed as follows: how do Thai and Taiwanese participants of the Milk Tea Alliance reciprocally connect to create their transnational civil society?

## What is Transnationalism ?

As a general terminology, transnationalism is multidimensional that often refers to the material ties, networks, and sustained relations that reciprocally operate in a consecutive trend between actors across national boundaries. In addition, it may also be utilized to delineate the movement of cross-border symbols and ideologies between individuals and institutions so as to build multidimensional transnational spaces. This reveals the potential to appraise new political, economic, and cultural forms that exist across and beyond the nation-state (Mitchell, 2017). Likewise, Crang, Dwyer, and Jackson (2003) illustrated that transnationality is multiply inhabited. This transnational social space comprised of the circuits, flows, trajectories, and imaginaries includes a wide variety of actors. Clavin (2005) further expanded that transnationalism should not be defined as only fostering bounded networks, but as structures that sustain and form shapes to identities of both nation state and non-nation state, and particular social and geographic spaces. Furthermore, Nye and Keohane (1971) delineated the terminology as 'contracts, coalitions, and interaction across state boundaries' which are not directly controlled by the central policy organs of government. While Waldinger and Fitzgerald (2004) demonstrated transnationality as the connection between "here" and "there". Nonetheless, David-Fox (2011) explained that the renewed interest in transnationalism in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century has refocused study toward the moments and mechanisms of exchange, two-sided analyzes of international relationships, and cultural and ideological interaction.

In a nutshell, scrutinizing transnationalism ponders a question of practices across boundaries: should it be presumed limits to a state's rights or form what is defined as a transnational civil society? Transnational civil society embraces more informal relationships and practices, which can be formed based on ties of social

movements (Mitchell, 2017). It becomes more interesting in researching a transnational civil society in a virtual space in which nonstate actors play a distinctive role in the international community currently. This study then aims to reversely highlight this neglect of reciprocal ideology again, albeit the current interests in the transnational mobilization of commodities and humans. Furthermore, I aim to elucidate the interrelations between space and people in a virtual space among Asian youths.

## The Spatial Scales and Dualism of Space and People, and Locality and Transnationality

Theoretically, Actor-Network Theory (ANT) opens academic scopes for human geography to investigate the interrelations and interactions between space and people, and spatial scales between locality and transnationality. ANT primarily conceptualizes “science and technology in the making” rather than “ready made science and technology” (Latour, 1987). In other words, how the boundary and the relationship between society and technology are the subjects of consecutive struggles and trials in building the fact (Walsham, 1997) which this study aims to investigate how networks, associations, and connections of people are forged in a virtual space and across geographical boundaries.

Likewise, Nye and Keohane (1971) purposed what can be called transnational interaction in order to expound the interwoven linkage between non-state actors and state actors themselves within a particular space. This interaction is on the basis of communication, transportation, transaction, and traveling, which aim to attain common political goals through transnational space. The expansion of transnational interaction is expressed through transnational social movement (Vertovec, 2009) as mentioned by Koehn and Rosenau (2002) that the energy that drives the transformational activities of civil-society networks is provided by the explosion of interpersonal interactions beyond territorial boundaries. These transnational social movements are defined as collective challenges based on common purposes and social solidarity. Most of them are taking place via virtual or cyber-communities (Vertovec, 2009). Transnational online space is constructed within networks (Murdoch, 1998) and utilized to create new myths, symbols, and norms politically and culturally so as to justify their activities and manipulate people on every scale in an ad hoc way (Souza & Preece, 2004). Either domestic politics or interstate politics can be directly and indirectly affected by this interaction. The study of Rosenau (1980) further expanded that the rise of new global relations and associations among private individuals and groups radically transform modes of collective practice and global political interdependence. Thus, we have witnessed the interrelations between space and official actors, while this study will expand the interrelations between space and unofficial actors, so-called the people.

Turning to the relations between transnationality and locality, many scholars purposed what could be called ‘transnational urbanism’ to underscore how translocal (i.e., local to local) connections and social relations are socio-spatially forged across geographical boundaries, and by which social actors and networks. Also, they widen the scope of actors under transnationalism ranging from transmigrants to social movements, advocacy networks, etc. by investigating its foundations in particular geopolitics (Rogers, 2005) and the mundane or everyday practices of social actors (Smith, 2005). These translocal connections then increasingly

advocate new modes of being-in-the-world (Smith, 2001). In accordance with the advancement of telecommunication, Murdoch (1998) navigated and juxtaposed transnationality and locality in line, he emphasized that physical distance is no longer considered as an explicit indicator for illustrating the relationship between points, nodes, or even particles in space. Conradson and Lathan (2005) then concluded how particular people negotiate their everyday practices that travel and inherent in transnational mobility, such mobility is dependent on what he defined it as ‘the panoply of mundane effort’, for instance, phone calls, internet usage, etc. Under the realm of the Milk Tea Alliance, the internet or cyberspace is a world both emplaced and given order through interactions, and forms a space for the movement’s participants. In some contrary cases, mobility across trans-nations can differentiate one space from one space, or even deepen the gap among them, rather than integrate into one social space, such as human, resources, and material mobility between core, semi-periphery, and periphery countries under the World-systems theory (Robertson & Lechner, 2016).

## People’s Relationships and their Identity in a Transnational Civil Society

People’s relationships across state boundaries can be unfolded through several facets. In order to achieve this research’s objectives, transnational identity and transnational space will be broadened to emphasize this issue. Vertovec (2001) expounded on the inherent linkage between transnationalism and identity, which call for juxtaposition, because people’s transnational networks of communication are grounded upon collective identity. Patterns of communication or exchange of resources and information, as well as involvement in socio-cultural and political activities, characterize such networks. Understanding any politicized identity which creates social cohesion across borders, it necessitates examining the social and political struggle that created the shared collective identity. Postmodern social movements construct “submerged networks” of political cultures that are interwoven with everyday interactions between a plurality of individuals. Collective actions take place on the basis of the demand to improve political or social circumstances of such submerged networks. These actions thus provide new expressions of identity that challenge conventional predominant representations (Diani, 1992; Taylor & Whittier, 1992; Simon, *et al.*, 1998). Once referring to civil society, the unpleasant socio-political circumstance hence engenders a willingness to undertake collective action, subsequently forming the shared collective identity.

Regarding the bulge of transnational civil societies, transnational governance is a critical feature of contemporary society, which can be achieved by both state and non-state actors. State-based agreements do not necessarily result in shaping an integrated transnational space, since state actors may only seek for cooperation from different nations, not for collective actions. On the other hand, nonstate actors involving policy coordination do not substitute national institutions, but rather work collectively and informally to carry out the necessary issues that affect several areas of jurisdiction. Innovations in computing, telecommunications, and the internet have facilitated the formation of a transnational civil society in a virtual community (Mitchell, 2017). Online civil societies in a digital age have mushroomed globally due to its

potentials to serve as another viable vehicle for collective actions and to breach barriers: geographical distances, cost, etc. Importantly, it is a means to camouflage participants' personal identities to be hardly identified (Brunsting & Postmes, 2002). This is concerned by activists participating in political movements in areas with strong censorship and authoritarianism. These developments are also recounted by way of suggesting ways in which identities are shaped by transnational social actors (Vertovec, 2001); though, its consequences still take root among pre-existing social networks that shape trust, reciprocity, and collective identity (Vertovec, 2009). The Milk Tea Alliance is also utilizing the internet and social media platforms to allow the rematerialization of milk tea culture to form its new transnational identity in accordance with the notion of Latour (2011) in the rematerialization of a subject allowed by digital techniques.

Within social worlds that span more than one area, identities of individuals and groups of people are negotiated. Hannerz (1996, as cited in Vertovec, 2001) discussed people who dwell in a variety of non-territorialized 'habitats of meaning'. People's cultural repertoires are formed as a result of their experiences in these varied habitats, which in turn impact the formation of identity, or even multiple identities. A range of identity, ideology, activity, commodity, and people can be conceptualized by studying transnational commodity culture, which will portray a wider transnational space and solidify social relations (Murdoch, 1998). Lately, people seldom grow up understanding only one culture but progressively have interactions with people from diverse cultures. Therefore, people are not only a member of one culture, but rather task of navigating both local and global cultures (Jensen, Arnett, & McKenzie, 2011). Examination of transnational flows of people, things, and ideologies connected with the specific commodity might be a way to interrogate the relations between transnationalism and identity (Crang, Dwyer, & Jackson, 2003).

The Milk Tea Alliance's transnational participants are indeed nonstate actors who are initiating the transnational space for their political works. According to the fact that these transnational participants are endeavoring to form the transnational identity to create the mental attachment to the movement; thus, it necessitates investigating these nonstate actors' interactions and interconnectivities in the interwoven transnational space so as to comprehend a consecutive phenomenon. This would bring micropolitics and microcultures of everyday life into the significant emphasis on transnationalism.

## Research Methodology

A qualitative approach applying phenomenological research was used for this study. Individual aspects and shared commonalities of a focal experience were sought in order to elucidate the meaning of experiences from the standpoint of the informants (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtler, 2010). An in-depth interview was used to create reciprocal and non-judgment interaction between the researcher and the informants. The interview questions of this approach are to ask specific questions in a flexible sequence (Marshall & Rossman, 2015). A set of interview questions facilitates the development at the commencement of this research. Different themes of the interview guidelines are as follows: their perspectives toward the connotations of milk tea

culture after the emergence of the movement, their lived experiences when participating in the movement, and the reciprocal connection between the informants and transnational participants.

## Data Collection and Analysis

The online face-to-face interviews were conducted in Thai and English from January to February 2022 while utilizing Google Meet and Zoom for gathering data remotely. The interviews last from 25 to 57 minutes, averaging just over 39 minutes. Pseudonyms were used during the interviews and data analysis. The research's site selection and sampling were initiated with accessible sites (convenience sampling); then, it built on insights and connections from early data collection (snowball sampling) (Marshall & Rossman, 2015). Then, the modified version of Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method developed by Moustakas in 1994 (Creswell & Poth, 2018) was sequentially utilized for data analysis and the finding section.

This research sets the criteria for the prospective informants in order to ensure dense, accurate, and experienced data. As the researcher is a participant in this movement who has participated in the movement several times on both online and offline channels; then, the criteria to select the informants for this research are composed regarding my position as follows: the informants need to be either Thai or Taiwanese activist, participant, or stakeholder in the Milk Tea Alliance which requires their participation in the movement at least once from 2020 onwards. Also, the informants need to be young generation according to the internet generation definition (Sackmann & Winkler, 2013). Since this movement is fundamentally taking place online by youths; subsequently, this group participating in the movement can be implied to the above definition: their age range is 41-year-old and below.

In terms of the demographics of the informants, 10 Thai and 8 Taiwanese informants were interviewed. Their average age is 25.4 (N=18). They vary in occupation, ranging from educational, business, and health sectors. The researcher endeavored to balance the gender proportion of the informants whom 11 persons are female and 7 persons are male. Some of them are members of the Taiwan Alliance for Thai Democracy, Facebook Page of MTAT - Milk Tea Alliance Thailand – พันธมิตรชาวมม, and the Taiwan New Constitution Foundation. It needs to bear in mind that 5 Thai informants were residing in Taiwan, while 2 Taiwanese informants were residing in Thailand during the time of data collection. They were international students and white-collar workers who all experienced in participating in the movement in the country where they were residing at the time. Even some informants participated in the movement offline; but among their notions, they all underscore the significance of the internet as the important part of the movement and the easiest pattern to trans-locally communicate.

## The Rematerialization of Milk Tea as the Ideological Beacon and Identity

Ostensibly, to go further beyond a national civil society, a transnational civil society necessitates

constructing a collective identity or shared commonalities to gather the public's feeling of being part of the society and to create social cohesion (Rupp & Taylor, 1999; Pullen, 2014). The widely known origin of the movement's title is that milk tea was chosen as a derisory parody of the statement addressed by the Chinese embassy in Bangkok indicating Thailand and China as one family (Chinese Embassy Bangkok, 2020). Milk tea culture was embraced forthwith transnationally, inasmuch as milk tea culture is a contemporary consumption praxis where Thailand, Taiwan, and Hong Kong-places where have been politically suppressed by China-collectively share. Collective milk tea culture and political backgrounds can visualize multilateral bonds among pro-democracy parties in Asia, while deepening transnational connections among these parties that are thicker than blood relative as China claimed. Through this entitlement, milk tea culture was rematerialized from its prior presence as a beverage to an embedded symbol of the movement, which its political stance is to advocate democracy and demand the political backward of China regionally.

This transnational civil society necessitates addressing its value and identity. The below transcriptions of Dami and Mai showed that transnationalism and identity are inherently linked while milk tea culture was opted as a rematerialized materiality as the ideological beacon and identity of the movement. Similar to the notion of Smith (2002) and Mitchell (2017) which indicates that the transnational identity is formed as people across borders encounter the identical political problems, especially in weak democratic countries. Stakeholders will cooperate informally to address these particular problems impacting expanded more than an area of jurisdiction with the absence of state actors which can be applied to the Milk Tea Alliance in this regard. This rematerialization of milk tea culture is the creation of a counterhegemony (Lears, 1985) of state apparatuses from both national (the junta governments) and international (the Chinese government) actors. State-apparatuses from both scales are advocacy of the construction of transnational identity among Thailand, Taiwan, and Hong Kong since the sense of unity is formed by interactional ideological affinity. Subsequently, the process of rematerialization becomes the dynamic reproduction of ideology embedded in a certain material (Sadati, 2013). Milk tea culture struggles for its new cultural meaning as the ideological beacon and identity so that the sites of power can be retained and constantly reminds the transnational participants of the current collective political struggles, circumstances, impetus, and demands; albeit its scantiness of a clear literal cultural meaning in its conventional form.

Apparently, the desires in articulating the political response regarding democracy are identical amidst transnational participants. The democratic downturn in Asian countries is gathering and uniting all people who are oppressed by the regime opposed to democracy, authoritarianism. The suppressive mode of authoritarian-style governance is also advocacy of the construction of transnational identity as state-apparatuses did. Transnational participants formed a sense of unity through the collective sense of suppression, coercion, and intimidation within a solidarity-space society on the internet. Hence, the informants commonly addressed political problems that need to be eradicated. They could not work independently, they rather need to work cooperatively across borders; then they depicted milk tea culture as a linkage or ideological anchor to jointly achieve political works in terms of democracy. In this regard,



democracy becomes the most salient facet toward the informants' sentiments that necessitated being reiterated and reinforced in light of this movement. They affirmed the interest and belief in democracy is the universal value as the only game in town to bridge people and construct a transnational space for this transformative civil society across state boundaries. Milk tea as a certain commodity was rematerialized from its conventional portrayal as a beverage to be an embedded beacon of democracy for Asian youths as Dami and Mai elucidated:

"I think that there were a lot of my Taiwanese friends who feel more connected with Thailand and Hong Kong after we joined the Milk Tea Alliance... They feel that it is not only the democracy in Taiwan, but Taiwanese people also need to support democracy in Thailand and Hong Kong... I am really happy to see milk tea connect people across different borders and countries." (Dami, Taiwanese, 32-year-old, 25 January 2022)

"I think that this symbol has a political effect since there was transnational cooperation. When there was cooperation, people could reciprocally interact and share information... From the point of view of milk tea, it was a gathering of people who have a political ideology in terms of democracy." (Mai, Thai, 23-year-old, 21 January 2022)

Their depictions reassure that milk tea was rematerialized as the ideological beacon and identity of the movement. Following the notion of Williams (1978), this common sense among Asian youths solidifies their normality of existing relationships while constructing new cultural hegemony where their new power is embedded in it. A bunch of Asian youths shift their perception of regional prosperity to be collectivism, not separately growing as it used to be. Under this common lens, a political regime matters since a new approach to regional prosperity is not only related to the economic facet but also to the political facet. The Asian society could not be economically and politically advanced by an authoritarian style economy, but by economic liberalism under a democratic regime. The Milk Tea Alliance then results in strengthening ideology against an oppressive authoritarian regime and China as its representation of authoritarianism.

Corresponding to the notion of Nye and Keohane (1971), Thai and Taiwanese activists' transnational networks of exchange and communication are grounded based on their collective identity which they would like to transmit their belief in terms of democracy toward their communications. The ideology in terms of democracy can be conveyed through a certain commodity, which is more interesting that this certain commodity of milk tea is becoming a transnational commodity after the emergence of the Milk Tea Alliance. Milk tea was a beverage per se, though it was rematerialized its conventional cultural meaning after the emergence of the movement. Time and place matter to the transnationalized milk tea, the prior manner of milk tea, originally a beverage, is maintained within a national scale. Nonetheless, as time goes by until 2020 when the movement was initiated, milk tea has become trendy across the region. Milk tea that Nut has known all her life, Thai milk tea, was reconfigured its cultural meaning from a beverage to a symbol of the movement since it further goes and 'be consumed transnationally' (Cook, 2004). Consequently, moving milk

tea through time and place embellishes with the advancement of transnationalism to appoint its brand-new position as a symbol of the movement as Nut manifested:

“When I grew up, maybe because of the advancement of transportation or globalization, Taiwanese milk tea becomes trendy in Thailand...It (milk tea) is moving beyond Thainess. There is not only Thai milk tea anymore in my view. There are milk teas from other places...Therefore, I feel that the meaning of milk tea is changing due to places and time.” (Nut, Thai, 26-year-old, 23 January 2022)

The transnational identity of milk tea utilized by the Milk Tea Alliance generates political engagement inasmuch as transnational participants can mentally and physically engage in a political entity for political intents. An everyday consumption praxis of milk tea constructs the world for people (Allison, 1991), milk tea thus becomes a materiality containing democratic ideology. Once transnational participants consume it, they also consume its connotation as ideology and the hidden structure of power relations behind it simultaneously (Phalapong, 2022). Interpretably, transnational participants aim to socialize and disseminate their political ideology in terms of democracy, thus influencing the everyday thoughts of the rest of the society by directing the normative ideas, values, and beliefs that transnational participants collectively share within this demarcated political entity. In light of cultural hegemony (Lears, 1985), this is the relationship between power and culture in individuals’ daily lives.

## The Virtual Association of the Milk Tea Alliance and its Transnational Bonds across the Actual Geographical Boundaries

Regarding the background of the Milk Tea Alliance, the movement initially began in 2020 on Twitter, then expanded to other platforms. According to interviews with the informants and the finding of the study of Isa and Himelboim (2018) on a social movement on Twitter, Twitter seems to gain more popularity amidst transnational participants rather than other platforms since Twitter portrays itself as an interactional platform where people across the globe can easily link, connect, and create information flows. Hence, transnational participants can reciprocally interact without knowing each other and expand their transnational networks with those who have similar political ideologies and identities, while other platforms are just a way participants illustrate their political ideologies and identities with their pre-existing social networks: this is the most apparent difference between Twitter and other platforms. Nonetheless, it should bear in mind that once referring to a virtual space of the Milk Tea Alliance, other social media platforms also have equal significance as a virtual space that forges interconnectivities.

Most adolescents progressively use social media recently in general, it is effortless to create interwoven relationships with people across the globe without stepping out of their comfort zone. These instantaneous interconnectivities overcome geographic boundaries and go along with distinctive conceptions of the way to self-present and link with others. Due to the advancement of telecommunication, the movement’s participants

can engage in the movement regardless of a place they are and time. Hence, the transnational bonds between Thai and Taiwanese participants of the movement have been reciprocally and gradually connected via social media platforms which construct the transnational civil society named the Milk Tea Alliance. Even though this transnational civil society is informal, it can reiterate the solidarity amidst the young generations in the region that offers a facet indicating the significance of young generations in unofficially compelling political works in the region. Moreover, this transnational civil society can be partaken by whoever because it is accessible online with the ability in gathering people in spite of geographical obstacles. Therefore, it is attainable for participants to claim themselves as a member of this transnational civil society, being part of the Milk Tea Alliance as Aera and Nut illustrated:

“It is an identity that becomes a real soft power that does not have to be bloodshed, but we can keep going on online platforms. There will be gatherings in different countries and raise the symbol of milk tea. This is soft power that shows that this group is expanding. It is one of the symbols showing the unity of the group despite being in different areas.” (Aera, Thai, 22-year-old, 24 January 2022)

“In reality, the Milk Tea Alliance goes beyond that assumption. It is a hashtag that whoever can use, whoever can be a member. But, for those who do not understand, they may assume that the Milk Tea Alliance is just a group of people or an association... It is the movement that the young generation gathered to politically demonstrate.” (Nut, Thai, 26-year-old, 23 January 2022)

Based on the common milk tea culture in daily life in East-Southeast Asia, the informants depicted their efforts to create conversations transnationally and their intimate sentiment between transnational participants toward countries in the movement through this commodity as a mediator. Since all participants demand democracy cooperatively; transnational conversations in terms of democracy, regional political issues, and the resistance to China were discussed to erect a transnational civil society where the public could share the same political intents in their conversations. An imagined community is implied by the aforesaid impetus; hence, it inherently builds a distinctive area on the internet where they could share this collectivity in many regards. The advancement of telecommunication notably shapes this imagined community. This imagined community can be presumed as a political entity that requires the mental attachment to gather people within the space. To sum up, this transformative module on becoming a transnational civil society is created via online conversations between individuals across state boundaries since they all share the same political demands as Dami and N explained:

“I still agree with the movement. Because as a Taiwanese, there are a lot of my friends feel more connected with Thailand and Hong Kong after we joined the Milk Tea Alliance... I am really happy to see milk tea connects people across different borders and countries.” (Dami, Taiwanese, 32-year-old, 25 January 2022)

“The online movement does not mean that there is no impact. Rather, it can create conversations... I

do not know whether China will be unstable with this thing (the online movement) or not; at least, it creates conversations on the internet that this thing is happening.” (N, Thai, 29-year-old, 5 February 2022)

Apparently, transnationalism is not dominated only by state actors but also by non-state actors vis-à-vis civil societies as mentioned in the preceding paragraphs. In this study, the civil societies of Thailand and Taiwan significantly play a role in shaping their translocal connections in an unofficial way in order to polish their political ideology in demanding democratic societies in Asia. This is societal intercourse, with remarkable political importance, that takes place without governmental control as Lim noted it as ‘under-table connections’. It creates ‘transnational relations’ as Nye and Keohane (1971) noted it as contacts, coalitions, and interactions across state boundaries without the political dominance of the government’s central foreign policy. The establishment of a new platform whereby stakeholders can be interwoven is erected, this is a transnational space where unofficial actors contribute to pursuing their political intents across boundaries. This transnational space is an emerging platform that accords to the Asian young generation, so they could cooperatively dedicate political work in terms of democracy. This is evidence that the transnational relations of the Milk Tea Alliance are not advanced by state actors to attain political works, but rather, by individuals. This elucidates the shift of arising unofficial actors in international politics: the transnational space of a new democratic era ushered by unofficial actors who are participants of the Milk Tea Alliance across state nations is salient as Lim gave insight from his perspective:

“I think the Milk Tea Alliance is a kind of special memory for the young generation in Asia. Especially, we have a reciprocal international connection, for the protestors, for advocacy, for scholars, and for students. We do have more and more under-table connections for our concerns on how to make our countries and how to make the whole of Asia become more democratic and get more freedom.” (Lim, Taiwanese, 25-year-old, 15 February 2022)

In much of thinking on transnationalism elaborated in the work of Crang, Dwyer, and Jackson (2003), it necessitates quasi-instantaneous communication across national borders with long distances. Once this communication could reach a critical mass through the involvement of substantial numbers of people in these activities, it tends to become normative. The aforementioned digital dialogues reiterate a critical mass among Asian youths who, once desire for democracy and struggle under Chinese political interference, tend to instantaneously and relentlessly create communication and interconnectivities under the transnational space. Paradoxically, reconceptualizing a transnational civil society via the lens of the ANT is different from utilizing state-apparatuses or modes of certain governance as a source of analysis. Turning a focal analysis back to interconnectivities as a source, transnational participants as an actor employ the internet as an actant to make a difference in the course of the Milk Tea Alliance’s participants’ actions. Once thinking about state-apparatuses and modes of governance as a source, outcomes could be the transnational identity. On the one hand, when scrutinizing interconnectivities, translocal reciprocity, interactions, and encouragement as

sources of this virtual space, the actual outcome is what conceptualizes ‘transnational civil society’ in this study. Therefore, a transnational civil society is a space encompassing interconnectivities occurred owing to shared commonalities.

More extensive scale rather than the sentimental linkage of individual and transnationalism, individuals across state boundaries endeavored to create a new civil-society network, transnational civil society. The transformative efforts of civil-society networks are driven by the energy of the explosion of interpersonal interactions across state boundaries (Koehn & Rosenau, 2002, as cited in Vertovec, 2009). In general, civil-society networks are emphasized domestically to reach political works on the national scale. Nonetheless, after the emergence of the Milk Tea Alliance, this is a homogenous assembly of Asian youths where their political works became more outstanding on an international scale so as to universally usher the region in an epoch of democracy. The process of ‘transnational place-making’ (Smith, 2005) was occurring from a web of relations since political and ideological orientations of democracy within this group of participants are embedded in this network. Co-presence of political and ideological orientations of democracy embedded in the aforementioned transnational interactions in more than one spatial location, but in one virtual space, is viewed as the process of forming transnational interconnectivities and space.

Thoroughly scrutinizing the transnational human spatial relations of the Milk Tea Alliance’s Thai and Taiwanese activists offers a glimpse of reiteration of a common critical appraisal raised in the work of Vertovec (2001) that whether transnationalism is a broad or narrow concept with ambivalence in constructing the transnational space. Obviously, on the basis of the study’s findings, transnationalism is a broad notion that can be applied to even activists, international students, or white-collar migrant workers depending on the intensity of communication and exchange across borders. Demanding democracy and being a generation under an authoritarian regime and China’s burgeoning influence are conditions facilitating the new transnational connection in this study. The political downturn, the defiance of China’s political interference, and the demand for democracy are the shared commonalities and faith in effectively solidifying the transnational civil society of Asian youths under the realm of the Milk Tea Alliance. Asian youths who could sense the above conditions, shared commonalities, and faith were witnessed as prerequisites in shaping this transnational civil society via interconnectivities. Linking transnational participants to the transnational civil society, milk tea was rematerialized as the transnational identity and the mental attachment. Subsequently, transnational participants could feel a deep ideological affinity for the movement by utilizing milk tea as an ideological and mental linkage within this demarcated political entity. Once transnational participants have the mental attachment to the movement, the translocal connections will occur in a virtual world. These translocal connections are connecting the dots across geographical boundaries in a virtual space which are instances of the creation of transnational human spatial relations.

## Forging the Translocal Connections by Accommodating a National Civil Society Abroad

Despite the prevailing circumstance of dwelling abroad, a Thai informant who is residing in Taiwan temporarily for her occupation can share and reinforce her Thai and democratic identity by attending physical demonstrations in Taiwan and online several times. Space and time seem inconspicuous in her opinion for being part of the movement to contribute to her country as she believes that she can stand with Thai demonstrators no matter a place she resides. The translocal connections between ‘here’ in Taiwan and ‘there’ in Thailand are portrayed to establish the transnational space where she could attend the movement in Taiwan while politically contributing to Thailand. The sense of diaspora is erected due to the transnational communication and interaction in this political arena. Apparently, since the movement has physically arisen in diverse countries in the region and online, it offers chances for participants who dwell abroad to politically stand and fight with their home country on the basis of their political ideology as Nut noted:

“I did not physically participate in the movement in Thailand because I am in Taiwan. But I protested in Taiwan for Thailand. It is an identity of a diaspora who still fights for their home country. I did not look at any specific area or any specific country to protest.” (Nut, Thai, 26-year-old, 23 January 2022)

Nut’s transcription further illustrates that apart from contributing to the transnational civil society, she desires to accommodate a national civil society in her home country to cope with the current political imbroglio and junta government, the Chan-o-cha administration. Even her subjectivity in this regard portrays that an endeavor to promote a national civil society in Thailand is explicit, but an endeavor to connect with a national civil society in Taiwan is absent. It is just a way of the utilization of this transnational civil society as a platform to achieve her subjective political work in Thailand. Besides, Taiwanese informants did not illustrate an apparent aspiration to accommodate a national civil society in their home country, hence, it could not be interpreted that this transnational civil society is the assembly of different national civil societies. In other words, it is the informal association under a homogenous transnational civil society.

## Forging the Translocal Connections via the Flows of Information, Encouragement, and Advocacy

What flows on the internet under the realm of the Milk Tea Alliance is evidence of the construction of the translocal connections; information, encouragement, and advocacy are actant to mediate interconnectivities between transnational participants. Transnational participants reciprocally encourage and support mentally and physically for indicating a collectivity that transnational participants do not singly encounter regional political problems and challenge their authoritarian governments. Transnational participants then solidified social relations by sharing information in many regards for raising awareness as well as informing the online world about political turmoil in countries that participated in the movement. A

Thai informant demonstrated that she would offer her time to share information for raising awareness, especially when transnational participants would like to spread the current political situation and news in their own countries. Her interview indicates that she will advocate the locals' political demands to form a sense of regional solidarity, and to ensure that the locals had international support. The emerging international and emotional support then constructs the interwoven ties between these transnational participants since Taiwanese participants sought to do vice versa as Alan gave a facile demonstration:

“I saw some protestors show flags of Hong Kong, Tibet, and Taiwan. I think the Thai people wanted to support Taiwan as a country, not part of China. They wanted to support us, so we also wanted to support them. This is a connection between Thailand and Taiwan that we wanted to support each other.” (Alan, Taiwanese, 20-year-old, 20 February 2022)

Millions of information, encouragement, and advocacy flows forge transnational bonds that show translocal solidarity across boundaries. Even though they have not met and known each other, the reciprocal advocacy is still explicit and is evidence of regional solidarity. The consolidation of regional solidarity aggrandizes unofficial partnerships of Asian prosperity for youths within the sphere of virtual space.

## Conclusion and Discussion

The Milk Tea Alliance vividly represents itself as a transnational civil society that is building a socio-political space for forging interpersonal dialogues in order to achieve the movement's objectives. The Milk Tea Alliance then necessitates forming universal or sharing values for gathering transnational participants' sentiments to link with the movement as well as identify a demarcated political entity. The above dense discussion shows the approaches that transnational participants think, act, and understand themselves and their relationship to the movement. Theorizing transnationalism through the human spatial relations across geographical boundaries under the manifestation of the Milk Tea Alliance enables us to understand which conditions forging the transnational space, and which factors mobilize and facilitate transnational interconnectivities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Asia amidst the young generations. Not only a transnationalized commodity or mobilizing people could shape transnationality, but ideological affinity in terms of the burgeoning democracy demand amidst the younger generations also bridges and strengthens transnationality to some extent via a virtual space.

Fully illuminating the results offers a glimpse of affirmation in constructing transnational civil societies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is imperative to utilize the advancement of telecommunication as a mobilizing instrument to usher the bridge between transnationality and locality, and between locality and locality; albeit geographical boundaries, culture, and language barriers. This panoply of mundane effort, internet usage, is particularly responsible for the creation of today's transnational civil society. Individuals could be part of a membership of a demarcated political entity across geographical boundaries without stepping out of their

dwellings by just having interconnectivities in terms of shared political identity with those abroad via the internet. Apart from telecommunication, shared commonalities (collective impetus and faith) between transnational participants are also essential in shaping transnational human relations. These commonalities bridge individuals across state boundaries since transnational participants could sense interwoven relations with those abroad. The stronger, deeper, and wider sentiment with the movement they have, the wider space of the movement could be witnessed transnationally. Then, transnational participants embraced and rematerialized milk tea culture as a symbolic representation of the shared commonalities since we could identify from the movement's title and a myriad of promotional materials in the movement. In other words, in forging the transnational human spatial relations, people require the transnational identity to mentally attach those joining in the movement which materiality could be an option for the sake.

This study left a question for future scholarly works since I have pondered this during the time of conducting research. Even though this study endeavors to respond to the principle critical appraisal in the work of Vertovec (2001), there is still much ground left to be empirically studied. Is the advancement of telecommunication solely mobilizing instrument in facilitating transnationality? Frankly, this study may neglect the significance of other kinds of development, for instance, transportation, international cooperation, etc. While the transnational civil society, on the basis of the findings, is shaped primarily by interconnectivities via the internet; it does not limit yet, rather still open to debate whether it is compulsory to utilize only this mediator? Could transnational participants employ other developments to constitute the transnational space of their own, then construct a new transnational civil society or even accommodate different national civil societies within the realm of transnationalism? If they could, will it challenge some extant literature regarding the potentiality of individuals in accessing another culture and identity across geographical boundaries without leaving their residences? To further interrogate and ponder this question, other unofficial or quasi-official transnational civil societies from varying arenas should be a focal analysis, for instance, #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, School Strike for Climate, etc. Thus, we could comprehensively unfold hidden conditions and factors behind the formation of transnationality and its relation to locality.

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