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The Milk Tea Alliance and China's Power Gap in Southeast Asia

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Undercurrents of anti-Chinese sentiment are not new to protest in Southeast Asia but appear to track popular anxiety about China's rising strategic power. Here, a student holds a placard during a Milk Tea Alliance anti-China protest outside the Chinese embassy in Bangkok on October 1, 2020. Photo: Romeo GACAD, AFP.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Following the February 1 coup, Myanmar became the latest country to be included in the online pan-Asian pro-democracy movement known as the Milk Tea Alliance.
- The Milk Tea movement began as a whimsical internet meme in 2020, channelling dissent against China's authoritarianism by youth activists in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Thailand—countries where sweet milk tea drinks are popular.
- The alliance may presage further memetic movements against regional authoritarianism, as internet penetration extends across Southeast Asia, as internet usage intensifies due to the pandemic, and as activists find it easier to forge transnational bonds.
- Myanmar today fits a regional pattern in which protest movements in different countries, triggered by different events, feature an undercurrent of criticism of China's growing influence. Protests in Thailand against the monarchy and military, and labour rights protests in Indonesia are driven by local concerns but incorporate anti-China or anti-Chinese sentiments.
- Undercurrents of anti-Chinese sentiment are not new to protest in Southeast Asia but appear to track popular anxiety about China's rising strategic power. As governments in Southeast Asia are keen to benefit from Chinese trade and investment, the emerging elite-popular divide over China policy leaves China with a gap between its hard and soft power in the region, making it vulnerable to populist politics.

INTRODUCTION

In 2020, two very different protest movements gathered force in Thailand and Indonesia. In Thailand, activists calling themselves the Free Youth Movement launched street demonstrations challenging the legitimacy of the military rule of General Prayuth Chan-o-cha and calling for reform of the monarchy.¹ In Indonesia, street protests and clashes with police across the country were triggered by the passage of a controversial Omnibus “job creation” law opposed by labour unions as a threat to worker rights. Although the Indonesian protests were more short-lived than the Thai, both movements had a revolutionary edge as they touched on old taboos: the monarchy in Thailand and class struggle in Indonesia.²

A striking but less obvious feature the protests had in common is that they both channelled undercurrents of anxiety about China’s rising power in Southeast Asia. In Thailand, activists have come to associate the Prayuth government with authoritarianism in China as Bangkok has aligned itself increasingly closer with Beijing. Thai activists, as Jasmine Chia observes, share pro- or anti-China articles online as code for commenting on the Thai regime.³ As the Thai protests arose alongside the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong, Thai and Hong Kong activists networked with each other on Twitter and other platforms. Drawing in Taiwanese activists also, the outcome of this networking is the Milk Tea Alliance, a movement that began as a meme that symbolises solidarity among anti-China activists with an ironic appreciation of their common interest in sweet milk tea drinks. Although the Milk Tea Alliance may sound like a mere internet joke, it is a clever use of memetic warfare to forge links across a region that is so diverse it often defies collective action—especially in the ASEAN context.

In Indonesia, the omnibus law activists targeted first the Jokowi government and then the national parliament. But as with other recent protests in Indonesia, there was an anti-China thread to the events if one knew where to look online. Some online activists perceived the law as a gift to foreign investors which would allow companies to contract out employment to workers from China. The Chinese migrant worker force is important to president Joko Widodo’s infrastructure programme but it is a regular target of opposition criticism. On one level, the discourse on China and ethnic Chinese in Indonesia shares little in common with the Milk Tea Alliance. In Indonesia, sentiment critical of China as a state, à la the Milk Tea Alliance, merges more readily with old racial prejudices against local ethnic Chinese. But this is slowly changing. Sentiment in Indonesia increasingly reflect anxieties seen elsewhere in the region over the rise of China as a political and economic force.

Growing anti-Chinese sentiment in Southeast Asia is a general enough phenomenon to receive recent cover-article treatment in *The Economist*. The magazine’s February 27 issue described the region as “China’s backyard”, making the obligatory historical reference to “tributaries”.⁴ Discontent in The Philippines centres on Chinese-run gambling and vice operations. While in Myanmar, even if the balance of evidence suggests that China did not back the military coup—not least because the government of Aung San Suu Kyi was relatively pro-Beijing—mere impressions were enough to add an anti-Chinese edge to the popular protest. At their best, these impressions led to concern that China might assist the Myanmar military’s cyber warfare capabilities.⁵ At their worst, they manifested in dangerous misinformation circulating on Twitter and Facebook claiming to show images of Chinese troops deployed on Burmese streets. The misinformation was an echo of a similar notorious false meme that went viral during the 2019 post-election violence in Indonesia.

Across the region, there are indications that a gap has opened between elite and popular opinion on the issue of China. Even prior to the pandemic, China's declining favourability ratings in the region were apparent. According to the 2019 Pew Global Attitudes Survey conducted in mid-2019, the number of Indonesians who gave China a "favorable" rating fell to 36 per cent, a 17 per cent fall matched only by the decline in Sweden and Canada—countries both mired in "hostage diplomacy" crises.⁶ A more recent Pew survey, covering South Korea, Japan and a number of Western countries, describes negative evaluations of China reaching "historic highs" following the coronavirus pandemic.⁷

The elite-popular opinion gap points to a more structural problem for China in Southeast Asia. While Southeast Asian nations seek to gain economically from China's rise, and China's rise translates to hard power vis-a-vis the governing elite of Southeast Asia, China remains vulnerable at the popular level. In effect, China suffers a gap between its hard and soft power in the region. China's power gap makes it vulnerable over the long-term to populist politics in Southeast Asia, especially in Indonesia, where anti-Chinese sentiment feeds into opposition Islamist narratives. Although newly emergent, social media-driven anti-Chinese populism already presents a challenge to China's influence in the region.

MILK TEA ALLIANCE

The Milk Tea Alliance is the latest example of an internet meme that has become a social movement. The meme was created amid an online incident involving a relatively apolitical Thai-Chinese actor, Vachirawit Chiva-aree, better known as Bright. Bright is the star of a TV drama "2gether", popular across markets in Asia, including China. In April 2020, Bright naïvely liked an image on Twitter that referred to Hong Kong as a country. In response, Chinese nationalists online targeted him and his show with criticism and calls for a boycott. Bright apologised and removed the Like. But Chinese trolls then turned on Bright's girlfriend, the Thai model Weeraya Sukaram, discovering that in 2017 she had made an Instagram post that implied Taiwan is a separate country. Amid the back and forth between activists on either side of the argument, the Chinese embassy in Bangkok entered the fray, releasing a statement condemning any "erroneous statement inconsistent with the One China Principle" and asserting the "kinship of 'China and Thailand as one family'".⁸

These events might have remained an ephemeral Twitter outrage, but they were amplified by a confluence of two factors: China's "wolf warrior" diplomats were asserting themselves online in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic; and the Thai youth movement was gathering steam in reaction to the government's banning of the opposition Future Forward Party earlier in the year. When Chinese activists targeted Bright they drew a strong reaction from Thai activists, who were joined in solidarity by Hong Kong and Taiwanese activists.

China's nationalist trolls found themselves outplayed by digital natives with a better sense of Twitter politics. When the Chinese activists criticised the Thai government, they were confused to find the Thai activists slyly agreeing with them. A meme war ensued, falling broadly along pro- and anti-Chinese Communist Party lines. The event generated a proliferating stream of images on the theme of Thailand, Taiwan and Hong Kong united in their penchant for milk tea drinks of different varieties.⁹ The hashtags #MilkTeaAlliance and #MilkTeaisThickerThanBlood entered Thailand's top trends list on Twitter.¹⁰

The Milk Tea Alliance appears to be a spontaneous outgrowth of the international connections developed by activists in Hong Kong with those around the region. Thai and Hong Kong activists are especially well connected. The founder of the now-banned Future Forward Party, Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, has said he was inspired by the Hong Kong protests. In 2019, he drew a warning from the Chinese embassy in Bangkok after a photograph emerged of him posing with Hong Kong democracy activist Joshua Wong.¹¹

Although the alliance is more “memeplex” than movement, it illustrates the way internet activism can evolve rapidly in virtual space. Memes go through a process akin to accelerated natural selection, in which ideas and images mutate through crowd-sourcing, and the most influential memes rise to the top of the algorithm by garnering the most engagement. The result is a “sticky” meme, like the Milk Tea Alliance, that migrates across borders, from protest to protest.

In 2020, Twitter engagement with Milk Tea Alliance memes was driven by users from Thailand, but Taiwan and Hong Kong users also played a role. As a recent sample (see figure 1), analytics from Keyhole over the period October 14 – November 13, 2020, show the country-of-origin diversity of the #milkteaalliance hashtag. Of the top ten most influential posters using the hashtag, seven were from Thailand, two from Taiwan, and one from Hong Kong. Although Thais predominate, the non-Thai influencers in the sample were significant. One was the Taiwanese representative to the United States, Hsiao Bi-Khim. Another was the Vice President of Taiwan, William Lai Ching-te, who wrote on October 10:

Proud to see our flag fly high and be recognized all over the world. We thank the people from so many countries who today expressed congratulations and support. Especially our Indian friends. Namaste!
#TaiwanNationalDay #JaiHind #MilkTeaAlliance

The third most influential non-Thai account was that of Joshua Wong, a key leader of the Hong Kong protests who helped to popularise the Milk Tea Alliance at the outset. For many months, Wong’s pinned tweet on his timeline promoted the Milk Tea Alliance.

At one point it might have been easy to dismiss the Milk Tea Alliance as a Gen-Z in-joke. But irony and humour are powerful tools in generating memetic virality. On Twitter, wit is trumped only by outrage. As a meme, Milk Tea has flowed across borders, connecting pro-democracy movements in Asia along with symbols such as the Hunger Games three-finger salute and tactics such as the use of umbrellas to fend off tear gas—both now spreading in post-coup Myanmar. The Milk Tea Alliance may become an enduring platform for multilateral activism—a kind of ASEAN for civil society. But it also runs the risk of facilitating anti-Chinese populism and being drawn into polarisation over US-China rivalry.

USER	POSTS	AVG ENG
 มากาซง @maeydd	1	69,101
 賴清德Lai Ching-te @chingtelai	1	59,862
 พี่เขาไม่เอาเผด็จกลาง @chaochao_peep	1	56,263
 เมกมา @emphae	1	51,097
 j a e @bekindjae	1	39,897
 ลีลียรักอาเจิงนะ @lilydelili	1	36,356
 Bi-khim Hsiao 蕭美琴 @bikhim	1	27,754
 คุณดี @khundeex	2	27,626
 CHARLIE @noreyore	2	27,261
 Joshua Wong 黃之鋒 🙄 @joshuawongcf	18	26,545

Figure 1: Top #milkteaalliance Twitter posts (Source: Keyhole)

INDONESIA'S LABOUR PROTESTS

In early October, 2020, protesters targeted the national parliament and the Jokowi government after news spread that an omnibus law affecting worker rights had been quietly passed. Thousands of protesters took to the streets of Jakarta, storming the compound of the national parliament, while smaller groups held protests in cities across the country. Unknown assailants damaged public property, most notably the Hotel Indonesia bus station in Central Jakarta, which was burned. For weeks, a smattering of protests continued, from Bandung to Surabaya to Makassar, led by a new generation of labour activists.

Despite the media focus on what appeared to be a new class consciousness among Indonesian youth, on social media one could detect an anti-Chinese fringe to the protests. Anti-Chinese sentiment was not a major protest theme and should not be overstated. Yet China is the elephant in the room on labour issues in Indonesia given the large number of Chinese migrant workers. But the labour protests are just the most recent example of Indonesian demonstrations that reveal a background level of anti-Chinese sentiment.

Prior to this, since the 2019 presidential election, China and ethnic Chinese had both emerged as targets of conspiracy theories and disinformation that flavoured opposition protest against President Jokowi.¹² Increasingly, in online chat groups, anti-Chinese sentiment conflates the country with local Indonesian Chinese. In Indonesia, unlike in Thailand, the sentiment is more underground, more racialised, and tends to be relegated to private or semi-public chat groups.

It was against this backdrop that the omnibus law protests incorporated a strand of anti-China criticism. The criticism was that the law enabled big business to outsource work to foreigners, especially to migrant Chinese workers. The presence of migrant Chinese workers in Indonesia is a running controversy among opposition protestors in Indonesia who accuse the government of bringing in unskilled workers to take the place of Indonesian workers, and of understating the number of such workers in the country.

The scale of the Chinese migrant worker force in Indonesia and whether they are “skilled” or “unskilled” are matters highly contested by the Jokowi government.¹³ Earlier in the year there had been episodes of unrest and small protests in Southeast Sulawesi over the viral video footage of Chinese mining working arriving in the city of Kendari. A report by the Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict outlined how this and other scattered incidents of unrest over Chinese workers drew the attention of pro-ISIS militants, who sought to exploit the anti-Chinese sentiment.¹⁴

During the omnibus protests, mentions of the term “cukong” on social media—a pejorative term to refer to Chinese Indonesian bosses, serves as an index to the heightened anti-Chinese sentiment. The narrative circulating on social media was that such bosses stood to gain from the law by outsourcing work to cheaper Chinese labour. A six-month snapshot of ISEAS data on mentions of “cukong” on Indonesian social media shows a spike in mid-September, as the omnibus law was being discussed in the media, and then a peak in early October after the law had been passed and during the protests (see figure 2).

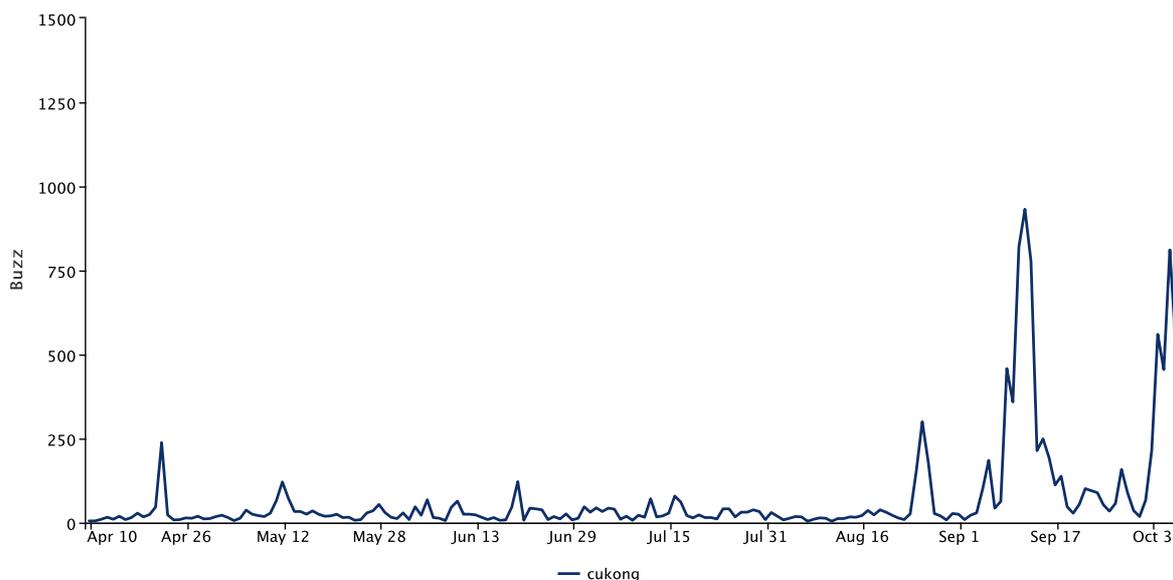


Figure 2: “Cukong” social media mentions, Indonesia (Source: ISEAS)

While detectible on social media, chatter about *cukong* hardly made it into mainstream media coverage of the protests. But one of the few senior politicians to routinely invoke anti-Chinese sentiment, Fadli Zon, appeared to pick up on the keyword. On November 11, Fadli tweeted from his official Twitter account a link to a news article and a post in which he described Indonesia as no longer a democracy but a “*cukongkrasi*”.¹⁵

If one did not know where to look and what to look out for—e.g., pejorative slang on opposition social media—it would have been easy to miss the anti-Chinese dimension of the protests. Similar to the anti-Chinese sentiment during the post-election violence, the phenomenon was marginal to the main theme of the protest (labour rights) and hard to detect offline. But one prominent offline and online example of anti-Chinese messaging during the protests came from a new opposition nationalist group, Save Indonesia Coalition (KAMI).¹⁶ Established in August 2020 by national figures such as former Muhammadiyah chairman Din Syamsuddin and former TNI commander General Gatot Nurmantyo, the group was outspoken in supporting the protests, although KAMI members did not appear to take a leading role in them.

KAMI posts on social media revealed an event held on September 30 that featured anti-Chinese messaging. The event featured a large banner (see figure 3) referring to saving Indonesia from economic, social, cultural and legal depression as well as from the grip of “*aseng, asing and communists*”. “*Aseng and asing*” is an increasingly normalised anti-Chinese slur referring to both local ethnic and foreign Chinese. The term was popularised during the anti-Ahok mass mobilisations of 2016-2017. “*Communists*”, in this context, also serves as a coded reference to Chinese.



Figure 3: “SAVE NKRI” KAMI event (Source: Twitter)

CONCLUSION

The Milk Tea Alliance is a striking example of the power of social media to generate new social movements and exploit weaknesses in institutional power. The movement has exposed the weakness of China’s cultural power in Southeast Asia. In parts of the region where the meme has not yet caught on, such as the largest country, Indonesia, there is an anti-Chinese edge to disparate protest events fuelled by the same anxieties that fuel the Milk Tea Alliance. As China’s influence in Southeast Asia grows, US-China rivalry intensifies, and internet coverage extends, we should anticipate further iterations of memes and memetic movements in Southeast Asia which channel and amplify populist discontent.¹⁷

In a climate in which US-China rivalry functions as a form of meta-polarisation, pushing domestic political actors to ideological extremes, there are risks for both China and for the pro-democracy activists of Southeast Asia. For China, the power gap leaves it vulnerable to populist politics and insurgent politicians who would exploit local anti-Chinese sentiment to gain political office. For activists, they risk their political legitimacy if their movements are exploited, Cold-War-style, by China’s strategic rivals. A further risk is that of legitimate criticism of China from a policy perspective degenerating into old prejudices against ethnic Chinese. Digital platforms may make it easier than ever to start a social movement. Online anonymity and unpredictable virality, however, make it harder to anticipate how a movement will evolve.¹⁸

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⁸ “Family Feud: Chinese Embassy’s statement reignites the fury of social media”, *Thisrupt*, April 15, 2020. <https://thisrupt.co/current-affairs/family-feud-chinese-embassy-social-media-fury/>

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¹² Quinton Temby, “Disinformation, Violence, and Anti-Chinese Sentiment in Indonesia’s 2019 Elections”, *ISEAS Perspective* 67, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, September 2, 2019.

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¹⁴ Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, “IPAC Short Briefing No.1: Covid-19 And Isis In Indonesia”, April 2, 2020, p. 3-4.

¹⁵ Fadli Zon, Twitter.com, <https://twitter.com/fadlizon/status/1326484861402509312?s=20>

¹⁶ <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/08/19/moral-movement-kami-aims-to-save-indonesia-says-cofounder-din-syamsuddin.html>

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¹⁸ Quinton Temby, “The Milk Tea Alliance Confronts China’s Weak Brew”, *Fulcrum*, March 17, 2021, <https://fulcrum.sg/the-milk-tea-alliance-confronts-chinas-weak-brew/>

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