

Transnational Activism in the Digital Age: The Post-1987 Generation of Taiwanese Activists and their Global Networks

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Abstract: This article explores the intersection of democratization process, the internet, and global movements, focusing on the post-1987 generation of Taiwanese prodemocracy activists. This cohort has come of age during Taiwan's democratization, digitalization, and pivotal political moments of the 2010s. Since 2020, some geopolitical, political and societal evolution have led to an update of the geopolitics of social movement in Asia. From Taipei, some members of this born after 1987 generation of activists are building, engaging and participating in global networks facing authoritarianism in South East and East Asia. Their activities, deeply embedded in Taipei's activist ecosystem, are shaped by its cosmopolitan environment while also actively shaping the dynamics of activism across the region. In this article, I look at this phenomenon to understand how transnational activism is redefined through new modern condition embodied by individuals and new ways to engage in the field of the global, with a focus on Taipei based actors.

Keywords: Transnational Activism, Taiwan, Democracy, Digital Resonances, Grassroot

Introduction: Political generation, social movements, global resonances

In 2014, the sunflower movement revealed to the world a Taiwanese youth coming together to denounce their government's lack of public consultation in closing economic ties with the People's Republic of China. Led by students, this movement was a direct reaction to the ongoing negotiations between KMT president Ma Ying-jeou and the People's Republic of China on the CSSTA (Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement) bill. Criticized for its potential to open the door to Chinese influence, which could weaken Taiwan's service sector and sovereignty, this law was negotiated without public consultation and triggered the sunflower movement. In this massive social movement, the denunciation of anti-democratic practices of a ruling party with an authoritarian background was as much denounced as the negotiations with the People's Republic of China, an authoritarian and irredentist state over Taiwan. Following the occupation of the legislative yuan and the surrounding streets, the movement achieved its goal with the withdraw of the CSSTA law.

In 2020, the #MilkTeaAlliance (#MTA) has been an online movement that reacted to a trolling campaign led by Chinese nationalists on social media. Harassing a Thai celebrity called Bright after he liked a photo online that referred to Taiwan and Hong Kong as countries, they got a reaction of Thai fans defending their idol. This online war against aggressive Chinese trolls went viral and spread to other netizens supporting this response. Many Hong Kong and Taiwanese actors joined these online supporters of the movement, gathering around the hashtag #MilkTeaAlliance to express their solidarity. The consumption of milk tea, common to Thailand, Hong Kong and Taiwan, served as a catch all slogan for pro-democracy activists to claim unity in the face of authoritarianism, symbolized in this case by foreign destabilization operations led by the CCP online supporters.

The six-year gap between these two moments allowed some Taiwanese prodemocracy activists to participate in both. The study I conducted from 2024 to 2025 aim to understand three major and articulated features of this generation of activists born after 1987 in Taiwan: a socialization at the crossroad of a democratization, digitalization and globalization processes. Through the figures of activists born from this intersection, I want to examine the dialectical movement where pro-democracy activists are influenced by, and influencing in return, the fields of social movements and transnational solidarity. The characteristics of modern youth, coupled with their commitment to establish democracy as a desirable horizon, are illustrating the reshaping of the landscape of activism from Taiwan. As we will see, the sunflower movement was a significant social movement that continues to shape the country's sociopolitical landscape, and the #MTA moment is a prime example of how pro-democracy activists and supporters from various national settings can mobilize within the digital and global realms, building new playgrounds for contemporary activism. In a nutshell, I am questioning in this article what defines a generation that grows up at the intersection of democratization, digitalization, and globalization, and how this generation is redefining the prodemocracy activist landscape in the region.

More than ten years after the sunflower movement, we now have the benefit of hindsight to reflect on the trajectories of those involved in this pivotal mobilization, which introduced a new

Taiwanese generation to the world (Lepesant, 2022). One particularity of Taiwanese nationalism is that its expression has been made possible by the country's democratization. Indeed, the lifting of martial law in 1987 paved the way for the affirmation of a national identity other than a Chinese identity imposed until then by the nationalist KMT party. Rooted in the affirmation of a "democratic nationalism" (Ho, 2022), a Taiwanese identity is expressed, claimed and spread specifically by this post-1987 generation, in articulation with a digitalized and globalized modern condition. Coming to age during the 2010's, this generation socialization embodies a unique blend of democratic values, intricately with an exposition to digital tools and global influences. This article is a proposition to show how their pro-democracy activism has unfolded locally and globally from this intersection. From the past decade (2014-2025) as a witness of many of them undergoing political awakenings during the sunflower movement, I will describe how their democratic commitments have evolved until now, in accordance with social changes, political evolutions and the advent of the digital era. These developments have not only forged their collective identity but have also positioned them as central actors in Taiwan's evolving social and political landscape, allowing them to connect with likeminded actors abroad.

In the continuation of many research analyzing the sunflower movement and its embeddedness in social media influence (Barendregt, Schneider, 2020), as well as its impact on Taiwanese political life and resonance with other East Asian movements, this article will focus on its impact on how the post-1987 generation engaged with transnational networks. In the last ten years, notable moments like the #MilkTeaAlliance have revealed how this generation uses online resources and mobilizes networks from online pro-democracy networks of activism. This article does not pretend to describe a monolithic path for this generation from social movement commitment to online engagement. Rather, it describes how this period enabled a dynamic interplay between grassroots and online activism, leading to an hybridization of activism in Taiwan today. From this analysis, I can assess the impact of these developments on the creation of new geographies of protest, considering the evolution of the online, political, and geopolitical realms over the last ten years. This article, leveraging this Taiwanese generation as an emblematic example, is a proposition to understand the intertwined online and offline dimensions shaping modern forms of activism. This leads me to ask the following question:

How the socialization of the post 1987 generation in Taiwan, at the intersection of democratization, digitalization and globalization, have paved the way for the subscription of this youth in new forms of transnational activism articulating local issues with global support ? How this evolution of the prodemocracy activism landscape is actualizing the Taiwanese political context and its global reach, paving the way for a new "geography of protest" ?

This sociological research has been conducted in two times: between July and September 2024 with fundings from the Taiwanese Foundation for Democracy and between July and December 2025 with funding from the Taiwanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It involved a combination of online ethnographies (on activist sphere social medias) and on-site ethnographies in activist spaces such as NGOs and political spaces (cafés, artistic spaces), I met individuals who participated in both sunflower and #MTA moment. It is from the activist ecosystem they built and the political spaces they opened for the last ten years that I have conducted with them

fieldwork, observations and interviews. This local network of activism, gravitating around political and artistic spaces, libraries and cultural spaces, is gathering the actors that bridge transnational connection from and to Taipei. I attended the events they organized, such as talks, debates and screenings, and examined their production closely, including books, articles and mobilizations. During these periods of fieldwork, I conducted a total of 36 interviews (34 individual interviews, 2 collective interviews). To avoid any form of ironic epistemology, I analyzed my collected data through iterative discussion with the interviewees. With this article, I aim to highlight and assess the defining characteristics of this Taiwanese political generation: pro-democracy, globalized, and interconnected with like-minded partners in Asia. This article does not solely assess digital democratic activism, but above all the articulation of the digital realm with grassroots commitment. It focuses on the Taiwanese generation born after 1987, who engage both locally and transnationally and mobilize the online and global realms as resources. From this perspective, I interviewed forty people, ranging from social movement leaders to ordinary participants.

Liminal considerations: A political generation...

Ten years on from the Sunflower Movement, its participants have pursued a variety of paths within the Taiwanese civil society, ranging from politics and research to journalism and activism. Academic works now allow us to clearly assess the success of this social movement and observe the impact that this cycle of contention (Tarrow, 2011) has had on the Taiwanese political landscape. The following ten years proved that some leaders of this founding movement maintained their momentum in other political environments, such as institutionalized activism within NGOs, think tanks, political parties, journalism and research among others. The institutionalization of the actors of this social movement is a powerful indicator of the establishment of a new political landscape from 2014 to the present day, with the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) holding the presidency for three consecutive terms (2016-now). Building on numerous studies of the intrication between Taiwanese national identity and democracy (Ho, 2022), this paper aims to evaluate the impact of digitalization and globalization on this generation of socio-politically well-established Taiwanese pro-democracy activists in their attempts to build transnational networks and find allies beyond borders.

Over the past decade, this generation has gained political momentum locally at the same time as a socialization processes under globalization and digitalization. The socialization of these individuals has redefined certain characteristics of the movements and causes in which they engage. Concepts such as horizontality and connectivity have become pivotal, with social movements in Taiwan exhibiting structural similarities to those worldwide and creating resonances between them (Rosa, 2019). Today, global dynamics influence the framework for prodemocracy activism, highlighting the role of transnational factors in shaping social movements in a multi-site context. These movements blend grassroots activism with the influence of transnational networks, local cosmopolitanism and global solidarity. The sunflower movement, in particular, revealed a new generation of Taiwanese activists whose efforts have resonated with other regional movements, most notably in Hong Kong (Wu, 2022). This born after 1987 generation have been socialized in a context of democratization built on the reject of authoritarianisms from the past in Taiwan (led by the KMT with the martial law and the white

terror) and from China (regularly threatening to invade Taiwan). This has fostered a decade of rich transnational connections among individuals, organizations, and civil society actors, with local social movement being influenced by transnational influences and potentially influencing other social movements in return.

... connected with Hong-Kong on a common concern about the China factor

One of the key takeaways from both sunflower movement and #MilkTeaAlliance is the heightened awareness among this generation of activists regarding the "China factor" (Liu, 2024). The unity displayed by Taiwanese youth in defending Taiwan's identity, sovereignty, and democracy during a period when pro-China policies were poised for implementation without public consultation drew global attention. This shared concern first manifested in solidarity with Hong-Kong activists, sparking increased convergence and support between activists from the two civil societies. After successfully securing their right and legitimacy to participate politically in their country, this generation rapidly viewed itself as Taiwan's primary defender (Lepesant, 2022). Throughout the 2010s, the China factor has become a central force triggering social movements in both Hong-Kong and Taiwan, pushing activists from both sides to collaborate, support and exchange strategies in response to this looming threat. Over the last decade, most large-scale social mobilizations in Taiwan have been activated by concerns over the China factor (Ho, 2022), revealing the intricated dimension between local politics and geopolitics in Taiwan.

More broadly, the shared stance against the "China factor" by activists from Hong-Kong and Taiwan has fostered connections with fellow activists across the region. Drawing on generational affinities (Sastramidjaja, 2024), they have progressively expanded the connections of support and solidarity with democracy activists in Southeast Asia (Phattharathanasut, 2024). These connections are forged through a mutual recognition of common challenges, as activists from different local contexts unite against the various risks Asian democracies face—whether it's the erosion of political representation, unequal distribution of wealth and political power, or the growing influence of China. Despite the different intensities with which these issues are being embodied in each country, they share a common experience of navigating an increasingly precarious political landscape, and are building cross-border solidarities to confront these shared threats. The #MilkTeaAlliance moment revealed these convergence triggered by common concerns.

Digital native activists

These encounters have been facilitated by the inherently "digital" nature of this global generation of activists (Sastramidjaja, 2024), who identify, connect, and influence one another through a digital mediation. Born in an era defined by digital tools, communication technologies, and new information channels, a segment of Taiwan's youth has become part of a broader global generation sharing concerns about the defense of democracy. As digital natives, they share common traits with their counterparts worldwide, especially a high level of transnational social capital (Phattharathanasut, 2024). Their cosmopolitanism is shaped by experiences such as travel, study abroad, student exchanges, internet use and involvement in activist networks,

fostering an openness to both local and international contexts. This sense of in-betweenness (Rowen, 2024) allows them to seamlessly navigate intricated online and offline worlds (Deng, 2020), connecting with like-minded peers who lead democracy defense activities in other countries, driven by shared values and concerns. From locally rooted, digitally mediated activism, these youth amplify their voices beyond borders, linking with global movements and creating transnational solidarities. Embedded in pro-democracy activism, they perceive their foreign counterparts as part of their "nearby" network, engaging in "global grassroots" movements (Xiang & Wu, 2023). Their awareness of regional social movements over the past decade enables them to form rhizomatic networks that span across Asia (Sastramidjaja, 2024), showing each other support and solidarities to their struggles and collective actions. In Taiwanese society, some of the actors who participated in the last ten years of development of the civil society in Taiwan are the one who are bridging this environment with some others abroad. I question in this article how these individuals involved in prodemocracy activities (mainly NGOs and CSOs members, scholars, journalists) are participating in the process to establish these new forms of transnational collaboration from Taipei.

I therefore assume this hypothesis: Following a political awakening during the 2010s, participants of the sunflower movement have increasingly engaged in diverse forms of prodemocracy activism. Over the past decade, these individuals have deepened their involvement in local activism in Taiwan, while also forming connections with grassroots activists, movements, and causes abroad. This phenomenon is leading to new forms of transnational solidarities, reconfiguring activist networks across Asia. In light of the region's evolving geopolitical landscape, these developments are reshaping the geography of activism, with Taiwan occupying a significant and increasing role.

I- 2010's : Mapping Taiwan in Global Social Movements

Sunflower Movement, a modern social movement led by an “actual generation”

In the past decade, numerous social movements across Asia have emerged within the framework of the "global justice movement" (Rowen quoting Porta and Diani, 2006:2), advocating for democracy, political participation, horizontal organization, and progressive ideas. The sunflower movement happening in 2014 has revealed a Taiwanese version of this series of "global justice movement" reproducing in Taiwan many of the organizational and operational characteristics of contemporary youth led social movement. While these collective mobilizations have been triggered by the China factor in context like Hong-Kong and Taiwan, the sunflower movement put the name of Taiwan on the map of "global justice movement" through its innovative mobilization methods, highlighting the significance of connectivity (Lepesant, 2022) among diverse actors championing different causes. Its less structured approach, lack of coherent ideology (Ho, 2017), reliance on new communication tools, and transnational outreaches underscore its modern characteristics. The connective aspect of contemporary activism is particularly noteworthy; drawing on the rhizomatic structure of social links and the internet, recent social movements in Taiwan and beyond illustrate the power of

connectivity, uniting individuals from various backgrounds, expectations, and concerns (Barendregt, Schneider, F. 2020). During the 2010s, the global connectivity of the middle class, coupled with the atomization of individuals in the neoliberal era, began to reshape social movements with the liminal force of “boundary objects” (Rowen, 2021). This transformation contributed to redefining how movements were organized, emphasizing more horizontal and less hierarchical structures gathering participant from all walks of life. Instead of relying on traditional collective networks, these movements featured a convergence of connective networks (Ho, 2023). They took on a cumulative dimension, encompassing various struggles and communities—such as radical left groups, LGBT groups, fandoms, and NGOs—while communication tools, memes, and internet culture became essential for mobilization.

It is through these characteristics intrinsically correlated with online tools that the movement agglomerated people from many walks of life. The success of this movement lies as much in the diversity of the players it has brought together around a common cause as in the political path it has opened up for the “actual generation” (Lepesant quoting Manheim, 2022) that has risen to decide Taiwan's future. For this generation, the collective power of this moment enabled them to realize their agency, their capacity to decide of the political future of the country as democratic around the affirmation of a Taiwanese identity (Ho, 2022). In concrete terms, the success of this movement has been measurable in the ten years since its launch. In the ballot box first, the momentum imparted by the sunflower movement was validated by the election of Tsai Ying-wen and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in 2016. This party has remained in presidential power ever since. In the wake of this movement, new parties representing the ideas of this generation have been created, such as the New Power Party in 2015 and the Taiwan State building Party in 2016. The sunflower movement has also given a strong boost to a prodemocratic part of the civil society, with the proliferation of non-governmental organizations championing democratic values and human rights, with many members of this generation joining their ranks. The sunflower generation is also the one that has helped to multiply the physical spaces for continuing the political emulation experienced during the social movement. It was in these political spaces, opened up in the wake of the movement, that many projects were born, notably around the creation of media, artistic creation workshops and places for exchange and discussion. As we have seen, this major social movement in Taiwan's recent history has propelled a whole generation, now aware of their agency, into key positions in Taiwanese civil society: politicians, journalists, researchers and activists.

Impact of the visibility of a movement and the global attention

With the sunflower movement, the 2010s propelled these Taiwanese civil society activists on the map of global geography of protest. This decade, which began with the Arab spring and the occupy movements, concluded in 2019 with the massive protests in Hong-Kong in response to the extradition law's project between China and the Hong-Kong government. Throughout these ten years, the increasing use of social media and the internet significantly gave to these movements a global audience, allowing them to resonate with one another. Mutual recognition between participants of the sunflower movement and the umbrella movement led to exchange, circulation and mutual influence between the two social movements (Wu, 2016). Occurring

both in 2014, this two social movements partly mediated and covered by online tools subscribe the Taiwanese and the Hong-Kong generation of activist in an online copresence.

Beyond sole online support, prodemocracy activists from both location started to visit themselves regularly and exchange about their local contexts, the challenges they faced and the strategies to adopt. Local maps of prodemocracy activism from different Asian cities (Taipei, Hong-Kong, Bangkok, Tokyo among others) converged together in the mental map of prodemocracy activists of the region. All these prodemocracy local ecosystem got connected through person to person networking of likeminded activists. Combined together, the online mediated discoveries of what was happening in other countries regarding pro-democracy activism through various causes led to the connection of local activism environments, paving the way to an inter-knowledge about a prodemocracy activism map of the region.

“Before the collapse of Hong Kong in 2020, we had a very strong connection with Hong Kong. It was because the ties between the sunflower and the umbrella generation, we linked with leaders like Joshua Wong and Nathan Law, who had very strong connection with some of the human rights defenders in Thailand and other countries. So our network was relying heavily on the connections we had through our friends in Hong-Kong but people from southeast Asia started to get some interest on Taiwan through this connection. They were really curious to exchange about some issues like the lift of martial law, transitional justice, democratization, but also very curious about the success of the sunflower movement.”

A. Taiwanese Prodemocracy activist

With this new characteristic for political knowledge and practices circulation among prodemocracy networks, the activist toolkit has been enriched with this new instantaneous visibility for different social movements and actors thanks to information and communication technology. With any local action able to attract some attention elsewhere, the potentiality to draw new maps of global activism have been activated. Any digitally mediated activity today is bearing the potentiality to inspire and affect elsewhere and foster new connection between actors sharing similar political engagement. Regarding transnational connections among social movements and actors in the region, the 2010s established strong ties between Taiwanese and Hong-Kong activists (Wu, 2022). However, by the end of the decade, this robust connection began to evolve, with attempts to involve other actors from various countries in the region in regional networks of activism.

Impact on geography of protest, circulation and network creation

Following the sunflower movement, there has been a significant increase in exchanges, circulations, and influences between Taiwan and Hong-Kong, but also among prodemocracy activists leading social movements worldwide. The connections established from Taiwan have facilitated the growth of future activist networks, characterized by a mediation through digital media and an infusion of global features into local movements. This evolution has contributed to the formation of activism archipelagos and a geopolitics of social movements over the past decade. Ultimately, the 2010s have been pivotal in shaping a political generation marked by major events, underscoring how the connective aspect of modern social movements intertwines and strengthens global activism. The year 2014 serves as a crucial turning point for

prodemocratic activism, positioning Taiwan as a node for various social movements and commitments, where diverse issues can be addressed by civil society groups and young people, fostering numerous connections with the global community. Since then, many exchanges, circulations, and mutual awareness have linked historic and symbolic movements, such as the Umbrella Movement in 2014 and the anti-extradition protests in Hong-Kong in 2019. Beyond merely serving as connecting points between civil societies from different countries, the landscape of activism is fundamentally intertwined by the multitude of local activists linking their contexts with like-minded counterparts across borders. These assemblages of local networks, combined with broader networks encompassing a multiplicity of causes, constitute the matrix of cross border networks in transnational activism.

In the geographies of social movements, varying intensities of connections link different local ecosystem of activist. Once again, the particularly close ties between prodemocracy activist from Hong-Kong and Taiwan during the 2010s has been particularly intense. This connection was based on shared cultural, linguistic, and major concerns regarding the threat from China and a collective fear of losing their national identity as countries (Wàngguó gǎn, 忘國感). However, the geography of social movements and the networks connecting activist spheres also extend to regions such as Southeast Asia. These connections are often founded on common struggles, values, and threats, frequently influenced by the China factor, which also acts as a structuring repulsive force for civil society movements in the area (Dedman and Lai, 2021). Efforts to build a network of activists that includes members from Hong-Kong, Taiwan, and Southeast Asian countries crystallized around initiatives like NOYDA (Network of Young Democratic Asians), one of the first formal attempt to coordinate a network around the defense of democracy and the promotion of Human rights. This initiative created in 2016 was designed in order to formalize a convergence of actors from seven countries and territories to “achieve peaceful, equal, sustainable society through democratic process and people-oriented development”. In the establishment of this network, the Taiwanese stakeholder were well represented with Tseng Po-yu being appointed as the first NOYDA secretary (Phattharathanasut, 2024). However, the lack of a common agenda and the outbreak of COVID-19 disrupted these plans and reset the dynamics of collaboration.

II- Covid outbreak, a turning point affecting geopolitics of Social Movements

“We still very cherish this kind of network, but now we know it can collapse all of a sudden. So we built a very strong partnership with South-East Asia country. At the beginning, this connection was weak, it was just about to support each other. But after the COVID, things have started to change. We are more visible in Taiwan and we are gradually seen by the international society.”

A. Taiwanese prodemocracy activist

The 2020s began with a global lockdown that stifled most ongoing social movements and attempts to build a network between them like NOYDA. Following an intense decade of pro-democracy activism in the region, the post-Covid era marked a significant turning point for social movement dynamics worldwide. During this period, the massive protests in Hong-Kong against the extradition law were effectively suppressed. The pandemic also adversely affected social movements in Thailand, where protests against the suppression of the Future Forward Party had to pause in early 2020 due to Covid-19 restrictions. The social movement in Hong-Kong, forced to pause due to health restrictions, never regained its momentum after the Chinese Communist Party imposed the National Security Law in June 2020.

“Pause and reboot”

This was the name of a conference organized by an NGO in Taipei during the summer 2024, emphasizing the idea that social movements in Asia sometimes need to pause in order to reboot themselves after intense momentum. This shows the reflexivity of prodemocracy activists regarding cycles of contention (Tarrow, 2011) following a collective mobilization for the sake of crystallize the progress achieved through the social movement. In 2020, as transnational networks and connections between pro-democracy activists had to reorganize in a post-lockdown era where physical circulations were almost impossible, the National Security Law effectively severed connections for local activists in Hong-Kong. For these activists, 2020 became a year when “civil society’s connections with foreign countries were cut off” (Wu, 2022). Consequently, Taiwanese civil society activists lost their strongest supporters and connections for cross-border solidarity in social movements. This period of pandemic forced social movements to either pause or rely heavily on digital mediation, leading to an acceleration of digital activism (Pinckney, Rivers, 2020). The years from 2020 to 2023 were profoundly impacted by Covid-19 restrictions, which allowed authoritarian states to stifle protests and disrupted daily human interactions locally. One consequence of this period was the acceleration of the digitalization of human relations, intensifying the globalization process associated with this phenomenon. Additionally, the breakdown of civil society in Hong-Kong come with other dynamic of shrinking of civic space across the region, as political events in Thailand, Myanmar, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines symbolized an authoritarian turn in Southeast Asia.

The impact of this period triggered significant shockwaves for democracy activists across the region. In Taiwan, the generation that had affirmed its identity in opposition to China and in solidarity with Hong-Kong lost its strongest ally. In contrast to the values promoted by China in the region, Taiwanese DPP governments since 2016 has built its narrative as a countermodel, embodying democratic principles interwoven with a distinct Taiwanese identity (Ho, 2022). In order to embody antithetical norms and values to counter China's influence (Ho, 2022), Taiwan civil society organizations are poised to align with their government pro-democracy-narrative. This convergence is redefining for ten years the role of Taiwan in the evolving geopolitics of pro-democracy activism. This fusion of democratic values and national identity, articulated as “democratic nationalism,” equips Taiwanese activists to advocate for democracy both within Taiwan and on a regional scale. Aligned with the narrative produced by the government to promote Taiwan as a “beacon for democracy”, some NGO’s and CSO’s in Taipei were created in order to propose Taiwan as a safe place for pro-democracy activists in the region. Recently

created, these organizations are proposing programs and trainings in order to empower activists from south-east Asia, organizing talks and conference to raise awareness to a Taiwanese audience about authoritarian issues occurring in neighboring countries. In the opposite direction, pro-democracy activists in Taiwan are looking for feedbacks from activists in other countries to find out about their emotions, tactics and strategies for dealing with the failure of their movements. This was the case when a Thai activist was invited to give a conference to share the lessons learned from the dissolution of the Future Forward political party in 2020, where Thai activists were forced to “pause and reboot”.

An internationalization of the perception of the China Factor

The geopolitical shift regarding social movement geopolitics over the past decade in Asia has been partly shaped by the feeling of China's increasing influence in the region, raising concerns for civil societies about its expansion and collaboration with authoritarian governments. China's rise as a global power, alongside its authoritarian turn under Xi Jinping, has made the China factor a pressing issue, particularly in Southeast Asia, where civil societies, though distinct from Taiwan, fear the People's Republic of China (PRC) as a governance model for their countries. China's assertive foreign operations has included aggressive united front operations (Jeangène Vilmer, Charon, 2024) has included aggressive united front operations, "wolf warrior" diplomacy, threats to Taiwan, economic coercion, and the use of digital authoritarianism (Froissart, Lafaye de Micheaux, 2024). These tactics, amplified during the Covid-19 pandemic, have heightened anti-China sentiment among regional prodemocracy activists, who see the PRC's partnerships with authoritarian regimes and its repression of freedoms in Hong-Kong as emblematic of China's influence (Phattharathanasut, 2024). These activists now view CCP not only as an external power but as a symbol and supporter of regional autocracies, with this shared opposition fostering a desire to build cross-border solidarity. Southeast Asian activists share the feeling of confronting a Chinese-led version of globalization (Schafar, Wongratana, 2021), fueled through partnerships of their countries in digital governance, surveillance technologies, and cybersecurity laws. The #MilkTeaAlliance (#MTA), as a transnational online movement, has emerged in this context mixing Covid lockdown, authoritarian turns for governments of the region (Yu, 2024) and Chinese foreign influence online campaigns.

The #MilkTeaAlliance moment, opening a new chapter for online and transnational social movement

An emblematic moment

The early 2020s concentrated key elements that led to the emergence of new forms of transnational mobilization, illustrating how rhizomatic networks (Sastramidjaja, 2024) converged and how the previous assemblage of diverse actors, causes, and agendas helped to converge online simultaneously. During the summer of 2020, the #MTA online war highlighted youth concerns across the region, from Thailand to Hong-Kong, expanding to Taiwan and to other countries like Myanmar after the coup in 2021. This marked a moment where a youth pro-democracy netizens came together digitally to fight back Chinese trolls and “little pinks” harassing Thai celebrities online with nationalistic arguments (Rauchfleisch, Wang, 2020). The

beginning of this online mobilization could be considered as a “banal politics” (Barendregt, Schneider, 2020) that happened only in the digital realm but gained progressively momentum to transform a fan community online mobilization to an online social movement. For the first time, a multisite online reaction have faced Chinese nationalist actors on their online battlefields. For Taiwanese activists, accustomed to deal with the "China factor", this moment triggered the expression of their solidarity, on a transnational and digital stage. Despite differences in local contexts and language barriers, the shared desire to counter the CCP's "cancel culture" (Dedman and Lai, 2021) overcame these obstacles. This digital solidarity emerged in a backdrop of growing authoritarianism in the region, a multi-layered and multi-site experience of the China factor, and the constraint to protest online. The campaign was partly relying on preexisting networks of activists joined by a massive amount of netizen from countries impacted by previous online influence operations by Chinese trolls and proxies.

In order to comprehend the viral spread of the #MilkTeaAlliance phenomenon, it is imperative to explore the emergent forms of socialization that are characteristic of the contemporary society of singularities (Reckwitz, 2020). The latest generations in East Asia are part of a global generation that evolve under the norms of cultural capitalism, and their socialization processes are undergoing a reconfiguration. Cultural productions, particularly those disseminated online, are generating emotional resonances, affective convergences, and global references that are shared across different populations. The all-encompassing hashtag #MilkTeaAlliance serves as a prime example, as it has succeeded in uniting a diverse group of individuals based solely on their shared cultural practice of consuming tea with milk, in contrast to the mainland Chinese custom of drinking it without adding anything. While seemingly trivial, this symbolic gesture has proven to be the most effective catalyst for uniting actors from diverse cultural and ideological backgrounds in the online space. This case highlights the transformative power of culture, demonstrating how new connections are being forged among individuals who are not personally acquainted with each other, and how a simple glass of tea has emerged as a symbol of solidarity for pro-democracy activists in the region.

In the context of the digitalization of their daily lives, pro-democracy activists have been observed to establish communities of interest with like-minded individuals both locally and transnationally. Culture has been identified as a significant unifying factor, facilitating cohesion through symbolic outreach and universal messaging that transcend language barriers and agenda differences. The pro-democracy movement has been observed to employ cultural content, such as the three-finger salute and the appropriation of the pirate flag from the manga series One Piece, to activate slow forms of commonality on a global scale. This enables activists to gain visibility and promote a shared struggle. Through cultural production, reappropriation and circulation, these digital native activists are able to recognize and impact each other. This initial encounter paves the way for their mutual support, with each activist and their online commitment joining their "nearby" (Xiang, 2023).

From a Taiwanese perspective, the framing the Milk Tea Alliance (#MTA) during this online war became an opportunity to resume the former attempts to build transnational prodemocracy networks and enable new cross-border activism connections online in a moment where Hong-

Kong allies were forced to act low key. This period also allowed activists from Taiwan to reactivate and deepen their connections with other participants of the #MTA campaign. This moment where activists from various countries, already engaged in their local contexts, came together online (Dedman & Lai, 2021) once again reframed the map of transnational activism in the region. This convergence, bringing together activists and a wider crowd of netizens, revealed shared commitments—such as opposition to CCP authoritarianism and an advocacy for the defense of democratic values in the region. The previously connected networks that had formed throughout the 2010s extended into Taiwan, with movements from Taipei blending into this newly formed loose and digitally mediated space of collective online resistance.

The #MTA, as the illustration of an online social movement, reflects the characteristics of contemporary activism: “a transnationalism that challenges the conjuncture of authoritarian state repression and the economization of society” (Rowen, 2024). It is digitalized, often claimed to be horizontally organized, and converges through both connective criticality (Deng, 2020) and affective connectivity (Sastramidjaja, 2024). This online phenomenon, born out of opposition to Chinese cyber-troops online harassment, presents some of modern social movement characteristics: the movement lacks a coherent ideology (Ho, 2017), with improvisation often driving its actions (Ho, 2018). The #MilkTeaAlliance is rallying diverse groups and individuals—an informal network of students, activists, politicians, citizen journalists, and keyboard warriors—primarily from Thailand, Hong-Kong, Taiwan, Myanmar and other South-East Asian countries. Despite facing different domestic challenges, these groups are united by a shared opposition to authoritarianism, particularly in resisting autocratic repression and criticizing the CCP influence, expansionism, conservatism and irredentism.

2020's : an up to date geography of activism

Four years after its emergence, the #MTA has largely faded from public attention, with many activist groups abandoning the term in their campaigns, particularly in regions like Hong-Kong (Phattharathanasut, 2024). However, this emblematic moment led some activists and groups to continue to identify with the alliance, and to participate in the remaining channels of discussion on crypted chat applications and information channels on twitter. From Taiwan to South-East Asia, some movements have adopted the alliance as part of their activism (Ho, 2024), leveraging the #MilkTeaAlliance as a “catch all hashtag” (Yu, 2024) to call for attention and transnational solidarity for Human rights and democracy. This online tools helps the prodemocracy activists “to garner sympathy, aiming to spread the news” (Putra, 2024) of their mobilization in order to let their counterparts abroad know what's going on locally and get support. The #MTA hashtag remains today a tool to communicate, exchange and get information about ongoing authoritarian turn and democracy movements facing it.

In a “pause and reboot” moment, this “catch all hashtag” maintain the potentiality to gather again a large number of support, paving the way for future mobilizations. Nowadays, the core members maintaining this network are still producing knowledges and materials in this logic. Among the many content shared along the #MTA network, the #MTA playbook is a good

example of knowledge sharing. This playbook is designed to provide a repertoire of protest practices used by the members of the networks in order to face authoritarianism efficiently. The play book provide a set of practice from street protest tactics (mainly influenced by the be water strategy developed in Hong-Kong), to economic sustainability for local activism and online resistance to digital authoritarianism (prevention to phishing, fake social media, website cloning).

Beyond this #MTA alliance as the most emblematic and recent expression of international online solidarity facing authoritarianism and China, other channels promoting democracy and human rights activism do exist. Given the new ways of informing, communicating and connecting provided by the online sphere, a multitude of networks, resonances and new international collaborations are taking place. These are above all based on inter-individual relationships, between activists highly endowed with “transnational capital”. Thus, #MTA and the numerous studies on this phenomenon are informing us on how like-minded activists are producing the condition to link their inter-knowledge and evolve in a multi-site copresence on a daily basis online proximity.

They also got to know each other, tied and build “affective community” relying on “mutual trust and friendship” (Phattharathanasut, 2024) established after people to people meetings following initial contacts via digital tools. The frame adopted by transnational connections is established and continue to refine itself through connections, exchanges, collaborations, and circulations. The #MTA is an emblematic example illustrating how online activism is partly reframing the way transnational activism is established between like-minded pro-democracy activists from different national settings. This #MTA moment shows, among other initiatives, and from a Taiwanese civil society perspective, how local activism is incorporating online tools bearing transnational resources, such as the possibility to use #MTA as a connective slogan.

III- Taiwan civil society, shaped by a geopolitics of social movements?

Taiwan's geopolitical history has profoundly shaped the present of this country and will continue to influence its future (Ho, 2024). However, while the events of the early 2020s reflect certain trends in which Taiwanese civil society members are actively engaging and responding to, they do not necessarily determine the trajectory of Taiwanese society as a whole. Regarding the local context for prodemocracy activism in Taiwan, the transnational phenomenon of a society both influenced by and influencing global factors in a dialectical way appears to be largely concentrated within Taipei's ecosystem of prodemocracy activism, in the engagement of some of its members in a wider transnational archipelago of activism. Nevertheless, certain policy directions and geopolitical trends in Asia are driving changes that affect this social group, gradually reconfiguring the geography of activism across the region.

Geopolitical trends positioning Taiwan as a “hub for activism”

Since 2020, a major change in transnational activism is that Taiwan's emergence as the sole truly democratic society in the Chinese-speaking world and the most "consolidated democracy" in the region (Schäfer, Wongratanawin, 2021). This democratic distinction equips Taiwan with a unique role, "both symbolically and pragmatically", as fertile ground for activists across Asia, offering both "inspiration for movements and a safe space for freedom of expression" (Dedman and Lai, 2021). Taiwan is increasingly seen as a "new hub of activism" (Wu, 2022), where foreign-based organizations are proliferating. Following this evolution, Taiwan appears as more and more cosmopolitan, with an increasing solidarity toward the countries of origin of the diasporas settling in the island (Ho, 2024). In Taipei, some NGOs are expanding their focus toward Southeast Asia, and some activist spaces are connecting activist networks throughout the region (Rowen, 2024). Given the increasing circulation of people and the recent developments affecting democratic countries in the region, Taiwan remains a safe place for those seeking refuge from authoritarianism, even if the country lacks an asylum law. Aligned with the goal of proposing space for prodemocratic activism, some actors and NGOs in Taiwan emphasize the necessity to link and support all activists activities in the region, underlying that they "experienced the strength of such kind of network in the past" (quote an interview A. prodemocracy activist).

By 2024, we are beginning to see the effects of this shift in Taipei's activist ecosystem, with more NGOs and international activists relocating to the city. This trend, which is likely to grow in the coming years, is being fueled by the closure of civic spaces in Hong-Kong and an authoritarian momentum in Southeast Asia. One of the main fieldwork conducted for this research has been focused on an NGO established in 2022 with the mission of welcoming foreign activists to Taiwan, while empowering democratic youth from Southeast Asia through specialized training programs. The main goal of these programs is to equip future transnational activists eager to learn from Taiwan's peaceful transition from dictatorship to democracy with knowledges and resources. Other conferences are organized by this NGO in order to spread "inspiring examples" giving potential model for addressing both historical and contemporary challenges in their countries. Indeed, "democratization also enhanced Human rights protection" (Ho, 2024) and Taiwan's experience serves as an instructive case for other societies grappling with similar issues.

This pattern continues since 2020, reshaping Taiwan's pro-democracy activist environment and positioning Taipei as a major hub for activism in Asia. As a result of the closure of the civic space in China and Hong-Kong, Taiwan has become a critical refuge for NGOs, journalists, researchers, and China-watchers fleeing restrictive environments. This cosmopolitanizing of the activist ecosystem in Taipei is bound to foster transnational networking in this city, cultivating a new, globally minded generation of activists, united by shared concerns issuing from their own experience related to their personal commitments. From this virtuous circle where a democratic context foster a proliferation of activism initiative, the Taiwanese civil society is more and more appealing activist from the region. This evolution of the map of activism in the region appeared to be synchronized with the objective of the Taiwanese

government that seeks to diversify the internal relations of the island and attract foreigners by promoting its cosmopolitan, progressive and democratic character.

“I established my NGO in 2022 with the goal to support the existence of a public space in south-east Asia societies. The development of our activity was a bit slow at the beginning but we recently launch a program calling volunteers to participate to our activities. Many of them are students from the countries of South-East Asia who are studying in Taiwan thanks to a scholarship program within the frame of the New Southbound Policy”

L. NGO worker in Taipei

New Southbound Policy side effects

This evolution aligns with the policies of the past eight years under Tsai Ing-wen and Lai Ching-te, which aim to connect Taiwan more globally and internationalize its society in order to get out the diplomatic strangulation operated by the PRC. Efforts to improve English proficiency and enhance ties with countries outside the Chinese-speaking spheres are having a side effect of cosmopolitanizing the country and enriching the transnational capital of Taiwan's urban, educated middle class. The new southbound policy, launched in 2016 with the goal of “counterbalancing and reducing dependency on mainland China” (Ho, 2024), has encouraged the government to diversify supply chains and economic ties but also to fund academic exchanges with Southeast Asian countries. In 2024, these student exchanges have led to an increase of South-East Asian students in Taiwan, mingling with their classmates and Taiwanese citizens. These exchanges could increase cross-cultural connections and deepen knowledges of Taiwanese activists in Southeast Asia societies, political systems and issues regarding Human rights. Some of this foreign student sometimes are engaging with Taiwanese activist networks focused on Southeast Asia, volunteering in NGO or participating in local activism.

“I’m currently teaching journalism at Ming Chuan university for master student. I’ve been really surprised at the beginning of the year to discover that a majority of my class is from Vietnam, with students really curious about the relation between democracy and journalism”.

C. Journalist Teacher at Ming Chuan University

This increasing process of cosmopolitanizing, partly oriented by state policies or in a free will of the people that circulate, got the potential to build bridges from Taiwan to Southeast Asia, to facilitate “the circulation of ideas and people across borders” (Phattharathanasut, 2024). While these governmental goals have not yet revolutionized ties between civil societies in the region, they have set in motion an increasing flow of economic, human, and cultural exchanges that are gradually diffusing in the Taiwanese society. During the recent years, mobilization addressing the field of global issues have been occurring in Taiwan, especially regarding the situation in Hong-Kong, the wars in Ukraine, Myanmar and Gaza. Given the impossibility of formal state-to-state diplomacy, the government favors fostering connections between activists and non-state actors. Most of these civil society ties are framed within an already globalized NGO ecosystem, relying on major funders and foundations for project-based collaborations. However, activists in Taipei, who often function as transnational actors, are also establishing connections

outside the confines of international conferences and NGO summits that usually dictate this kind of activism.

Conclusion

Over the past decade, Taiwan's post-1987 generation has become a pivotal force in shaping the regional landscape of pro-democracy activism. Rooted in a context of democratization, digitalization, and globalization, this generation has matured through emblematic events such as the sunflower movement and the #MilkTeaAlliance. These social movements have had a profound impact on their identities, networks, and strategies. These founding moments have reflected the anxieties of a generation caught between local sovereignty and geopolitical pressures and revealed their ability to link local struggles to global movements. They have navigated both offline and online spaces to create new connections, new alliances.

As this article has shown, Taiwanese activists, particularly those based in Taipei, are doing more than just reacting to external threats, such as the Chinese government. They are also proactively shaping new forms of transnational collaboration. These actors are constructing an archipelagic geography of resistance, consisting of informal networks of solidarity and more institutionalized spaces fostering training and exchange. This geography is decentralized yet interconnected, affective yet strategic, and grounded in local struggles while oriented toward global democratic ideals. Taiwan's unique political trajectory, democratic resilience, and increasing regional significance have made it a symbolic and pragmatic hub for pro-democracy activists throughout Asia.

However, although Taiwan's potential as a "beacon of democracy" is widely recognized, the future of this activism remains uncertain. The region's growing repression, the professionalization of activism, and the reliance on external funding raise important questions about the sustainability, autonomy, and resilience of these networks. Similarly, the cosmopolitanism that characterizes many of these activists—who are often urban, educated, and multilingual—does not always resonate with broader segments of society less endowed with transnational capital, either in Taiwan or abroad. The challenge ahead is translating these elite forms of transnational capital into more inclusive, grassroots practices of solidarity.

In conclusion, Taiwan's post-1987 generation is more than just a political group influenced by one founding protest. They embody a broader transformation in how activism is practiced, conceived and shared in the digital age, across borders, causes, and languages but also in a dynamic interplay between online and physical realms, between grassroots contexts and transnational influences. These activists are contesting authoritarianism and redefining the geography of protest in East and Southeast Asia through their actions. Thus, Taiwan's activist ecosystem is not merely reacting to shrinking civic spaces in neighboring countries; it is actively contributing to a new regional infrastructure of hope, resistance, and democratic imagination.

Future research should focus on individual transnational actors to understand how maps of transnational activism are evolving. When studying transnational movements, emphasizing the circulation of individual activists across space and time is a relevant methodology (Phattharathanasut, 2024). This approach can reveal the driving forces behind activists' mobility,

as well as their interpersonal connections and the establishment of transnational activist spaces across borders and diverse political and societal contexts. Paying special attention to individual circulation could illuminate the formation of activist networks and help identify key connections that may give rise to future social movements. Furthermore, this approach could demonstrate how international exchanges of people, knowledge, and practices influence moments of activist mobilization that drive social change in local contexts.



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