

Milk Tea Alliance: Constructing Transnational Identity by Consuming Milk Tea in the Asian Context¹

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Abstract

Responding to democratization trends against the coercive influence of China toward Asian nations, the Milk Tea Alliance was launched by young activists in Thailand in 2020. The familiar beverage transformed into material culture to achieve political goals. This research examines its new cultural meanings in constructing transnational identities by consumerism. Qualitative research was done with primary data gathered by in-depth interviews. 18 samples were Thai and Taiwanese young activists. Results were that milk tea was culturally rematerialized by diverse consumer practice through the Milk Tea Alliance: social media habits when consuming milk tea daily; drinking milk tea during offline demonstrations; and choosing milk tea from a specific retail chain advocating democracy and the youth movement. This cultural meaning reconfigured multi-faceted transnational identity among participants, including democratization, regional solidarity, new Asian values, and defying Chinese political interference.

Keywords: Milk Tea Alliance, Milk tea, Consumerism, Material culture, Transnational identity

Introduction

The Milk Tea Alliance is an ongoing transnational social movement initiated in Thailand, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Myanmar, and India in April 2020 to promote regional democratization and exemplify solidarity. The transnational social movement began when Vachirawit Chivaaree, an actor in *2gether: The Series*, a Thai television drama, retweeted photos on Twitter addressing Hong Kong as an independent nation. These posts were criticized by Chinese observers (Kosawiwat, 2020). The Twitter hashtag #nnevvy created by Thai fans defended Vachirawit and his girlfriend by criticizing the Chinese government's suppressive international policies. In turn, Chinese responses criticized Thai political perspectives and institutions (Wongsurawat, 2021).

The Chinese Embassy in Bangkok propounded the slogan 'China and Thailand as one family' which led to a new hashtag on Twitter, #MilkTeaAlliance, intended as a derisory parody (Treesuwan, 2020). The hashtag was among the top trending ones on Twitter in Thailand at the time along with one in Thai #ชาแนมข้นกว่าเลือด (translated as #MilkTeaIsThickerThanBlood) (Tanakasempipat, 2020). These two hashtags amounted to support for Hong Kong and Taiwanese democratic independence, and regional issues caused by coercive Chinese practices, such as the Mekong River and South China Sea disputes. In addition to the digital movement, protests occurred in several territories in Taiwan (Chang, 2021) and Thailand (Sinpongsaporn, 2020).

After the movement began, milk tea reemerged as a common value promoting democracy, opposing Chinese influence, and empathizing with Taiwan (Hale, 2020). Milk tea became a regional symbol for pro-democracy youth movements. To understand why a beverage became a transnational social movement, it is necessary to examine interterritorial ideological connections through milk tea and its cultural meaning.

As a symbol for all nations enduring Chinese suppression and coercion, drinking milk tea during a distinctive circumstance is not only about how you quench your thirst but also how you consume its connotation to support the movement. This research aimed to 1) demonstrate the milk tea consumption praxis of youths in Thailand and Taiwan; and 2) scrutinize cultural meanings of milk tea through consumption in the Asian context as political identity in the transnational Milk Tea Alliance.

Primary questions include

- 1) how does Milk Tea Alliance participants consumption of the beverage reflect the movement?; and
- 2) what is the cultural meaning of milk tea as political-ideological affinities between Thai and Taiwanese youth?

Literature Review

Concept of Transnational Identity

Transnational identity recently emerged as an aftereffect of globalization as well as emergence of social media platforms promoting instantaneous interconnectivity, overcoming geographic boundaries, and advancing conceptions of self-presentation and mutual connections. Increasingly, life is no longer monocultural, but involves interactions with people from diverse cultures. Navigating local and global cultures (Jensen, Arnett, & McKenzie, 2011), individuals adhere to transnational social movements based on gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and religion where common characteristics define solidarity across national borders (Rupp & Taylor, 1999, as cited in Doherty, 2006). Doherty (2006) demonstrated that transnational identity is developed due to an endeavor to promote ideology. In particular, the construction of identity through social movements can be a fundamental focus of political work.

Concept of new cultural geography

Inasmuch as this research dominantly emphasizes identity throughout the consumption of things, cultural identity will also be illustrated so as to comprehend this research. Jackson and Holbrook (1995, p. 1914) delineated consumption as “a social process whereby people relate to goods and artifacts in complex ways, transforming their meaning as they incorporate them in their lives through successive cycles of use and reuse”. Kleine III, Kleine, and Kernan (1993) also demonstrated that people utilize things to perform one of their social identities, and products only connect to the overall or global self in an indirect way. By proposing a concept of new cultural geography, Jackson (2000) distinguished different approaches in theorizing the relationship between people and commodities which are: the process of externalization whereby commodities and services are separated from the institutions from which they originated before being subject, the process of sublation which distinctive cultural contexts embedded in the meaning of material objects as people use things to objectify social relationships (Miller, 1989, as cited in Jackson, 2000), and the process of displacement in changing preference form one thing over another involved simple displacement attitudes for building environment (Holbrook & Jackson, 1996). These processes were employed as the main theoretical lens in scrutinizing the consumption of milk tea and its political identity in this study. As a result of this dense discussion, it depicts the way consumption can construct a social process that manipulates people’s lives in sophisticated ways. Therefore, consuming milk tea as a material object with its hidden identity can be interpreted as a social process to achieve the consumers’ intentions as well.

Methodology

This research investigates new cultural geography and transnational identity. Data was gathered by in-depth interviews in Thai and English also remotely by Google Meet and Zoom. Secondary data consisted of online media reports, Twitter posts in hashtags, and memes and flyers in Thai, English, and Mandarin.

Samples were citizens of Thailand or Taiwan under age 41 to qualify as part of the internet or young generation (Boose, 2021), who had participated in the movement at least once online. Interviews lasting an average of about 39 minutes were conducted in Thai language with ten Thai samples and English with eight Taiwanese samples. 60% of samples were female and 40% male, with an average age of 25.4. 50% of informants worked in education as student or lecturer, 28% in business, and 22% in other occupations. 28% consumed milk tea routinely, 22% a few times weekly and 50% a few times monthly. Frequency of consumption was less influential in constituting political identity than consumption praxis. Data was analyzed by a modification of the Stevick–Colaizzi–Keen (SCK) method outlined by Moustakas in 1994 (Creswell & Poth, 2018) for thematical analysis.

Milk Tea Consumption Praxis for Thai and Taiwanese Participants in the Milk Tea Alliance

This research aims to understand the link between identity and consumption as a process and practice through which identities are chosen, affirmed, and reinforced, and situate this development within a social context (Shankar, Elliott, & Fitchett, 2009). Milk tea was seen as a material culture reproducing a social and cultural process. How this material culture shaped and challenged contemporary world cultural identities was investigated to define newly constructed identities (Crang, 2014) in the political activism of the Milk Tea Alliance.

One sample stated:

“Drinking milk tea doesn’t only spread awareness of the movement, but also helps makes people understand and remember.” (Nut, Thai, 23 January 2022)

Milk tea as material culture dichotomously combined drinking and thinking with the Milk Tea Alliance. Cultural meanings are debatable, reconstructed according to participant involvement. Online societal manipulation redefines material culture. Through political use of social media platforms as mediation, social and material life is codified to form, convey, and understand meaning. Sample consumption welcomes redefinition of milk tea to spread its message societally. Lim, a Taiwanese sample, noted: ‘Drinking milk tea is like accepting the very clear meaning behind it.’

Lolo, another sample, ascribed her consumption habit to understanding and supporting the movement. Before the movement began in 2020, she rarely drank milk tea. When it became a symbol of the movement, the beverage became part of her daily life. Configuring consumption behavior can be seen as verifying movement goals and culture. The self is constructed by monitoring and modifying the narrative presented through behavior and consumptive behavior (Schembri, Merrilees, & Kristiansen, 2010). As samples understand and support the movement, their identities are rebuilt through modified consumption behavior. Lolo noted:

“Before the Milk Tea Alliance emerged, whenever I went to a Thai or Hong Kong restaurant, I never ordered milk tea. But afterwards, I would order it.”
(Lolo, Taiwanese, 27 January 2022)

On a social level, milk tea clustered consumers into a social group, differentiating them from other groups. In this way, milk tea solidified group socialization in movement participation; by consuming milk tea, samples agreed to collaborate with the Milk Tea Alliance, assuming movement goals. Karen, another sample, noted:

“Milk tea itself is just a beverage and has no other function or meaning. However, after the movement, each time that I bought milk tea, I knew that I was not just a consumer, but also someone who sought a more democratic society by supporting the path of democracy and freedom.” (Karen, Taiwanese, 20 February 2022)

Milk tea consumption inevitably reflects the movement. The redefined material object is in this sociopolitical context when participants use milk tea to objectify social relationships and comment on societal existence through demonstrations. Milk tea becomes a dynamic locus for diverse use in social media platforms, demonstrations, and milk tea retailers. Movement is accompanied by politicization. Material culture transitions from a beverage in a shop where it is regularly consumed to new settings in which it is politicized with a new cultural meaning according to a new sociopolitical context. Samples assert that they are not merely consumers, but also thinkers on the subject of milk tea in different venues:

1. Milk tea consumption on social media platforms

The Milk Tea Alliance initially emerged on Twitter, an online platform, and continues to grow in influence through social media, in which consumption habits and political ideologies are expressed. Since the movement began in 2020 on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram,

participants posted pictures of milk tea with hashtags and captions to advocate for the movement by alluding to their political ideology.

Through captions, an externalization process redefined a material object when evidence of milk tea consumption was posted online (Jackson, 2000) while tagging Milk Tea Alliance. Social media platforms were a new venue for redefining milk tea. Consuming milk tea elucidated relationships between the movement and its participants by solidifying a societal tie. Visible links between the movement and its participants incites responsibility for political activism. Mai described her political work by sharing information and emotionally supporting movement participants. One post indicated support for resisting the One China principle on Chinese National Day, declaring: 'Let's take a break by drinking Thai milk tea' with trending hashtags relevant to the Milk Tea Alliance and anti-Chinese viewpoints.

Daily consumption of milk tea online may be seen as a praxis ushering movement participants to build responsibility for movement advocacy. Mai explained:

"At the time, I sometimes felt that drinking milk tea was a sign of expressiveness. So I sometimes posted a picture on Instagram Story or Twitter to express my support, even to just share information and encourage them."

(Mai, Thai, 21 January 2022)

2. Milk tea consumption offline

Offline movements in Thailand, Taiwan, and Hong Kong have displayed regional solidarity and reciprocal support. Consuming milk tea under these circumstance indicates advocacy for the movement. Demonstrators participate in the movement while holding beverage containers, conferring meaning to its presence. The practice of drinking milk tea in terms of movement participation was investigated to link milk tea consumption environmentally with Milk Tea Alliance demonstrations through newly constructed meanings.

This externalization is more salient than in online statements, insofar as milk tea is purchased from a shop for use by demonstrators to convey new cultural meanings embedded in this context, as part of an externalization process (Jackson, 2000). Samples describe milk tea consumption of as showing support, solidarity, and political adherence to the Milk Tea Alliance. One sample, Dami, compared her milk tea consumption in terms of participation in demonstrations in Thailand to online expression. In a search for social endorsement, drinking milk tea offline is purposeful for Dami:

"When I joined the protest, I always posted bubble milk tea on my social media to say that 'Yeah, I am part of the Milk Tea Alliance. I support Thailand and I

am from Taiwan.' I like to post that kind of supportive image on my social media to let everybody know that we are standing for Thailand." (Dami, Taiwanese, 25 January 2022)

In addition, Lolo and other samples saw attending the Milk Tea Alliance demonstrations as facilitating social interaction and solidifying social relationships. By bringing milk tea, Lolo was endorsed by friends as among movement membership. Milk tea as a material object forged a reciprocal bond between individuals. It provided an image of solidarity to ally movement participants. Emotional motivations related to solidarity and political support in the movement were motives impelling informants to buy milk tea before joining demonstrations.

Consumption of milk tea offline was also collective, as the beverage was distributed gratis at some Bangkok demonstrations, as one Thai sample relates. Mass consumption was characterized by purposeful action. And in offline demonstration, toasting fellow participants with milk tea to illustrate mutual solidarity. After receiving free milk tea at events, some participants were motivated to learn more about the movement and related regional sociopolitical issues. In this way, public engagement in consuming milk tea may lead to learning, understanding, and recognizing regional occurrences.

3. Choosing a milk tea retailer

Consumer choice may be political as well as economical. Purchasing milk tea from one retail vendor may illustrate a political ideology. So consumer choice may influence individual sense of self as Warde (1994) observed. Apparently, milk tea shops have become a place containing political ideology through a process of displacement on to the newly built milk tea retailer's space (Jackson, 2000). They are no longer just a mundane place where economic practice happens any longer, since participants elucidate their political concerns toward a certain retailer they consume.

Thai sample consumer decisions about milk tea from Taiwan demonstrate advocacy for Taiwan across geographical borders, and Taiwanese sample consumer choices of milk tea from Thailand send an inverse message. Milk tea retailers originating in Thailand, Taiwan, and Hong Kong are patronized by samples to indicate personal support of the movement while endorsing participating member countries. The sample Mai consumed milk tea from Taiwanese retailers despite their high price, to show adherence to a social group. Her experience corresponds with Warde's (2005, as cited in Shankar, Elliott, & Fitchett, 2009) notion of consumers defining themselves by purposefully selecting a certain commodity. Activists were likelier to drink milk tea sold by businesses from nations involved in the movement, as Mai remarked:

“Sometimes I want to consume milk tea from Taiwan, for example Tiger Sugar, despite the expense in terms of the cost of living in Thailand.” (Mai, Thai, 21 January 2022)

Aera, another Thai sample, used this semiotic symbol to convey her identity as a form of self-discovery. She described her emotions shared with international participants in the Milk Tea Alliance. She consumes Taiwanese milk tea to support Taiwan’s political advance.

Milk Tea Alliance community linked transnational identity

Transnational civil society means constructing a collective identity to consolidate public societal participatory feelings as well as creating social cohesion (Rupp & Taylor, 1999; Pullen, 2014). The Milk Tea Alliance constructs its own transnational identity to create a collective feeling among transnational participants within separate political contexts (Hirsch, 1986). Thai and Taiwanese consumption praxis depicts a political identity. Consumption and identity are multifaceted and indissociable.

The cultural meaning of milk tea is politically echoed by consumer advocacy, solidarity, and political stances. These facets convey a linked transnational identity that is shared collectively about democratization, regional solidarity, new Asian values, and rejecting Chinese political interference. Democratization in Asia reflects Doherty’s (2006) view of transnational identity as expanding democracy to spread an ideology. Universality and popularity of milk tea are extended to characteristics of democracy. The proliferation of milk tea is interpreted by transnational participants as an impetus to regionally democratize Asian societies. As individuals enjoy drinking milk tea, they also delight in democracy.

Regional solidarity is also portrayed, as informants advocate transnational participation through psychological support, cultural advocacy, and mutual solidarity. Milk tea is a spiritual anchor of regional reciprocal solidarity, combating authoritarianism and fighting for democracy, by sharing political updates for reciprocal encouragement. In this way, drinking milk tea becomes pan-Asian empirical political advocacy.

The Milk Tea Alliance also uses the rhetoric of Asian values to unify young activists promoting democracy. New Asian values are advanced by samples to help transnational participants transcend enemies of democracy. The sample Dami implied that milk tea represents new Asian values and links cooperative defenders against authoritarianism. This transnational linkage amounts to a club promoting democracy in collective social movement.

Finally, milk tea is rematerialized as a means to resist Chinese territorial disputes and political interference. Samples use milk tea as a means of disobedience, regionally shaped into

a political identity. The sample Alan suggested: ‘I think it is about Asian people standing together to fight China.’

Conclusion

Milk Tea Alliance practices show consumption as a construction of a transnational identity formed by consumption of the beverage. Jackson’s (2000) thematic analysis of new cultural geography illustrates externalization, sublation, and displacement processes. Specific places, times, and consumption forms are essential for building new cultural meanings for milk tea. Political identity is reflected by spaces where it is consumed: social media platforms, demonstrations, and preferred retailers. Consumption of milk tea becomes an identity process in a sociopolitical space where commodities have connotations.

Consumption practices add up to a cultural meaning politically echoing purposeful movement identities. Through synchronized solidarity, milk tea transnationally represents democratization, regional solidarity, new Asian values, and the defiance of Chinese political interference in Asia. As Dedman and Lai (2021) proposed, the Milk Tea Alliance generates an identity of intra-Asian solidarity against authoritarianism. In doing so, the beverage shows regional solidarity toward transnational participants and public aspirations for democracy by balking at Chinese political interference.

Cultural politicization (Wright, 1998) reflects the transnational identity of milk tea used as a political instrument in Thailand or Myanmar where Milk Tea Alliances play significant roles in domestic politics. Material culture achieves political goals nationally and internationally. Future research might investigate other forms of identity creation that do not involve consumption. In Thailand, activists have refrained from consumption to forge democratic identities by boycotting outlets which endorse the Thai junta: MK Restaurants Group and Charoen Pokphand Group. Although this campaign lost momentum, non-consumption could be examined to see why it failed to create enduring political identities.

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