Transnational Grassroots Movements and Regional Hegemony: The Milk Tea Alliance's Constraints on the Hegemonic Rise of China

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Bachelor Thesis: BSc International Relations and Organizations

National Identities in East Asian IR

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Second Reader: Dr. Nicolas Blarel

Date: 26.05.2023

Wordcount: 7989

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1. Introduction

China's potential rise to regional hegemony is widely discussed in International Relations scholarship. The materialistic, institutional, and military powers of China are often weighed against the US to evaluate China's position in the region (Roy, 2020; Lind, 2018; Mastanduno, 2019; Webb and Krasner, 1989, p. 183). While this comparison is understandable and can help explain why China has not yet achieved regional hegemon status, it might not be the only reason. This thesis explores regional constraints to China's rise from a Gramscian perspective. By looking at the concepts of hegemony, counter-hegemony, and common sense and applying them to the regional context, China's potential and constraints will be discussed. Furthermore, the Chinese hegemonic structures, their effects on the region, and political responses to them will be outlined. Thus, the role of transnational grassroots movements as an expression of regional common sense will be stressed. To do that the discourse of the Milk Tea Alliance will be analyzed to investigate the movement's counter-hegemonic tendencies.

As outlined by Flemes (2007), regional acceptance of a state is a key factor in its potential to become a hegemon (p. 18). In Gramscian theory, an actor needs the consent of its subordinates to become a hegemonic power (Im, 1991, p. 128). Hegemony in the international sphere does not only encompass coercion but also consent to the system which is expressed by accepting the status quo as "common sense" (Hopf, 2013, p. 320). Therefore, it is crucial to look at the sentiments and public opinion within the region to further investigate constraints on China's rise.

In the age of social media public opinion is easily shared and spread online. Personal sentiments and responses to political events can be shared by any individual with access to the internet and received by millions of other users. Thus, social media is a great channel for the political organization of social movements (Tye et al., 2018, p. 410). The use of social media and the internet has multiple effects on political participation, such as an increase in electoral behavior, the building of digital communities, and expansions in alternative political participation (e.g. activism) (Huang and Hong, 2017, p. 221). The same social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, are used in many countries. Due to that, stories of one country can easily be accessed by audiences from other countries and social movements can expand beyond borders (Jones and Mattiacci, 2017, p. 743). Thus, social media platforms act as a tool for the mobilization of transnational grassroots movements. Since social media creates the space for the expression of public opinion and political organization it allows for an insight into transnational regional sentiments towards China. To investigate regional public opinion and how it constrains China's rise I propose the following research question.

RQ: To what extent do transnational grassroots movements hinder Chinese regional hegemony in East Asia?

To answer the research question I will employ a case study of the Milk Tea Alliance (MTA) movement. Firstly, I will review important literature on hegemony, counter-hegemony, and common sense. Furthermore, I will explore the importance of regional consent and the role of social media in expressing it. Moreover, I will look at the regional context, specifically domestic struggles for democracy, and how they relate to the Chinese hegemonic project. Afterward, I will outline the methodology, including my case selection and the planned data analysis. The case of the MTA, a transnational grassroots movement that originally included members from Thailand, Hong Kong, and Taiwan will be put into context with this research. For the analysis, a critical discourse analysis will be conducted to investigate the discourse under the hashtag #MilkTeaAlliance on Twitter.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework: Hegemony, Counter-hegemony and Common Sense

Hegemony is a term coined by Gramsci. It describes the supremacy of a small group of capital owners, the bourgeoisie, who hold a materialistic and ideological power over the subordinate classes (Im, 1991, p. 127). They are concerned with the continuation of the capitalist economy, and, thus, reproduce the current mode of production. Gramsci argued that the difference between hegemony and other types of supremacies is that a hegemon uses its ideological power to manufacture consent among the subordinate class rather than sheer force or violence like a dominator (Im, 1991, p. 127). The bourgeoisie can do that by compromising some aspects of the system to the benefit of the subordinate group, while still ensuring that the capitalist system itself does not get endangered (Im, 1991, p. 128). To achieve that, the bourgeoisie needs to develop political, ideological, and materialistic unity, or in Gramsci's terms a "historical bloc" (Im, 1991, p. 131).

While Gramsci developed his theory of hegemony in a domestic sense, Cox (1983) applied it to international relations. According to Cox (1983), hegemony in the international system is built by the "outward expansion of the (internal) hegemony established by a dominant social class" (p. 171). Hegemony in the international system is based on the adaptation of cultural and economic models from the hegemonic state in the domestic context of the subordinate states (Cox, 1983, p. 171). Thus, the spread of hegemonic ideology is based on the

acceptance of the hegemonic structures by the subordinates. Moreover, the economic model of the hegemon becomes the dominant global mode of production which interlinks the subordinate states to the hegemon and one another (Cox, 1983, p. 171). Due to that, political structures are established as states interact based on the hegemonic system. Furthermore, social structures between the subordinate working classes are transnationally established. Thus, international hegemony, as described by Cox (1983), creates economic, social, and political structures of predominance (p. 172). These structures of predominance, furthermore, allow the hegemon to create universal norms and institutions which influence the behavior of states and affect civil society (Cox, 1983, p. 172). Thus, a state can be the hegemon in the domestic and the international sphere. Moreover, a state can be a hegemon in a region (Yilmaz, 2010, p. 194). A regional hegemon expands across national borders, but unlike the international hegemon, the power is limited to a specific region.

As outlined by Cox (1983), the identity of a state is constructed in accordance with its ideology, which is expressed through norms and values. These norms and values influence a state's domestic and international behavior. For example, whether a state is democratically or autocratically ruled has major implications for its citizens. Hopf (2013) argues that not only the state but also the public plays an important role in creating these identities (p. 318). Furthermore, he claims that Gramsci's concepts of hegemony and common sense are crucial in the creation of interstate identities and relations (Hopf, 2013, p. 321). The acceptance by the subordinate group of the status quo, which includes states' identities, norms and values, and foreign policy, thus, build a key component of a state's hegemonic power. Only if a state's power is accepted in the common sense of the domestic and international public, does the state have a chance to take on a leadership role and become a regional hegemon (Flemes, 2007, p. 18).

Common sense and public opinion are key factors in a state's rise as a regional hegemon. If a state's dominance is not accepted or tolerated by its neighbors that state's ability to become the hegemon is challenged. Such an attempt to challenge the current power structures is called a counter-hegemony. Carroll (2006) argues that hegemonic projects can be constrained when there is a shift from "power-over" (the dominant class's power over the ruled) to "power-to" (the subordinates' power to achieve materialistic and ideological freedom) (p. 19). To achieve such a shift, specific political action that falls outside the hegemonic norm and creates a gateway from the present to the desired future needs to be planned (Carroll, 2006, p. 20). This means that the members of the counter-hegemony need to plan activities that

clearly resist and oppose the hegemony. These actions, hence, follow from the desire for a future that stands in contrast to the status quo. When talking about domestic politics, the bourgeoisie and the state as its tool would be considered to have the "power-over" the subordinate class, while the lower classes would struggle for the "power-to" economic and ideological freedom. In the international context, a hegemonic state would be considered to hold "power-over" other states and their inhabitants. Here, the inhabitants and leaders of different states in the region would make up the common sense, which has the potential to build the counter-hegemony by struggling for their "power-to" economic and ideological liberation (Hopf, 2013; Carroll, 2006). Thus, the power of a hegemon can be challenged.

In the domestic context, Gramsci speaks of a "war of position" as the most likely strategy to build a counter-hegemony (Im, 1991, p. 143). For this, the subordinate classes must build their own historical bloc. This requires a degree of organization and articulation of a planned future. Furthermore, the war of position entails that the counter-hegemonic project addresses as many potential allies as possible (Im, 1991, p. 146). Thus, the counter-hegemony is not a single-issue strategy but rather includes different struggles into one movement with a common goal. Internationally, the same idea can be applied. The difference is that the potential allies of the movement can exceed national borders as the struggle is between the dominant class of one international or regional hegemon and the inhabitants of any state that struggles under their dominance. Cox (1983), however, argues that the potential for an international alternative historical bloc must emerge out of domestic counter-hegemonic struggles (p. 174). The domestic struggle in the subordinate states is a central point for international resistance. While the subordinate state and their respective counter-hegemonic struggles can differ greatly between the states, due to different national histories and identities, they are subjected to the same international hegemon. Thus, the subjection to the hegemonic rule offers a baseline of solidarity between the subordinate civil societies, besides the differences in domestic struggles. Especially if the hegemon is perceived to be a threat and the civil society claims to be in crisis, the transboundary support for such a movement is more likely to rise (Smith et al., 2018, p. 373-374). Then, international solidarity can turn into a collective transboundary alternative historical bloc between subordinate civil societies that expands out of domestic counter-hegemonic struggles.

In today's age, social media has become an important channel for public opinion and social organization. Compared to traditional channels of public opinion, social media is easily accessible to a variety of actors outside fixed jurisdictions (Zhuravskaya et al., 2020, p. 417).

It can give a stage to groups that would usually be excluded from the mainstream such as marginalized actors, contributing to the "democratization of knowledge" (Omotayo and Folorunso, 2020, p. 134). Furthermore, social media allows many actors to connect regardless of distance and language barriers, due to its scale-shifting effect and translation functions. Scale-shifting refers to the broadcasting of local stories into other regions and contexts, which enhances a story's magnitude and reach (Jones and Mattiacci, 2017, p. 743). Thus, social media can act as a bridge between different nations and can be used by a transnational movement to coordinate political action and diffuse its norms and goals (Cammaerts, 2015, p. 5). Hence, social media creates a space for transnational exchange about discontent with the current hegemonic order, and to organize the mass struggle for ideological and economic liberation. Social media is especially useful for transnational grassroots movements for two reasons. Firstly, a grassroots movement does not emerge from institutional or organizational power but rather from civil society (Batliwala, 2002, p. 396). Hence, grassroots movements are non-elitist but focus on experiences of marginalized communities. Social media gives these non-elites a stage that would be harder to gain access to otherwise (Zhuravskaya et al., 2020, p. 417). Secondly, if a movement is transnational, it means that the participants of the movement are non-institutional actors from multiple states (Maiba, 2005, p. 42). Social media allows users to overcome geographical and linguistic borders and connect people from most places of the world (Zhuravskaya et al., 2020, p. 417). In this way, it creates a modern space for counter-hegemonic organization. Members of the subordinate group can build and advertise their historical bloc and reach many people due to the scale-shifting of counter-hegemonic ideology on social media platforms. Furthermore, allies from closely or loosely related struggles can be found and won over. Since posting on social media is a low-effort activity that can be done from the comfort of one's own home, traditional barriers to non-traditional political participation can be overcome.

2.2. China and Regional Hegemony: Potential and Constraints

China's potential to become a regional hegemon is still contested. While most scholars argue that it has not reached hegemon status yet, it is undeniably a strong contestant for the title. Flemes (2007), argues that a state needs material resources, ideational power, discursive and diplomatic instruments, and acceptance of other states in the region to be considered a regionally dominant power (p. 12-18). China's position in the region will be assessed by testing these criteria.

Firstly, according to Ngamsang (2016), China has taken some important steps in the expansion of its economic power. One example is the Bejing Consensus which attempts to offer an alternative to the Washington Consensus in the region, especially for countries that fail to meet the neoliberal and democratic conditions. The open trade economy has given countries the security that Chinese capital will flow into their countries, regardless of regime type and ideology (Ngamsang, 2016, p. 13). It is, however, disputed how well of an alternative the Beijing Consensus poses. Beeson and Xu (2019) outline that the Beijing Consensus has not been able to replace the neoliberal Wahington Consensus (p. 349). Furthermore, the authors question whether the Beijing Consensus was even developed for that purpose (p. 348). Yu (2019) agrees that the Beijing Consensus was not developed as an antagonist to the Washington Consensus, but that it nonetheless offers an alternative economic model that is especially appealing to autocratic regimes (p. 194). Thus, while the general acceptance of the Beijing Consensus and its international success is contested, the leniency of the model has appealing features to those states that want to remain authoritarian while also growing economically. Another example is that China has played a leading role in the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). China is the biggest stakeholder of the bank and is an important decision-maker in the bank. Compared to its Western counterparts, the AIIB has more lenient policies regarding regime type and human rights (Ngamsang, 2016, 14-15). Furthermore, as the bank aims to fund projects in states that need developmental assistance for low interest rates, a dependency between economically weak states and the AIIB, and thus the Chinese government, is created (Rettob, 2022, p. 218). Secondly, China has launched multiple soft power campaigns to exert ideological power in the region. One example is the spread of Confucius Institutes which offer classes in Chinese languages and cultural practices globally (Ngamsang, 2016, p. 13). They are intended to shape outsiders' perceptions of China into a more positive image. While in recent years, states in the political West have increasingly constrained the Confucius Institutes, they are, nonetheless, impactful elsewhere (Repnikova, 2022, p. 11). With over 500 institutes in 162 countries, the soft power strategy is well established (Repnikova, 2022, p. 11). In addition to the Confucius Institutes, the Chinese government developed the Luban Workshops. These workshops are aimed to provide vocational training for foreigners who have an interest in working with Chinese industries in their home countries (Gao, 2020, p. 174). The workshops have been established in Thailand, Indonesia, and Cambodia, as well as in other regions of the world. Thus, the Chinese government enables and encourages foreigners to work in the Chinese market without having to migrate. Thirdly, Repnikova (2022) argues that the Chinese government has made calculated diplomatic choices by hosting "public diplomacy spectacles"

(p. 40). Some examples are the 2022 Winter Olympics and the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai. With these, an open and cooperative image of China is painted. Fourthly, the recognition of China as the dominant power is contested. Chu et al.'s (2014) study shows that, at the time, the opinions on whether the US or China had the most influence in the region were split (p. 402). Furthermore, they explain that countries nearby were more likely to believe in China's power. Thus, there is no clear perception and tolerance of China as the hegemonic leader in the region.

There is, moreover, a broader discussion held about the norms and values promoted by China. China is a one-party authoritarian state. At the core of the system is the Communist Party of China (CPC) and its General Secretary Xi Jinping. So (2019) argues that Xi, who came into office in 2012, has intensified the CPC's authoritarianism on a political, economic, and ideological level (p. 58). China's ambitions to become an established global power, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), have influenced the political climate in the region. While China does not actively promote authoritarianism, it benefits from the stability of autocratic neighbors and trade partners (Einzenberger and Schaffar, 2018, p. 8). According to du Rocher (2020), the Chinese government has three mechanisms through which it encourages stability, and thus, autocratic rule in the region during BRI negotiations. Firstly, diplomatic presence and "common destiny" narratives are employed to create a feeling of solidarity and innovation which is supposed to incentivize elites to envision non-democratic economic growth (du Rocher, 2020, p. 39-40). Secondly, the Chinese government exploits the institutional weaknesses of partner states, by providing resources to corrupt governments, and therefore, enabling leaders to remain in office besides planned elections (du Rocher, 2020, p. 41-42). Thirdly, projects like the BRI, which is more lenient towards domestic ideology and regime type, are supposed to demonstrate a possible alternative to the neo-liberal and democratic trade model of the political West (du Rocher, 2020, p. 42).

While these economic mechanisms benefit other regimes and elites, they also have major effects on the citizens of these states. Many East Asian states have a history filled with oppressive colonial regimes, authoritarian states, and struggles for democracy. In many states in the region, citizens regularly mobilize to demand democratic reforms. The inhabitants of Hong Kong, for example, have organized multiple protests within the last decade. Since the handover of the former British colony, the Chinese government has tried to tighten its grip on the island beyond the "One Country, Two Systems" agreement of 1984 (Fong, 2017, p. 526). The most recent protests in Hong Kong were the Anti-ELAB protests, where Hong Kong inhabitants stood up against the Extradition Law Amendment Bill (ELAB), which would allow Hongkongers charged with crimes in the Chinese Mainland to be extradited (Kow et al., 2020,

p. 3). Hongkongers feared that the law would harm the city's rule of law and citizens' right to a fair process. Hence, the protesters were concerned that the democratic elements of their system were being eradicated by the Chinese government. A struggle for democracy in Hong Kong is, thus, inherently related to the prevalence and spread of Chinese authoritarianism. Similar to Hong Kong, Taiwan experiences a lot of pressure from the CPC. While Taiwan has a more democratic and sovereign political structure than Hong Kong, it is nonetheless subjected to Chinese authoritarianism. This is especially due to the shared history of China and Taiwan. After the Chinese civil war, the remnants of the defeated Kuomintang (KMT) party retreated to Taiwan and re-established the Republic of China (ROC) in 1949 claiming it was still the same ROC as before. Simultaneously, Mao Zedong proclaimed the People's Republic of China (PRC) (Lee, 2014, p. 102). Both of the newly established states fought for international recognition until the UN decided in 1971 to replace the ROC with the PRC as the representative of China (General Assembly, 1971, 2758). The tensions between Taiwan and China have remained high even after this moment because Beijing continues to claim the island as part of its territory. Between 1988 and 1996 the political regime in Taiwan became more democratic as the dynastic rule of the Chiangs ended and presidential elections were established (Lee, 2014, p. 103-104). Nowadays, the division between the KMT, which promotes closer relations with the CPC, and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which is more skeptical of the CPC, further catalyzes democratic and autocratic tensions (Lee, 2014, p. 104; Wong, 2022, p. 5). Ever since Tsai Ing-wen, the presidential candidate from the DPP won office in 2016, Taiwan has been under ideological attack again from the CPC (Templeman, 2020, p. 87). During the previous KMT presidency of Ma Ying-jeou (2008-16), Taiwanese citizens rose against the government's attempts to establish closer relations with China. In 2014, the Sunflower Students Movement famously demonstrated this public sentiment by occupying the parliament for 24 days (Ho, 2015, p. 69-70). Moreover, the struggle against authoritarianism domestically and regionally is observable in states that do not have a direct link to China. Thailand, for instance, has been afflicted with many turns of rulership and regime change within the past century (Chambers and Waitoolkiat, 2020, p. 145). The political system frequently experiences tensions between monarchy, military rule, and democracy. Since 1932 the military has staged 13 successful coups d'état which led to the weakening and fragmentation of the political system (Chambers and Waitoolkiat, 2020, p. 145). The uncertainty of the democratic system in Thailand has resulted in the advancement of many pro-democracy movements across the country. Most famously the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship, who are also known as the "Red Shirts", mobilized a vast network of

supporters for former Prime Minister Thaksin (Naruemon, 2016, p. 94). It emerged as an opposition to the autocratic regime established through the 2006 coup (Naruemon, 2016, p. 105). More recently in 2020, the Free Youth Movement mobilized over Twitter to demand a more democratic leadership in Thailand (Sinpeng, 2021, p. 193). While these counter-movements were concerned with domestic politics, they did not take place in a vacuum. Mandelbaum (2023) argues that the Chinese government has had an interest in establishing a more autocratic rule in Thailand since the country joined the BRI in 2014 (p. 369). The BRI has intensified the polarized political landscape in Thailand and led to the usage of Chinese capital for furthering the autocratic elite's agenda (Mandelbaum, 2023, p. 369-370). Thus, the domestic tensions between authoritarianism and democracy are intertwined with the Chinese pursuit of economic projects and can be seen as part of the hegemonic agenda of the CPC.

As China holds power in the first three of Fleme's (2017) categories but lacks in the fourth I argue that China would have the power and resources to become the regional hegemon but lacks the acceptance of the states and their inhabitants in the region. The dissatisfaction with authoritarianism and the CPC's role in promoting it resulted in many incidents of public protest all over the region in recent decades. There are causal mechanisms between domestic pro-democracy movements and the disapproval of an assertive role of China in the region. China's aims to support autocratic leadership in its neighboring states to establish more economic and ideological power are, thus, part of the Chinese hegemonic project. Therefore, a struggle against authoritarianism is a struggle against the Chinese hegemonic project. Thus, I argue, that these protests have counter-hegemonic tendencies and will further explore this argument by analyzing the discourse of one movement in more detail.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Case Selection

To analyze the extent to which transnational grassroots movements hinder the emergence of Chinese regional hegemony, a single-N case study will be employed. The Milk Tea Alliance (MTA) is a fitting case. The MTA is a loose movement that emerged after an online dispute between a Thai actor and a Chinese audience. The actor Cheva-aree (also called "Bright") retweeted a post that referred to Hong Kong as an independent country (Schaffar and Wongratanawin, 2021, p. 5). Furthermore, his girlfriend Nnevvy posted a comment on Instagram where she referred to herself as Taiwanese looking, rather than Chinese (Wang and Rauchfleisch, 2022, p. 584). This statement upset some Chinese netizens as they felt that the

sovereignty and territorial claims of their state were being attacked. Thai netizens posted over two million posts in support of the actor and his girlfriend on Twitter under the hashtag #Nnevvy in response (Wang and Rauchfleisch, 2022, p. 584). This caught the attention of Hong Kong and Taiwanese netizens, who also started to post about the dispute to hit back against China. Thus, the movement became transnational.

While the situation started as nothing more than an exchange of angry social media posts, a transnational grassroots movement against authoritarianism and Chinese dominance in the region emerged. Soon the members started to identify as the Milk Tea Alliance. Under the hashtag #MilkTeaAlliance political disputes between China and other states in the region started being discussed, as well as authoritarianism and democracy. Netizens were, furthermore, mobilized to act in the form of protests or online campaigns (Wang & Rauchfleisch, 2022, p. 584-585).

The MTA is a fitting case to answer the research question as it includes members from multiple states mobilizing against China, the potential hegemon. Furthermore, the MTA expanded out of domestic counter-hegemonic struggles which according to Cox (1983) enables the formation of a transnational counter-hegemony (p. 174). Thus, the extent to which this transnational grassroots movement counters China's hegemonic rise can be analyzed in light of this case study.

3.2 Method of Analysis

To analyze the case, a critical discourse analysis will be employed. Firstly, the micro- and macro-level discourse will be identified and explained. The micro-level discourse shows communication style and language use, while the macro-level discourse depicts underlying structures such as power and inequality (van Dijk, 2015, p. 468). Afterward, discursive themes under the #MilkTeaAlliance that relate to both the micro-level and the macro-level discourse will be highlighted. Van Dijk (2015) argued that the analysis of discourse becomes interesting when it bridges the micro-level communication to the macro-level structures of a discourse (p. 468). The themes will be identified by filtering Twitter data to terms that relate to the macro-level structure. These terms will become apparent in the macro-level analysis of the MTA discourse. Then the themes will be investigated from a Gramscian viewpoint. Thus, counter-hegemonic tendencies of the MTA discourse will be inspected. To do this, the conceptualization of counter-hegemonies written above will serve as a lens through which the contents of the tweets will be examined. Furthermore, other Gramscian academic writings will be used supplementary.

3.3 Operationalization: Data and Concept Measurement

The data derives from the hashtag #MilkTeaAlliance on Twitter. Discursive themes that relate to both the micro- and macro-level discourse will be examined. This is done by using Twitter's "advance search" option, which allows for a more refined search. The themes will be determined based on the macro-level structures, which will be outlined below. To guarantee a degree of reproducibility the inquiry of data will be performed on at least ten days in seven weeks. The tweets under the "Latest" and "Top" rubric of Twitter, thus, will differ. It is important to identify that the themes under the hashtag are consistent and not coincidental. Some exemple tweets for the identified themes will be given to demonstrate the findings further. Moreover, related tweets that will not be used as examples will be stored in an external databank.

While the concept of counter-hegemony might look different in practice than in theory, it does have some observable key features. To measure the concept, the data will be analyzed for characteristics of a war of position as outlined in the conceptualization. Thus, some key features include a big allyship, solidarity, building of a counter-ideology, and denouncing the status quo (Im, 1991).

4. Data Analysis

4.1 Micro-level and Macro-level Implications of the Milk Tea Alliance Discourse

When analyzing the initial MTA micro-level discourse of April 2020 memes, humor, and digital language become evident. This form of communication illustrates the youthfulness of the movement. Thai netizens attached images of Bright's TV show "2gether", in which he played a gay character, to underpin their progressiveness (Schaffar and Wongratanawin, 2021, p. 16-17). "2gether" falls under the "Boys Love" (BL) genre which originated in Japan. These TV shows often depict romantic and sexual relations between male characters. Zhang and Dedman (2021) argue that BL TV shows are so popular in Thailand because they represent the desire for LGBTQ+ rights which are still limited by the government (p. 1040-1041). These images, moreover, stand in clear contrast to the aggressively nationalistic Chinese messages (Schneider, 2021, p. 314). Zhang and Dedman (2021) argue that this pro-LGBTQ+ position of Thai activists sparked the emerging MTA movement (p. 1042). Moreover, self-deprecating humor was used to weaken the Chinese attacks. Chinese netizens would make negative, and subjectively offensive, statements about the Thai government, to which the Thai netizens

would agree, and thus, undermine the aggression (Schaffar and Wongratanawin, 2021, p. 6). As the Twitter dispute turned into the MTA movement and netizens from Hong Kong and Taiwan joined, the micro-level discourse evolved. The hashtag was used for issues other than the initial dispute about Bright's and Nnevvy's statements. Tweets about China's role in environmental issues, Covid-19, and human rights violations emerged under the hashtag (Schaffar and Wongratanawin, 2021, p. 18-20). When looking at the micro-level discourse, and thus the language and communication style, the humorous and youthful nature of the movement stands out. The hashtag that started as a response to the single-issue dispute had now become an expression of discontent and desire for change. Even though the discussion turned to include broader issues, the communication style has stayed similar. Memes, images, and short messages remained a key component of the movement (Schaffar and Wongratanawin, 2021, p. 18-22).

On a macro-level, the discourse of the MTA movement encompasses a conversation about authoritarianism, democracy, regional leadership, and imagined futures. While on a micro-level the Tweet about Hong Kong led to people criticizing Bright for his *careless* actions, on a macro-level it was a discussion about the "One China" policy and Hong Kong's struggle for autonomy (Schaffar and Wongratanawin, 2021, p. 13). At the core of the movement is the desire for democratization both domestically and regionally, connecting the members from Thailand, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and later other countries. As the Chinese government is argued to back authoritarian rule in the region to stabilize economic relations, the discourse about democratization is inherently critical of the CPC (Hioe, 2021, p. 33; du Rocher, 2020, p. 41-42). The CPC's growth strategies need to be understood as part of its hegemonic project, as they aim to "reorder geo-economic power balances" and to "push back against America" in the region (Møller Mulvad, 2019, p. 461). Xi, furthermore, promotes the Chinese win-win cooperation model. By doing so, Xi discursively positions the Chinese state at the center of harmonious globalization (Møller Mulvad, 2019, p. 459). The Chinese hegemonic project, hence, includes a discourse about alternative win-win partnerships that are backed up by the stabilizing of autocratic rule in the region. The fostering of authoritarianism has crucial implications for the inhabitants of the subjected states. The MTA macro-level discourse aims to put the public opinion of young adults in the center and to create a space for them to express desired futures, which are democratic and free. Therefore, anti-authoritarianism is a vital part of the discourse. The criticism against the Chinese and domestic governments embodies the structural regional and domestic power imbalances and the public's attempted resistance.

To analyze the discourse as a whole, the gap between the micro-level and macro-level communications needs to be bridged (van Dijk, 2015, p. 468). When the societal and personal structures interact the broader image becomes apparent and can be investigated. Thus, to analyze the discourse of the MTA further, the interaction between micro- and macro-level discourse will be explored. This can be done by filtering the posts under the Twitter hashtag, which are individualistic micro-level statements, to only show Tweets that are related to the structural, and thus macro-level, topics. Based on the macro-level discourse analysis, the tweets will be filtered by entering the search terms "authoritarianism, China, CPC/CCP (Chinese Communist Party), PRC, resistance, and democracy".

4.2 Data Analysis

When filtering the tweets, four trends become apparent. Firstly, users posted symbols of solidarity. Secondly, tweets related to authoritarianism that label China and domestic regimes as problematic were posted. Thirdly, MTA participants promoted seminars and workshops to diffuse counter-ideological knowledge about regional politics and the movement. Fourthly, participants coordinate protests to encourage physical political activism.

To investigate the counter-hegemonic tendencies of the movement, each theme will be discussed and analyzed through a Gramscian lens.

Firstly, the discursive theme of symbols of solidarity will be investigated. The symbols often included drawings of three milk tea cups which were labeled with Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Thailand to illustrate the similarities between the three entities, while simultaneously distancing them from China. Milk tea symbolizes the alliance because it is a popular drink in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Thailand. While each country has its own version of the drink, it embodies commonalities, while also acknowledging differences. Furthermore, tea in China is, in contrast, consumed without milk (The Economist, 2021). These symbols are positive as they depict the cups cheering which reminds of a celebratory toast. Sometimes the images also included other states in the region such as India or Myanmar.
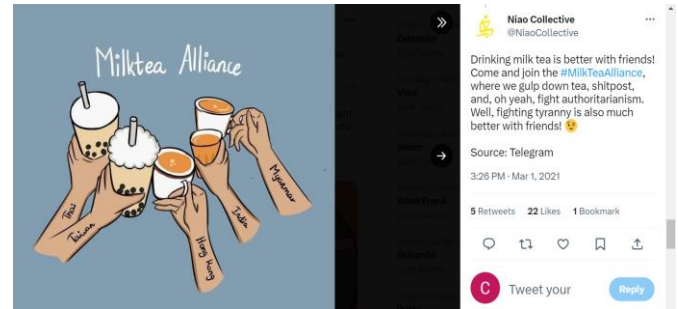
Figure 1. Tweet (Yang, 2020)

Figure 2. Tweet (Niao Collective, 2021)

The captions of the images described the movement and declared the user's stance against authoritarianism. They, furthermore, highlighted the value of solidarity (Yang, 2020), or declared their friendship among the members (Niao Collective, 2021).

Another common symbol of solidarity under the #MilkTeaAlliance is the three-finger salute. The salute originated from the books and movie series *The Hunger Games* where it was used as a symbol of resistance to the government (Sastramidjaja, 2023, p. 17). The salute was used in Thai pro-democracy protests since 2014, as a form of silent resilience, when public political actions were banned (Sastramidjaja, 2023, p. 17). It was then adapted by members of the MTA as a symbol of anti-authoritarianism and solidarity.

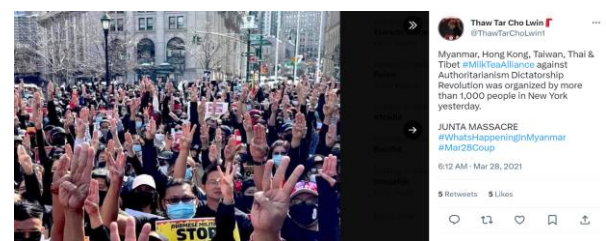**Figure 3.** Tweet (Milk Tea Alliance Burma, 2021b)

Figure 4. Tweet (Lwin, 2021)

Carroll (2010) argues that a transnational counter-hegemony is more likely to form and persevere if solidarity between grassroots actors is shown and transferred into political action (p. 178). As a result of solidarity, the willingness to learn from one another increases which stabilizes the movement (Carroll, 2010, p. 178). The solidarity, which was expressed through symbols, created a feeling of belonging. The recognition that the struggle against authoritarianism was a common experience led to allyship besides the domestic differences. Neufeld (2001) argues, that collective action becomes possible when members identify similarities of oppression while still acknowledging the differences in their experiences (p. 96).

The realities of authoritarianism and the degree of Chinese influence differ greatly between Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Thailand. Yet the members could identify with anti-authoritarianism and show solidarity with each other. The different versions of milk tea reflected those differences, while also symbolizing alliance in a common struggle. The illustration of solidarity among the MTA, hence, shows counter-hegemonic tendencies because solidarity is the basis for the political resistance that can challenge the current hegemonic power (Neufeld, 2001, p. 106).

The second discursive theme under the hashtag is the identification of the problem. As outlined above, the MTA encompassed a discussion about authoritarianism and the Chinese government which movement members claimed to be problematic. Users posted about their experiences and fears relating to authoritarianism, as well as their hopes for a more democratic future.

Figure 5. Tweet (Milk Tea Alliance Burma, 2021a)

Figure 6. Tweet (Ngerng, 2021)

Other users addressed the Chinese government directly as being the root of the problem. Some posted about their general discontent with the Chinese government, while others had specific demands attached to their criticism.

Figure 7. Tweet (Book, 2022)

Figure 8. Tweet (Wong, 2020)

Both the tweets in Figures 7 and 8, discussed the issue more broadly and called for support to resist China's influence. The discourse is targeted toward members of the movement, people affected by authoritarianism, and other potential allies.

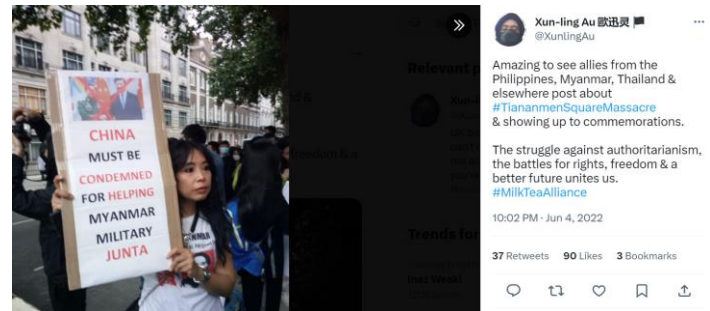**Figure 9.** Tweet (Milk Tea Alliance PH, 2021a)   **Figure 10.** Tweet (Au, 2022)

Figures 9 and 10, on the other hand, show tweets that addressed a specific issue related to China's regional politics. Both tweets condemned China for making assertive foreign policy decisions that influenced the inhabitants of the Philippines and Myanmar. The discourse, thus, is directly targeted toward the Chinese government.

While the target audience and scope of the tweets differ, they all identify authoritarianism and China's influence in the region as problematic. In Gramsci's domestic understanding of a counter-hegemony, the subordinate classes must identify the issue with the system to overcome them by building an alternative historical bloc (Im, 1991, p. 145). The discourse under the hashtag #MilkTeaAlliance shows these counter-hegemonic tendencies. Authoritarianism as part of the Chinese hegemonic project was being condemned. Users argued and criticized that the Chinese government benefited from and supported regional authoritarianism. Furthermore, members envisioned alternatives to the status quo. Full-time activist Ngerng (2021) portrayed democracy as the goal of the movement, while the Milk Tea Alliance PH (2021a) specifically demanded the CPC's retreat from the West Philippine Sea. Users identified freedom and democracy as a common social goal in the region, which furthermore illustrates the movement's counter-hegemonic tendencies (Carroll and Ratner, 2010, p. 12).

The third discursive theme under the hashtag is the diffusion of counter-ideological knowledge. Educative resources such as links to webinars about topics relating to alternative regionalism, and democratization, and the role of China in spreading authoritarianism were shared. Some users posted links to educational YouTube videos to promote their counter-ideology, while others organized webinars and workshops in collaboration with university professors and activists.

Figure 11. Tweet (Noberto, 2022)

Figure 12. Tweet (Chachavalpongpun, 2022)

Figure 13. Tweet (Milk Tea Alliance PH, 2021b)

Figure 14. Tweet (Ucao, 2021)

By inviting Twitter users to participate in educational events, audiences were encouraged to apprehend the movement more deeply, as well as critically assess regional authoritarianism (Milk Tea Alliance PH, 2021b; Ucao, 2021; Chachavalpongpun, 2022) and examine the autocratic mechanisms of the Chinese government (Noberto, 2022; Ucao, 2021). Similar to the "problem-identification" theme discussed above, the "counter-ideology" theme shows that the MTA shared an anti-authoritarian and democracy-oriented vision for the future. This shared vision is a key component of a counter-hegemonic organization (Carroll and

Ratner, 2010, p. 12). Gramsci, furthermore, argues that a counter-hegemonic struggle includes an intellectual and moral reform (Carroll, 2010, p. 176). The diffusion of critical knowledge under the hashtag #MilkTeaAlliance shows that the current intellectual and moral understandings were being challenged. Thus, the advancement of authoritarianism under the Chinese hegemonic project was being questioned, challenged, and countered.

The fourth discursive theme under the hashtag #MilkTeaAlliance is the call for political action. The hashtag was used to distribute information about upcoming protests which encouraged action against authoritarianism broadly, or specifically in one of the movement's states.

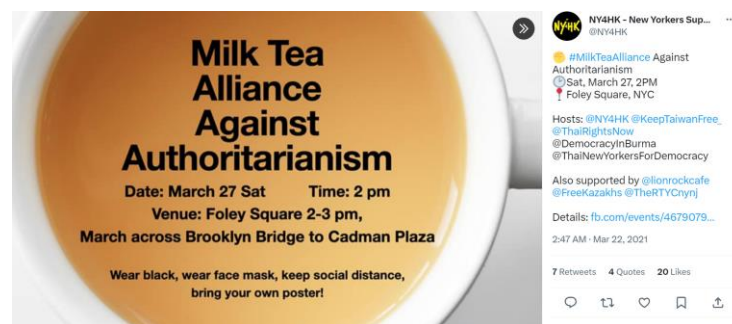

Figure 15. Tweet (Kyaw, 2021)

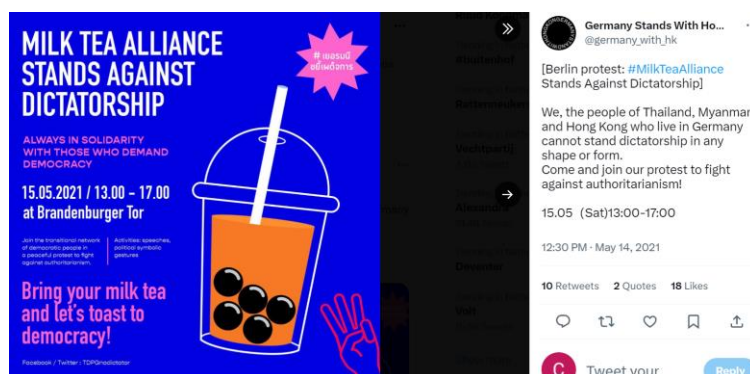**Figure 16.** Tweet (New Yorkers Supporting Hong Kong, 2021)

Figure 17. Tweet (Germany Stands With Hong Kong, 2021)

These tweets promoted protests that were targeted to fight "dictatorship and oppression in Asia" (Kway, 2021) and position the "Milk Tea Alliance against authoritarianism" (New Yorkers Supporting Hong Kong, 2021). Moreover, the theme of solidarity became apparent again. The post by Kyaw (2021) depicts the flags of Hong Kong, Taiwan, Thailand, and Myanmar (also known as Burma), in a cartoon-like manner with their respective version of

milk tea. The protest promoted by New Yorkers for Hong Kong (2021) was held in New York in solidarity with the MTA members who suffer under authoritarianism. Similarly, the protest promoted in Figure 17 by Germany Stands With Hong Kong (2021) was held in Berlin by members of the diaspora and allies. The protest was held "in solidarity with those who demand democracy" and "fight authoritarianism" (Germany Stands With Hong Kong, 2021).

Figure 18. Tweet (Milk Tea Alliance Calendar, 2022b)

Figure 19. Tweet (Robertson, 2022)

Figures 18 and 19 show tweets that used the hashtag to promote protests targeting a specific issue in one of the movement's states. The Milk Tea Alliance Calendar (2022b) asked allies to symbolically show their support by "wearing all black in mourning for Thailand's democracy". Robertson (2022) called for literal political action by promoting a rally in Bangkok against the Non-profit Operations Bill which was proposed in 2021 and aimed to strictly supervise NGOs, and thus, would impact the human and civil rights of Thai citizens (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

Figure 20. Tweet (Milk Tea Alliance Calendar, 2022a)

Figure 21. Tweet (Nick stands with Ukraine, 2021)

The tweets shown in Figures 20 and 21 promoted protests directly targeted against the Chinese government. The first protest was organized by the diaspora and allies in London "to condemn China for supporting the Myanmar military junta" (Milk Tea Alliance Calendar, 2022a). The second protest was held in Perth and addressed several issues related to the Chinese government like Tibet, Xinjiang and Hong Kong (Nick stands with Ukraine, 2 021).

Once again, the scope of the tweets varied. While some broadly condemned authoritarianism, others protested domestic political changes or the influence of the Chinese government. Nonetheless, all tweets aimed to mobilize Twitter users to partake in MTA-related activism. Hopf (2013) argues that demonstrations against the status quo verbalize the mass's discontent with the common sense of the elites (p. 323). In other words, the mobilization of subjects to authoritarianism in East Asia and their global allies shows that the common sense was questioned and rejected. The usage of social media is constantly increasing in the region and surges the citizen's participation in political activism (Huang et al., 2017, p. 550-551). While it is hard to say how representative the MTA discourse is for the general public, Huang et al.'s (2017) study shows that social media usage and online political activism in East Asia are becoming increasingly common (p. 527; p. 550-551). Furthermore, alternative futures were being imagined and demanded. The authors of the tweets talked about revolutions (Kway, 2021), resisting oppression (Milk Tea Alliance Calendar, 2022b), and alternative political systems by "toasting to democracy" (Germany Stands With Hong Kong, 2021). Moreover, the protests were held not only in the member states of the movement but also in Germany, the US, the UK, Australia, and more. This shows that the movement managed to accumulate a widespread network of allies. The role of allies is crucial in the building of a counter-hegemony

(Im, 1991, p. 146). Furthermore, the continuity of protests promoted under the hashtag beyond the initial hype of the movement relates to Gramsci's claim that a counter-hegemony needs to be constantly defended (Im, 1991, p. 142). Protesting the status quo, by revolting against current values and articulating other wishes for a prolonged period of time, thus, shows counter-hegemonic tendencies.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The analyzed discursive themes under the hashtag #MilkTeaAlliance show counter-hegemonic tendencies. The movement has established a widespread allyship, showed solidarity with other members besides national differences, condemned the status quo, and commonly envisioned an alternative future. As outlined by Gramsci, a counter-hegemonic war of position must deconstruct the current hegemony and construct an alternative system (Im, 1991, p. 143). The "problem-identification" theme shows that the participants condemned the status quo. Furthermore, they criticized authoritarianism and the CPC's interest in conserving it. The discourse under the "call for political action" theme shows that the members of the movement and their allies questioned the hegemonic ideology and defended their counter-ideology with physical political action. To construct the counter-hegemony new transnational identities were created based on common struggles and desires that went beyond traditional borders, as shown in the "symbols of solidarity" theme. Furthermore, the "counter-ideology" theme shows that the counter-hegemony was constructed by diffusing knowledge about the movement and the structures behind it, which contributed to moral and intellectual reform.

While China has not reached regional hegemon status yet, the Chinese government is making economic and foreign policy decisions that benefit it's hegemonic project, such as the regional stabilization of autocratic rule (Møller Mulvad, 2019, p. 46; du Rocher, 2020, p. 41-42). These decisions have severe effects on the political climate of the states in East Asia. The critical discourse analysis of the hashtag #MilkTeaAlliance has shown that civilians oppose authoritarianism, and thus, the Chinese hegemonic project. As Flemes (2007) argued, to become a regional hegemon the state's neighbors need to accept its ideological dominance (p. 18). The discursive themes show counter-hegemonic tendencies, meaning that the idea of Chinese regional hegemony is not accepted as common sense. The members of the movement fought to resist the hegemonic advance by protesting and denouncing the current system, and by educating on alternative possibilities for the future. The struggles against authoritarianism and the desire for democratization made the members unite and stand in solidarity against authoritarianism. Thus, I find that the MTA as a transnational grassroots movement, which

includes members from Taiwan, Thailand, and Hong Kong, as well as other allies, hinders the advance of Chinese regional hegemony to a great extent by showing counter-hegemonic tendencies. Furthermore, I find that beyond the emphasis on US-China power comparisons in the previous scholarship, there are other mechanisms, such as regional common sense that moreover constrain China's rise to regional hegemony.

Some limitations of the research need to be addressed. Firstly, due to personal language barriers, only tweets in English were analyzed. Secondly, the scope of this research did not allow me to compare the MTA discourse to the domestic counter-hegemonies in depth. While it is apparent that each state has its own counter-hegemonic struggle, as outlined in the literature review, the similarities and connections between them and the MTA movement could not be compared. Lastly, this research is based on data from Twitter. While the internet is increasingly used to express public opinion and to politically mobilize, it is unclear how representative the movement is for the general public (Huang et al., 2017, p. 550-551). Nonetheless, the research showed that the members of the MTA did show counter-hegemonic tendencies, and thus the results fall within the scope of this research. However, I recommend future researchers widen the scope of analysis. Looking at non-digital expressions of public opinion could help to analyze the common sense further. Furthermore, I recommend future researchers widen the language scope of the data. This way a more nuanced analysis can be conducted. A comparative analysis between each domestic movement and the MTA could also show interesting differences between the domestic and transnational struggle. Moreover, it would be interesting to repeat the research with a different case study to see whether other transnational grassroots movements in the region also show counter-hegemonic tendencies against China.

This research is of academic relevance as it looks at the widely discussed topic of China's potential regional hegemony from a new perspective. The literature usually depicts the main constraint for the Chinese hegemonic project to be the current US hegemony. While this is a meaningful perspective, it is also important to look at other mechanisms as well. This research highlights the public opinion of those subjected to the regional hegemon and the power of transnational grassroots movements to hinder it. Thus, this research employed a Gramscian approach and connected the case study to the theoretical concepts of counter-hegemony and common sense. By analyzing the discourse of the MTA movement, I contributed to the field by showing that China's rise is constrained by the resistance of the regional civil society. The research is of societal relevance as it highlights the power of transnational grassroots movement and their potential to influence politics. These findings could lead to an incline in alternative political participation and resistance movements.

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