

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# From Bad Student to Transnational Activist: Netiwit Chotiphatphaisal and Transnational Activism in Northeast and Southeast Asia

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## Abstract

This study explores and understands transnational activism in Asia, specifically focusing on the crucial role played by individuals, particularly Thai youth activist Netiwit Chotiphatphaisal, in shaping and constructing transnational networks and relations. The study argues that the networks individuals establish with other transnational actors serve as the primary source of inspiration for other individuals to engage in transnational activism. These networks are rooted in everyday life interactions in the era of globalisation, with activism reflecting this embeddedness and interconnectedness. The case study of Netiwit demonstrates how connections between Thai activists and activists in Hong Kong and Taiwan stem from the increased mobility of individuals in the globalised world, facilitating physical interactions. By analysing this dynamic, the study aims to offer a more nuanced explanation of transnational activism, the movement of knowledge, and the concept of globalisation in Asia.

**Keywords:** Transnationalism; Asian studies; Youth; Activism; Networks

## Introduction

Since 2019, a series of youth-led pro-democracy movements have occurred across Northeast and Southeast Asia. They began with the mass demonstrations against the anti-extradition law amendment bill in Hong Kong, followed by a series of youth-led protests against the General Prayuth Chan-o-cha regime in Thailand and the protest against the 2021 military coup in Myanmar. Despite their diverse origins and organising bodies, these youth-led protests have served as a mutual source of inspiration, featuring several similar protest symbols and strategies (Janjira Sombatpoonsiri 2021; Ladia 2022). Moreover, the youth who engaged with these movements identified themselves as part of the Milk Tea Alliance, a loose transnational coalition, by supporting and advocating for each other's movements, as well as fighting against the expansion of authoritarianism in the region (Dedman and Lai 2021; Huang and Chavalin Svetanant 2022).

The unexpected solidarity among youth-led movements across Asia challenged the prevailing assumptions. Conventional wisdom prior to 2019 held that Asian countries and regions differed significantly in terms of political regimes, culture, religion, and developmental levels. Moreover, the regional values were not seen as conducive to transnational activism aimed at promoting democracy (Kumar 2000). This raises the question of how this solidarity arose. This study specifically explores and understands transnational activism in Asia, particularly the pivotal role played by individuals in shaping and constructing transnational networks and relations. This research is guided by two primary research questions: “How is the transnational youth network in Asia constructed?” and “What role do individuals play in its development?” Netiwit Chotiphatphaisal, a Thai youth activist, was selected as the primary focal point due to his significant contribution to building transnational networks that connected Thai activists with their

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counterparts in Hong Kong and Taiwan. His case highlights the role of an ordinary individual, not in the international spotlight, in building transnational networks.<sup>1</sup> This network subsequently played a key role in numerous political campaigns in Thailand and abroad, both before and after the outbreak of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). In addition, it significantly contributed to fostering transnational solidarity campaigns in Hong Kong and Taiwan during the mass demonstrations in Thailand between 2020 and 2021.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that Netiwit was not the only actor working on transnational issues in Asia; various other individuals, groups, and non-governmental organisations were actively working on these issues. The study argues that investigating the transnational network of an individual could serve as a valuable starting point to build upon and advance existing understanding of transnational activism and the global diffusion of social movements. Additionally, it could also contribute to furthering our knowledge on ‘globalisation from below’ (Mathews *et al.* 2012) and the question of “society-to-society movements of ideas and actions” in the Asian context (Sato and Sonoda 2021: 213).

In terms of methodology, this study employed a blend of qualitative research methods for data collection. Firstly, a semi-structured interview was conducted with Netiwit Chotiphatphaisal and 10 youth activists from Thailand, Hong Kong, and Taiwan who had either worked with or were in contact with him. All interviewees, except Netiwit, were selected using a snowball sampling method. Secondly, the study gathered data from primary sources, specifically Netiwit’s memoirs. In recent years, Netiwit has published two books in the Thai language that document his personal experiences: “*Nakrian Leo Nai Rabop Kansueksa Saen Di* (A Bad Student in an Excellent Educational System)” in 2020 and “*Kansueksa Khong Nisit Leo: 5 Pi Nai Rua Chula* (The Education of a Bad Student: A memoir)” in 2022. These memoirs offer insights into his life experiences and thought processes. Lastly, the study also utilised secondary data in Thai, English, and Mandarin Chinese to strengthen the analysis.

The study argues that it is necessary to conceptualise and further delve into the role of individuals in transnational activism. Individual networks with other transnational actors stem from the interaction of everyday life in the age of globalisation, with transnational activism serving as a manifestation of this cross-boundary embeddedness and interconnectedness. Consequently, the overemphasis on the role of communication technologies has led to the oversight that human relationships still require face-to-face interaction. This interaction is vital for keeping a relationship active, sustaining engagement, and maintaining overall strength. Furthermore, face-to-face interactions with foreign actors have the potential to reshape existing social networks by forging new connections or bridging old and new networks, thereby facilitating participation in transnational political campaigns. The case of Netiwit Chotiphatphaisal illustrated that the connection between Thai activists and activists in Hong Kong and Taiwan developed through physical interactions rather than online interactions, with no initial intention to focus on international political agendas. Consequently, the individual network represents a potential first step in establishing new networks and connecting activists from diverse locations. Additionally, this social bond has the potential to influence individual perspectives on both domestic and international socio-political issues, laying the groundwork for prospective transnational collective actions.

This study is divided into six sections, including the introduction. The subsequent section reviews the existing literature and conceptualises individual networks in the context of transnational relations, emphasising the importance of understanding networks and ties to elucidate transnational activism. The third section briefly describes Netiwit, tracing his activism from high school through university. The fourth and fifth sections discuss how Netiwit interacted and constructed a personal network with activists in Hong Kong and Taiwan, respectively. Finally, the study discusses the role of individuals in transnational activism and suggests avenues for future research. This will also illustrate how tracking the networks of individual transnational actors can contribute to a broader understanding of the causes and dynamics of transnational youth activism in Asia, specifically the Milk Tea Alliance, in the last few years.

### Individual Network in Transnational Activism

Recent research and writings on the role of individuals in transnational activism have been dominated by two overarching narratives that have significantly influenced academic perspectives and reader discourse.

<sup>1</sup>Although Netiwit is a famous activist in Thailand, he was not yet well-known at the regional and global level during that period.

The first strand of literature focuses on transnational actors possessing transnational social capital, which is defined as “certain resources accessed or utilised by individuals via durable interpersonal social ties or group memberships” (Lee 2010: 781) that help individuals “connect members of different countries” (Moon and Shin 2019: 560). This corpus of literature primarily focuses on individuals at the helm of international institutions or governments, such as Raúl Estrada-Oyuela (Depledge 2022), Maurice Strong, and Mostafa Toba (VanDeveer and Steinberg 2014), as potentially important transnational actors. Immigrants are also often closely studied as transnational actors owing to their complex connections with individuals from diverse geographical locations (Cachia and Jariego 2018; Lubbers *et al.* 2010; Vacca *et al.* 2018). Consequently, this literature extensively covers various immigrant groups, including political exiles (Pidduck 2012), international students (Moon and Shin 2019), and labourers (Arnold 2013).

The second strand of literature, as highlighted by Downie (2014), places a significant emphasis on the impact of digital communication technologies in empowering and facilitating individuals to engage in transnational activism. This perspective suggests that, while transnational social capital may not serve as the primary impetus, the emergence of advanced digital communication technologies has enabled and catalysed such activism. Moreover, scholars in this realm have underscored the pivotal role of social media in fostering the creation of a ‘network society’ (Castells 2015) and enabling ‘connective action’ (Bennett and Segerberg 2013). This results in a new form of movement that is leaderless and could be called ‘organising without organisations’ (Shirky 2008). Consequently, this framework is frequently employed to elucidate transnational uprisings witnessed worldwide, such as the anti-American War protests (Walgrave and Rucht 2010), the Arab Spring (Holmes 2012), and the Milk Tea Alliance (Schaffar and Praphakorn Wongratanawin 2021).

While these studies have significantly contributed to our understanding of individuals as transnational actors, they exhibit several limitations. For instance, the literature on actors with transnational social capital tends to overlook that the movement of people in the age of globalisation is no longer restricted to particular groups; ordinary individuals can now interact and forge ties with others in foreign locations (Mathews *et al.* 2012). Additionally, tourism, the shortest form of immigration involving a diverse range of people, has significantly opened up a space for physical interaction (Urry 2003), giving rise to new forms of protest and resistance (Rowen 2016).

At the same time, the overemphasis on the role of communication technologies has resulted in an oversight of the fundamental reality that human relationships require face-to-face interaction to establish ‘co-presence’ (Larsen *et al.* 2006) and ‘meetingness’ (Urry 2003). This face-to-face interaction is crucial to ensuring a relationship remains active, sustains engagement, and maintains overall strength. Furthermore, while digital media undeniably facilitates easier connectivity than ever before, physical communication remains essential to establishing mutual trust and friendship. This holds particularly true when engaging in high-risk activities that heavily rely on trust, such as political and resistance campaigns (Haug 2013; Van Dyke and McCammon 2010), as evidenced in the case of the transnational interaction between young Taiwanese and Hongkonger activists (Ho 2019: 91–93). Therefore, greater emphasis should be placed on the roles of leadership and brokerage in order to gain a deeper understanding of transnational activism.

As outlined in the concise literature review above, individual decisions to participate in transnational activism are still poorly understood, requiring further empirical and theoretical investigations to develop comprehensive theories that extend beyond the predominant emphasis on transnational social capital and digital communication technologies. This necessity stems from the recognition that individuals always play an important role in activism, with numerous factors influencing an individual’s decision to participate in or engage in a political campaign. The complexity intensifies, especially when the engagement is on a transnational scale. This study identifies ‘networks’ as a pivotal element influencing individuals to initiate and participate in activism.

Networks constitute an integral part of individuals’ everyday lives. In social movement studies, they serve as an important indicator for predicting an individual’s participation in political campaigns and events (Tindall 2015: 231). For instance, Oegema and Klandermans (1994) found that friendship networks are crucial as individuals strive to maintain relationships and uphold promises to friends. Therefore, a network is the outcome of patterns of interaction (Diani and Mische 2015: 309), consisting of various ties—both strong and weak—that an individual has (Van Dyke and McCammon 2010: xv–vi).

These ties may stem from face-to-face or online interactions (Poell and van Dijck 2015: 533). However, the present study argues that networks formed through face-to-face interactions are likely stronger and wield greater influence when an individual decides to participate in political-related activities (Haug 2013; Ho, 2019; Van Dyke and McCammon 2010).

In Appadurai's five scapes of globalisation (1996), 'ethnoscapes' represent the global movement and flow of people. The advancement in transportation and communication technologies has significantly enhanced the speed and intensity of movement of individuals, exceeding all prior levels, especially in the context of 'grassroots globalisation' (Appadurai 2000) or 'globalisation from below' (Mathews *et al.* 2012). A host of factors, such as business, education, tourism, and transnational marriage, have further contributed to the increased frequency and intensity of people's movement across the globe. Consequently, this heightened mobility has provided individuals with unparalleled opportunities to interact and form connections, highlighting the potential for individuals to establish transnational connectivity, ties, and networks. Moreover, this flow has created a transnational space for physical interaction and face-to-face communication, which is essential for building sustainable and strong networks to engage in political activism.

By conceptualising transnational activism through a network frame, the study identifies networks and ties as primary contributors that lead individuals to engage in and participate in political activism. These networks are typically built and sustained through close, face-to-face interactions. In today's globalised world, where cross-border movement has become commonplace, this mobility significantly aids individuals in building transnational networks with people from foreign countries. While transnational social capital and digital communication technologies could play an influential role in certain scenarios, it is essential to place a lesser emphasis on these two variables and focus on physical interaction to understand transnational activism, particularly in the context of political activism conducted in high-risk political environments. Additionally, tracking the flow of movement and analysing the construction and development of these networks can help overcome the undervaluation of face-to-face interaction and trust built through them in contemporary social movement studies.

Recent years have witnessed a series of youth-led protests in Northeast and Southeast Asia, resulting in the exchange of knowledge among these movements and the emergence of a loosely connected transnational youth solidarity network, namely, the Milk Tea Alliance. While many studies attribute these phenomena primarily to the influence of social media (Huang and Chavalin Svetanant 2022; Ladia 2022; Schaffar and Praphakorn Wongratanawin 2021), available evidence suggests that youth activists in this particular geographical region have been in contact with each other for an extended period, hinting at a human dimension to the alliance. For instance, connections between youth activists from Hong Kong and Taiwan have been documented (Ho 2019), as well as the existence of the Network of Young Democratic Asians (NOYDA).<sup>2</sup> This warrants a closer examination of the formation and dynamics of this transnational youth network. Therefore, this study focuses on the pivotal case of Netiwit Chotiphatphaisal and his role in connecting Thai activists with their counterparts in Hong Kong and Taiwan.

### Who is Netiwit Chotiphatphaisal?

Netiwit Chotiphatphaisal (เนติวิทย์ โชติภัทร์ไพศาล 秦聯豐), also known by his nickname 'Frank,' was born in Samut Prakan province, part of the Bangkok Metropolitan Region, on 10 September 1996. He began his activism campaign as a high school student. He rose to national fame on 10 January 2013, when he appeared on the famous television show '*Cho Khao Den Sorayuth* (Piercing the Headline with Sorayuth)' to debate the Thai education system, focusing on hairstyle rules.<sup>3</sup> His campaign was centred

<sup>2</sup>The Network of Young Democratic Asians (NOYDA) was established in April 2016. It is an alliance of dedicated young individuals and activists in Asia working to achieve a peaceful, equal, and sustainable society through a democratic process and people-oriented development. NOYDA confronts common challenges, defends human rights, and stands in solidarity with civil society and the oppressed across the region. NOYDA had 14 official members, with two representatives from its seven member countries or territories: Hong Kong, Thailand, Taiwan, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, and Vietnam. Additionally, there are observer members, such as Myanmar (Solomon 2016).

<sup>3</sup>Thailand amended the Ministerial Regulations on student hairstyles in 1975, officially ending the requirement for male students to maintain military-style crew cuts and females to keep bobs no longer than their earlobes. However, in practice, many schools still enforce the old regulation, leading to instances of power harassment by teachers.

around reforming Thai education and revoking obsolete school rules, such as student uniforms, hair-styles, and morning flag salutes.<sup>4</sup> Due to a progressive campaign that challenged conventional beliefs in school and society, Netiwit found himself marginalised by his teachers and labelled as a ‘*Nakrian Leo* (bad student)’ (Netiwit Chotiphatphaisal 2020). He also campaigned to repeal the decree that required mandatory military service for every Thai male.<sup>5</sup> In parallel with his activism, he co-founded the Thailand Educational Revolution Alliance (TERA) in 2012 and Education for Liberation of Siam (ELS) in 2013, both dedicated to promoting education reform in Thailand. He was also outspoken in his criticism of the military coup in May 2014 and joined several anti-coup campaigns to promote democracy and demand an election.

Netiwit’s commitment to political activism continued as he entered Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok. Before the start of his first semester, Netiwit and his friend sparked controversy by refusing to prostrate before the statues of King Rama V the Great and King Rama VI at an annual oath-swearing event at the university (Asaree Thaitrakulpanich and Staff Reporter 2016). He also publicly criticised a Thai initiation ritual based on hazing at the university, commonly referred to as ‘*rub nong*’ (University hazing).<sup>6</sup> At the end of his freshman year, he was elected president of the Chulalongkorn University Student Council, the first sophomore to hold the position. Regrettably, he and seven other student council members were subjected to disciplinary measures and removed from their positions after they walked out of a swearing-in ceremony that required them to prostrate before a king’s statue at the beginning of the following semester (*Bangkok Post* 2017). Later, Netiwit was elected president of the Political Science Student Union of Chulalongkorn University for the 2020–2021 term and president of the Student Union of Chulalongkorn University for the 2021–2022 term. It was during his university years that he began interacting with foreign activists and expanded his campaigns beyond Thai political issues and educational concerns.

### A Bad Student and Joshua Wong

The informal network connecting Netiwit Chotiphatphaisal with Hongkonger activists was established in 2016 after he visited Joshua Wong in Hong Kong. During his freshman year, Netiwit and his friend planned to commemorate the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Thammasat University massacre that took place on 6 October 1976 at Chulalongkorn University. The event, themed “6 Tula: Chao Chula Mong Anakhot (6 October: Let Chula Look to the Future),” was the first large-scale commemoration of the massacre at Chulalongkorn University. Netiwit noted in his memoirs the potential influence of activism in Hong Kong on the event’s theme after the organising team bore witness to China’s intervention in Hong Kong’s legislative and juridical systems and how the young Hongkongers, led by Joshua Wong, Nathan Law, Agnes Chow, and others, fought for democracy and freedom in Hong Kong (Netiwit Chotiphatphaisal 2022: 59). At that time, they perceived a sense of hope in Hong Kong’s politics, and the society there was highly optimistic about the future, especially with the recent establishment of the Demosisto political party by leaders of the Umbrella movement.<sup>7</sup> Driven by this optimism, they sought to share this feeling with Thai society by organising an event that would instil optimism about the future and give hope to a society that had endured years of junta rule (Interview with Netiwit Chotiphatphaisal 2023a). The theme of the event organised by Netiwit and his friends differed from that of the event at

<sup>4</sup>Thai students are required to sing the national anthem and pay respect to the Thai flag every day at 8 a.m. before school starts.

<sup>5</sup>According to the Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand, all Thai males over 21 years of age are to be conscripted for military service, except those who have undergone reserve training before. However, reports on physical and mental violence during military service have led to disorder and fatalities, thus sparking societal controversy.

<sup>6</sup>‘*Rub nong*’ is a Thai university initiation activity to welcome a freshman student, typically lasting for the first month or semester of university life. It aims to help students adapt quickly to the university environment and academics and make friends. However, every year, there are reports of violence during this activity, such as sexual harassment, suicide, and fatalities. These incidents have significantly raised concerns in Thai society in recent years.

<sup>7</sup>Demosisto was the political party established by the Umbrella Movement activists led by Joshua Wong, Agnes Chow, and Nathan Law. The party was active from 10 April 2016 until it disbanded on 30 June 2020, after the Hong Kong National Security Law was enacted.



Thammasat University, which aimed to delve into the past, prompting society to remember one of the most forgotten massacres in modern Thai history. The inspiration drawn from the Hong Kong protests reflects how the flow of information facilitates the diffusion of knowledge and ideas during the campaign. However, as exemplified by Netiwit's case, this inspiration was not enough to motivate individuals to engage in political campaigns to support each other. While the events inspired him in Hong Kong, he lacked any comprehensive plans to launch a campaign to support them.

The commemoration event was organised concurrently with the annual event at Thammasat University, which was more well-known. Therefore, in an attempt to create an alternative to attract a larger audience, Netiwit and his friends decided to invite foreign scholars and activists. Netiwit proposed inviting Joshua Wong, a famous Hongkonger youth activist and one of the leaders of the Umbrella movement in 2014, as a keynote speaker (Anonymous interview 2023g). Despite disagreement from his friends, Netiwit contacted Wong via email. He believed that Wong's speech could inspire Thai people to speak out against the military dictatorship and instil hope for the future of their country, aligning with the event's theme of remembrance. He believed that Thais could also learn from Hong Kong's experience as both places faced similar political tragedies (Anonymous interview 2023h). Additionally, Netiwit wanted to learn more about the Demosisto party, which he saw as a successful model of youth-led political parties. As he said, "I started getting interested in Joshua Wong around 2016 as his movement began to be successful and he also formed the Demosisto party, which was going to join the upcoming election" (Interview with Netiwit Chotiphatphaisal 2023a).

Regrettably, Wong did not respond to his email, prompting Netiwit to take the risk of flying to Hong Kong to personally extend the invitation to Wong. Finding Wong during that period was not difficult, as it was campaign season for the 2016 Hong Kong Legislative Election, with Nathan Law running as a Demosisto candidate. Wong had actively joined in Law's campaign, making it easy for Netiwit to find him by participating in the Demosisto campaign. On 24 July 2016, Netiwit met and spoke with Wong and Law for the first time, taking a photo together before arranging a meeting to discuss Netiwit's commemoration plan in more detail (Figure 1). Wong acknowledged having seen Netiwit's invitation email but had not replied, explaining that he did not know Netiwit then. Thus, face-to-face interaction played a crucial role in helping Wong recognise Netiwit and build trust between them.

The following day, Netiwit visited the Demosisto party's office, providing Wong with details about his event and the political situation in Thailand. During this meeting, Wong and Law also learned about the upcoming constitutional referendum,<sup>8</sup> leading them to participate in a "no" vote campaign, capturing the moment in a photograph and posting it on Facebook (Figure 2). Learning about the situation in Thailand, Wong promptly accepted Netiwit's invitation to join the 6 October event. However, Law expressed reluctance, as Wong had just been refused entry to Malaysia a year earlier (BBC 2015). Additionally, Law harboured concerns stemming from the abduction of Gui Minhai, a staff member of Causeway Bay Books,<sup>9</sup> in Thailand a few months earlier before controversially reappearing in China (Kellogg 2018). Law was afraid that Wong might face a similar fate. Nevertheless, the interaction between Netiwit and Wong highlighted the importance of 'co-presence' (Larsen *et al.* 2006) and 'meetingness' (Urry 2003) in high-risk activities such as politically-oriented activism. The physical interaction with Wong in Hong Kong proved instrumental, as reliance on digital media might have made building trust and inviting Wong to Thailand challenging.

Disappointingly, Wong never made it to the event in person. Wong was scheduled to arrive in Thailand on the late night of 4 October 2016, and Netiwit and his friends were waiting at the airport

<sup>8</sup>On 7 August 2016, Thailand was set to hold a referendum on a military-drafted constitution. This constitutional draft was perceived as establishing only a partial democracy, potentially paving the way for the junta to maintain power after elections. However, the opposition group was not allowed to organise any formal campaign against this constitutional draft before the referendum.

<sup>9</sup>Causeway Bay Books, located in Causeway Bay, Hong Kong, became famous for selling books critical of the Chinese government and the Chinese Communist Party. Five staff members of Causeway Bay Books, namely Lui Bo, Gui Minhai, Lam Wing-Kee, Cheung Jiping, and Lee Bo, disappeared between October and December 2015. This case stirred controversy, especially since Lui Bo and Gui Minhai were residing outside Mainland China at the time, in Hong Kong and Thailand, respectively. They were also non-Chinese citizens, with Lui Bo being British and Gui Minhai Swedish. Later, they mysteriously reappeared in China and on Chinese national television channels to confess their crimes.



**Figure 1.** Netiwit Chotiphatphaisal posted after he met Joshua Wong and Nathan Law for the first time during the Demosisto electoral campaign on 24 July 2016 (Chotiphatphaisal 2016a).

to pick him up. Three hours after Wong's flight had landed, there was no sign of him, and it was soon discovered that Thai authorities had detained Wong. Netiwit spent the whole night at the airport negotiating with the Thai authorities, while Hongkonger activists rallied in front of the Royal Thai Consulate-General in Hong Kong to exert pressure on the Thai junta. This incident also caught international attention, as Wong and Netiwit were key nodes in their communication networks, leading to numerous online campaigns (Penchan Phoborisut 2019: 3280). Eventually, Wong was deported back to Hong Kong 12 hours after landing in Thailand. According to the Thai junta, Wong was arrested on account of his active involvement in resistance movements against other foreign governments,



**Figure 2.** Netiwit Chotiphatphaisal met Joshua Wong and Nathan Law at the Demosisto party office on 25 July 2016. In this photo, Wong and Law help Chotiphatphaisal promote the “vote no” campaign during the 2016 Thai constitutional referendum (Chotiphatphaisal 2016b).

which could potentially jeopardise Thailand’s relations with other nations. However, many activists across Asia, including Netiwit, believed Wong was detained at “China’s request” (Cheung *et al.* 2016). Upon his return to Hong Kong, Wong took to Facebook to thank his four Thai friends, including Netiwit and NOYDA, for negotiating with the local Thai officers. He also posted a photo of Netiwit and his friend waiting to pick him up at the airport (Figure 3). While unable to physically attend, he virtually joined the event through Skype, under the close surveillance of the Thai state, which observed the commemoration and prohibited participants from bringing umbrellas—a reference to the Umbrella movement (Anonymous interview 2023h). Despite Wong’s failure to enter Thailand, the bond between Wong and Netiwit had already been established through their shared experience of a difficult circumstance.

The Wong incident significantly shaped Netiwit and his friends’ cognitive understanding of domestic and international affairs. Netiwit stated that, prior to meeting Wong, he had limited knowledge of the political situation in Hong Kong and the Chinese repression and did not recognise the influence of international affairs on Thai domestic politics. However, the Wong incident exposed him to Beijing’s repression and deepened his understanding of the challenges faced by Hong Kong. He recounted his experience at the airport, stating, “When I was waiting for Joshua at the airport, there were a group of Chinese people following me everywhere” (Interview with Netiwit Chotiphatphaisal 2023a), who he suspected were Chinese government spies. Netiwit also recognised the links between the authoritarian regime in Thailand and China, emphasising the importance of transnational campaigns to pursue democratisation in Thailand.





Figure 3. Joshua Wong posted to thank Netiwit Chotiphatphaisal and the Network of Young Democratic Asians for negotiating with the Thai authority (Wong 2016).



**Figure 4.** Netiwit joined the Demosisto Party campaign in Hong Kong to support Nathan Law, who was facing disqualification as a legislator by the court (Photo from Netiwit Chotiphatphaisal).

Netiwit's firsthand experience of transnational repression and authoritarian collaboration prompted him to undertake more international campaigns, visiting Wong at least once a year. He used these opportunities to reconnect with friends, develop stronger connections, and share experiences with Hongkonger activists until the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020. Additionally, he initiated an annual commemoration of the 1976 Tiananmen Square incident on 4 June in front of the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Bangkok. Netiwit also established the Sam Yan Press and translated and published a collection of short articles into a book titled "*Wela Yu Khang Rao: Nangsue Wan Koet Joshua Wong (TIME IS ON OUR SIDE: A book for Joshua Wong's 21st birthday)*" (Liu et al., 2017) with Pawat Akarapipattana to celebrate Wong's birthday and to boost Wong's morale while he was imprisoned. The proceeds from the book were initially planned to be donated to the Demosisto party but were ultimately used to establish '*Manutsayachat Rai Phrom Daen (Humanity Beyond Borders)*' to support Uyghurs and other political refugees in Thailand. Moreover, Wong was appointed as an honorary advisor to this organisation (Interview with Netiwit Chotiphatphaisal 2023b).

Furthermore, in 2017, Netiwit travelled to Hong Kong to meet Wong and participated in a campaign to support Nathan Law, who was facing disqualification as a legislator by the court. This showcased the solidarity between young activists hailing from two different geographical locations. (Figure 4). Subsequently, when Wong was jailed later that year, Netiwit, representing the Student Council of Chulalongkorn University, issued a statement condemning the Chinese government's intervention in Hong Kong's judicial system and expressing solidarity with Wong and other activists from Hong Kong. This marked the first instance where a student council in Thailand publicly took a stance on international political issues, setting a new precedent for other youth-led organisations in the country to follow (Anonymous interview 2023e). The frequent interaction between Netiwit and Wong after the 2016 incident led many Thai activists to perceive that Netiwit has a strong connection with Wong and has access to Hongkonger activists. As one Thai activist noted, "I don't know much about the connection between Thailand, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. But if you want to learn more about it, you have to ask Netiwit" (Anonymous interview 2023d).

The events at the airport on the day Wong arrived in Thailand mobilised many Thai students to engage in domestic activism. They observed close ties between the authoritarian governments of Thailand and China and how this connection contributed to the democratic regression in Thailand. Thai students waiting for Wong at the airport also noticed the presence of military officers around them, which served as a realisation that authoritarian repression was imminent with potential

consequences for their lives (Anonymous interview 2023g, 2023h). This highlighted the importance of networks forged through physical co-presence when activists confronted authoritarian threats. In a subsequent development, many students involved in organising and participating in this commemoration joined the Free Youth Group, a prominent youth-led political force, during the mass demonstrations in Thailand between 2020 and 2021. These students drew inspiration from the Hong Kong protests in 2014 and 2019, adopting several of their protest tactics.

The Wong incident not only strengthened the bond between Wong and Netiwit but also cemented their friendship. Wong came to recognise Netiwit as one of his good friends and a valuable international ally (Anonymous interview 2023a). When Netiwit and his friend later visited Wong a few months after the commemoration event, Wong was enthusiastic about personally receiving them at the airport. However, due to unforeseen circumstances, Wong found himself caught up in urgent matters that prevented him from realising this plan. Determined to ensure his friend's comfort, Wong arranged for one of his friends to pick up his Thai friend instead, thus ensuring a smooth arrival. During this visit, Wong also invited Netiwit to give an interview to Hong Kong's media to share his perspectives on Thai politics. Through this media engagement, Netiwit not only contributed to the exchange of ideas but also strengthened the bond between Hong Kong and Thailand.

The Wong incident also transformed the cognitive understanding of Hongkonger youth activists regarding Thailand and transnational activism. Firstly, it educated Hongkonger activists about the 6 October massacre and offered a better understanding of the political landscape in Thailand. They also came to realise that a place once seen as a paradise travel destination was, in reality, a country enduring authoritarian repression. Moreover, the activists recognised the interconnectedness among the authoritarian regimes in the region and the imperative to collaborate with overseas activists in their collective struggle. This perspective resonated with a young activist in Taiwan who had been a strong ally of Hong Kong since 2012.

The connection between the Thais and Hongkongers has persisted and played an important role during the COVID-19 and post-pandemic era. The meme war between Thai and pro-Chinese Communist Party Internet commentators, triggered by controversial tweets from Thai celebrities about the status of Hong Kong and Taiwan, extended to Hong Kong after Netiwit informed Wong about it (Interview with Netiwit Chotiphathaisal 2023a; Anonymous interview 2023e).<sup>10</sup> This collaboration eventually culminated in the Milk Tea Alliance, a loose alliance of Thais, Hongkongers, Taiwanese, and Burmese youth activists. Furthermore, members of the Free Youth, who had met Wong, were inspired by several protest tactics and strategies used during the Hong Kong protests in 2014 (the Umbrella movement) and 2019 (the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill movement). These inspirations led to the diffusion of protest strategies during a series of youth-led protests in Thailand between 2020 and 2021 (Anonymous interview 2023g). Lastly, in 2022, the Sam Yan press ran an advertisement on *Tuk Tuk*, a popular Thai three-wheeled motorcycle rickshaw, to mark Wong's birthday while he was under arrest.

In sum, the Wong incident not only underscored the efficacy of networked communication, as discussed by Penchan Phoborisut (2019), but it also significantly instigated cognitive shifts and relational changes among youth activists in Asia. Wong's case highlighted the collaboration between the Thai and Chinese governments, making the youth aware of the interconnectedness of authoritarian regimes in the region. The pursuit of democracy necessitates efforts not only against domestic autocracy but also autocracy elsewhere. This relational change resulted in a cognitive shift among Asian youth activists, motivating them to engage in more global campaigns and learn from each other. As a result, it was

<sup>10</sup>The online conflict between Thai internet users and pro-Chinese Communist Party (CCP) internet commentators started on 4 April 2020, when Vachirawat Chivaaree, known as Bright, a popular Thai celebrity known for his Boylove (BL) series named 'Phro Rao Khu Kan (2gether)' that had gained popularity in China, liked a tweet calling Hong Kong a "country." Many pro-CCP Internet commentators interpreted it as a show of support for Hong Kong's independence, thus leading to demands for an apology. Despite Bright issuing an apology statement on 9 April, it only sparked a new wave of online conflict. Pro-CCP netizens discovered social media posts by Bright's girlfriend, Weeraya Sukaram, known online as Nnevy, where they believed she had insulted China, particularly a Chinese girl, and supported Taiwan's independence. She was accused based on her Instagram comment during her trip to Taiwan, where she replied, "What?" when Bright commented that she looked beautiful like a Chinese and mentioned that she identified more with the fashion style of a Taiwanese girl than a Chinese girl.

intriguing to see how an attempt by a group of university students to organise a university-level event could change the dynamics of domestic youth activism and result in transnational activism.

### A Bad Student and Taiwanese Youth Activists

While Hong Kong had close ties with the Taiwanese activists,<sup>11</sup> it was not Wong who introduced Netiwit to the Taiwanese activists. Netiwit's first exposure to Taiwanese politics and society occurred in 2017 after a Taiwanese student in Bangkok invited him to visit Taiwan (Anonymous interview 2023c). Before visiting Taiwan, Netiwit had no particular interest in Taiwanese politics. However, his visit to Taiwan proved transformative, significantly changing his perspective. Netiwit found that Taiwan had many similarities with Thailand, even more so than Hong Kong, given that both had experienced authoritarian rule and had undergone democratisation. As a result, he saw Taiwan as a potential role model for Thais struggling for democracy, prompting Netiwit to emphasise the importance of Thais learning more about the Taiwanese experience (Interview with Netiwit Chotiphatphaisal 2023a). The role of this Taiwanese student reflected the significance of international students as transnational actors capable of fostering connections with the locals across different geographical locations through face-to-face interactions. However, the attempt to create a network between Thai and Taiwanese youth activists was first initiated in 2019.

Netiwit visited Taiwan for the second time during his fourth year of university after being invited to speak at the Oslo Freedom Forum held in Taipei, Taiwan, on 13 September 2019. In addition to participating in the event, he planned to learn traditional Chinese in Taiwan for one month. It was during this second trip to Taiwan that he began forging closer ties with young Taiwanese activists. At that time, the Taiwanese government, led by President Tsai Ing-Wen, initiated the '*Xin Nan Xiang Zhengce* (New Southbound Policy)' to promote collaboration and connections with the Southeast Asian region at the grassroots level. In line with the policy, the National Taiwan University Student Association (NTUSA) launched the '*Dongnanya Zhuti Xilie Jiangzuo* (Southern-East Asia Series)' to enhance Taiwanese students' and society's understanding of the societies, cultures, and economies of the Southeast Asian countries. This lecture series commenced on 16 September 2019 with Netiwit, delivering the inaugural lecture titled "*Taiguo She Yun Renshi Qinlianfeng Yu Dangdai Taiguo Zhengzhi* (Netiwit Chotiphatphaisal, a Thai Social Movement Activist, and Modern Thai Politics)." One event organiser said:

After we knew Netiwit would visit Taiwan, we immediately contacted him to give a lecture hosted by NTUSA. We believed he was the ideal person to start our Southern-East Asia lecture series (Anonymous interview 2023b).

The lecture at NTUSA not only afforded Netiwit a platform to share his insights and experiences but also served as a means to strengthen his network with Taiwanese students, particularly the president and vice-president of NTUSA (Chotiphatphaisal 2022: 329–331). He cultivated a profound connection with these student leaders through engaging discussions and meaningful interactions, laying the groundwork for future collaborations between the Thai and Taiwanese students.

During his visit to Taiwan, Netiwit had the opportunity to reconnect with his old friend, Akrawat Siripattanachok, who was studying in Taiwan during that period. Netiwit and Akrawat had known each other since both attended a protest campaign demanding an election on 27 January 2018, popularly known as 'MBK39'.<sup>12</sup> During his stay, Netiwit engaged in discussions with Akrawat about Thai politics and transnational activism. During these conversations, Akrawat proposed establishing a pro-Thai

<sup>11</sup>The connection between youth activists in Hong Kong and Taiwan was established in 2012 when Hongkonger activists visited Taiwan to discuss and exchange knowledge after successfully participating in the anti-national education campaign. Simultaneously, Taiwanese activists had recently concluded their anti-media monopoly movement. This frequent and intense interaction proved fruitful when these youths organised another significant demonstration in 2014—the Sunflower Movement in Taiwan and the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong (Ho 2019: 91–93).

<sup>12</sup>The event was called 'MBK39' as it was held in front of Ma Boon Khrong (MBK) Centre, a shopping centre in the city, and 39 people received arrest warrants due to their participation in this demonstration. BNK48, the famous girl idol group in Thailand, inspired the name.



democracy organisation in Taiwan to promote democracy in Thailand and encourage Thai activists to interact with the international community. Both agreed that Taiwan was an ideal location to set up this organisation, considering its proximity to Thailand and being one of the few safe havens for the democracy movement in Asia. Furthermore, they observed a limited presence of Thai civil society abroad, and when it did exist, it paled in strength compared to political exile organisations from other Asian countries (Interview with Akrawat Siripattanachok 2023; Interview with Netiwit Chotiphatphaisal 2023a).

Netiwit and Akrawat envisioned this organisation to facilitate academic exchange, assist Taiwanese politicians in visiting Thailand, and raise political awareness about Taiwan's political situation. Akrawat shared this concept with other Thai students in Taiwan, helping Netiwit connect with a faculty dean at his university. At the same time, Netiwit reached out to NTUSA, leveraging his personal ties with the president and vice-president of the organisation, which he had developed when he was invited to lecture about contemporary Thai politics there. Netiwit and Akrawat invited the then vice-president of NTUSA to serve as the honorary advisor of the Thai-Taiwanese Friendship organisation, an offer he gladly and promptly accepted (Netiwit Chotiphatphaisal 2022: 330–331). This network subsequently provided a pathway for connecting with many Taiwanese students, activists, and politicians (Interview with Akrawat Siripattanachok 2023).

As an international student in Taiwan, Akrawat possessed 'transnational social capital' (Moon and Shin 2019) owing to his network of connections in both Thailand and Taiwan. His prior engagement in political campaigns in Thailand had facilitated his connection with Netiwit. Consequently, Akrawat acted as a facilitator by bridging the gap between Thai and Taiwanese youth activists to promote transnational activism. Nevertheless, physical interaction spaces, such as the Oslo Freedom Forum and lectures at NTUSA, played a crucial role as platforms for establishing and nurturing this network, offering opportunities for individuals to interact and forge connections.

Unfortunately, the formation of the Thai-Taiwanese Friendship Organisation has encountered challenges, primarily due to the delayed formation process following Netiwit's return to Thailand and Akrawat's hectic academic schedule. This setback demonstrates the significance of face-to-face interaction in activism. Reduced activity or inactivity of a network due to a lack of physical communication can have adverse consequences, leading to fragmentation within the entire network, as evidenced in this case, where migration and personal reasons disrupted the organisation's development.

While the attempt to establish the Thai-Taiwanese Friendship Organisation remained unsuccessful, it was pivotal in facilitating numerous collaborations between Thai and Taiwanese students. A notable example was the field trip exchange between Thai and Taiwanese students, with 11 Taiwanese students visiting Thailand in December 2020 (Anonymous interview 2023b). Similarly, a member of Sam Yan Press, a press established by Netiwit, travelled to Taiwan from October to November 2022, further strengthening the ties between the two youth communities (Anonymous interview 2023e, 2023f). Moreover, during his 2019 trip to Taiwan, Netiwit came across a captivating history book that inspired him. Recognising its significance, he embarked on the remarkable task of translating the book into Thai with the assistance of Tony Su and Akrawat. The resulting book, titled "*Taiwan Mai Chai Suan Nueng Khong Chin!: Prawattisat Chat Taiwan* (Taiwan is not Chinese!: A History of Taiwan Nationality)" (Hsueh *et al.* 2021), represents the first-ever Thai work dedicated to exploring Taiwan's national history. Lastly, the initiative to establish the Thai-Taiwanese Friendship Organisation paved the way for deeper collaboration between Thai and Taiwanese individuals, particularly during the 2020–2021 youth-led demonstrations in Thailand. Under the banner of '*Taiwan Tuidong Taiguo Minzhu Lianmeng* (Taiwan Alliance for Thai Democracy),' this solidarity group comprises Thai students in Taiwan, Taiwanese students, and foreign allies in Taiwan, supporting the 2020–2021 youth-led protest in Thailand.<sup>13</sup>

## Conclusion

The case of Netiwit Chotiphatphaisal demonstrates the pivotal role of physical interaction in facilitating 'co-presence' (Larsen *et al.* 2006) and fostering a feeling of being present, essential for building a

<sup>13</sup>For more details about the Taiwan Alliance for Thai Democracy (TATD), refer to Adam K. Dedman and Autumn Lai, 2021, "Digitally dismantling Asian authoritarianism: activist reflections from the #MilkTeaAlliance," *Contention: The Multidisciplinary Journal of Social Protest* 9(1): 16–19. <https://doi.org/10.3167/cont.2021.090105>



transnational network. Such a network serves as a key motivating factor for individuals to participate in or initiate transnational collective action. This implication emphasises the need for a more comprehensive conceptualisation of the role of networks that facilitate individuals participation in transnational activism. It also illustrates the phenomenon of globalisation from below, underscoring the flow of people and networks across Asia.

Netiwit grew up as an education activist advocating for Thai education reform, but it was during his university years that he ventured into transnational campaigns. He travelled to Hong Kong intending to invite Joshua Wong to serve as a keynote speaker at the Thammasat massacre commemoration without realising that he was undertaking transnational activism. Wong's denial of entry and subsequent deportation shifted the cognitive perspectives of Netiwit, fellow Thai activists, and activists in Hong Kong regarding domestic and international politics. The invitation for domestic university events sparked an international controversy as it showcased how two authoritarian states were collaborating. In the context of Taiwan, an international student possessing transnational social capital played a crucial role in connecting activists from both regions. Nonetheless, physical interaction remained a key driver in forming the network. Despite the failure to establish the Thai-Taiwanese Friendship Organisation, it laid the groundwork for future collective actions between Thai students in Taiwan and Taiwanese activists with the aim of supporting the 2020–2021 mass demonstrations in Thailand.

The transnational network built by Netiwit differs from the concept of the 'international front line' proposed by Joshua Wong (2020), as the latter focuses primarily on civil society collaboration and highlights the repressive practices of the Chinese government, often relying on the Hong Kong diaspora network (Ho 2023). In contrast, Netiwit's case highlights the role of ordinary individuals in building transnational networks and the flow of people in the age of globalisation. The majority of this network is built through his travels to particular places. This network took shape when Netiwit was not yet a widely recognised activist at the regional and global levels. This is evident from his attempts to contact Wong, who, at that time, did not respond as he did not know who Netiwit was. It was only after Wong's deportation from Thailand that Netiwit gained international recognition.

While this study has limitations in providing a comprehensive picture of the complex transnational activism network in Asia, given its focus on the role of a single actor, the reality is that transnational networks are highly complex and involve various actors from different geographical locations. Nevertheless, the case of Netiwit highlights the pre-existing connections between Thai and foreign activists, serving as an illustrative example of the transnational network of youth activists. Netiwit's case study can further the discussion and provide a fresh perspective on youth activism and transnationalism. In the last few years, Asia has witnessed several youth-led demonstrations, and they have all resonated with each other, sharing political symbols and tactics and openly supporting each other. Future studies could further investigate this transnational youth activism network, as well as other networks between activists from different countries and regions (e.g., Thai-Myanmar activists and Vietnamese-Taiwanese activists) or from multiple locations (e.g., the environmental movement, the LGBTQ+ movement, and the NOYDA). These studies could examine how these networks bridge and influence youth activism within, between, and beyond Northeast and Southeast Asia. Investigating these networks may contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the diffusion of protests in several youth-led movements in recent years and the emergence of the Milk Tea Alliance.

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