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This outstanding multi-method study of the evolving character of Hong Kong's repeated waves of protest lays forth a new understanding of how threats influence the organizational forms that movements assume. Masterfully researched and skilfully analysed, this study will be of great interest to scholars of both social movements and authoritarian politics.

Mark R. Beissinger, Henry W. Putnam Professor of Politics  
at Princeton University, author of *The Revolutionary City: Urbanization and the Global Transformation of Rebellion*

This valuable book, grounded in extensive empirical research, illuminates the characteristics of a 'leaderful' format. It explains how large numbers of protesters collectively exercise leadership simultaneously, as well as the relational mechanisms involved.

Donatella della Porta, Professor of Political Science at  
Scuola Normale Superiore, author of *Social Movements, Political Violence and the State*

How did Hong Kong people mobilize en masse without leaders to challenge a powerful authoritarian state? Drawing on eight years of on-the-ground research, this book theorizes a leaderful form of mass mobilization that challenges conventional understandings. The authors capture what it means for protestors to "be water" and its implications for contemporary leaderless social movements.

Diana Fu, Associate Professor of Political Science  
at the University of Toronto, author of *Mobilizing Without the Masses: Control and Contention in China*

Using quantitative and qualitative methods, Cheng and Yuen meticulously account for how spontaneous self-mobilization of citizens has generated several large-scale protests in Hong Kong in recent years. It is a book to be appreciated by social movement scholars around the world. Their pathbreaking discovery of the dynamics of leaderful mobilization helps us understand why massive protests could still erupt as they did under authoritarian regimes.

Ho-fung Hung, Henry M. and Elizabeth P. Wiesenfeld  
Professor in Political Economy at Johns Hopkins University,  
author of *Protest with Chinese Characteristics: Demonstrations, Riots, and Petitions in the Mid-Qing Dynasty and City on the Edge: Hong Kong under Chinese Rule*

In their capacious new book, Cheng and Yuen join a new transnational generation – including names like Benjamin Abrams, Santiago Anria, Philip Ayoub, Diana Fu, Neil Ketchley, and Dana Moss – whose work addresses fundamental theoretical issues through deeply place-based investigations. Their book advances a creative concept of movement leadership — "leaderful mobilization" — between the tired duality of spontaneity and elite control found in classical movement studies. They demonstrate how — through the capacity of informal leaders to motivate

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masses of citizens — the movement held the state at bay for months. It should have both a deep and a broad influence in the study of contentious politics.

Sidney Tarrow, Maxwell Upson Professor of Government  
at Cornell University, author of *Power in Movement*  
and *Movements and Parties*

*The Making of Leaderful Mobilization* is a great example of a widely anticipated volume that more than lives up to the very high expectations that many people in a field had for it. For years now, Cheng and Yuen have been steadily producing some insightful articles and book chapters on varied aspects of protest in Hong Kong. Their book not only pulls together the key strands from those pioneering publications in a beautifully clear way, but also brings in important new data and arguments. The result is a major contribution to both Hong Kong Studies and Social Movement Studies. I was eagerly awaiting this book — and it proves well worth the wait.

Jeffrey Wasserstrom, Chancellor's Professor of History  
at UC Irvine, author of *Vigil: Hong Kong on the Brink*

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## The Making of Leaderful Mobilization

The past few decades have seen the transformation of Hong Kong from a liberal enclave to a revolutionary crucible on the edge of China. *The Making of Leaderful Mobilization* takes you through the evolution of protests in this restive city where ordinary citizens gradually emerged as the protagonists of contention in place of social movement organizations. The book presents a theory of mediated threat that illuminates how threat perceptions fuelled shifting forms of mobilization – from brokered mobilization where organizations played guiding roles to leaderful mobilization driven by peer collaboration among the masses. Bringing together event analysis, opinion polls, interviews, and social media data, this book provides a thorough and methodical anatomy of Hong Kong's contentious politics. It unveils the processes and mechanisms of collective action that likely prevailed in many contemporary social movements worldwide. Our temporal approach also uncovers the multiple pathways reshaping hybrid regimes, underscoring their resilience and fragility.

Edmund W. Cheng is Professor of Political Science at the City University of Hong Kong. His research spans contentious politics, political communication, and the sociology of knowledge. He co-edits *Social Movement Studies* and is a recipient of the Gordon White Prize.

Samson Yuen is Associate Professor of Political Science in the Department of Government and International Studies at Hong Kong Baptist University. His research interests include contentious politics, civil conflicts, public opinion, and civil society, focusing on East Asia. He is a recipient of the International Convention of Asia Scholars Best Article Prize.

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# The Making of Leaderful Mobilization

*Power and Contention in Hong Kong*

**EDMUND W. CHENG**  
*City University of Hong Kong*

**SAMSON YUEN**  
*Hong Kong Baptist University*



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*To our loved ones*

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## Preface

This book began its life as a casual conversation in early October 2014. Both of us were postgraduate students at that time, writing our doctoral theses and taking a break from our fieldwork in mainland China. We bumped into each other in Admiralty, a business district in downtown Hong Kong that was then occupied by angry protesters. Though we were no strangers to the spectacle of mass protests in our hometown, the Umbrella Movement truly surprised us with its sheer scale and burst of energy. As often happens in academic dialogues, we agreed that we should start studying these unfolding events; and we did. In the following days, we designed a survey, assembled a team, and distributed the surveys across the three protest camps. Time was of the essence as it seemed likely that the police would clear out these camps at any minute. Thanks to our team's efforts, we were able to complete the data collection. We never anticipated that the occupation would continue for another two months. Nor did we foresee that the movement would become a key turning point in Hong Kong's history and politics.

Since then, we closely followed protest events in what was known to international observers as the 'city of protests'. We dug into Hong Kong's history of protests and continued to conduct surveys and ground observations whenever there were major rallies or demonstrations. We interviewed politicians, activists, protest participants, government officials, and ordinary citizens. Our research deepened the conviction that this dynamic laboratory of protests could contribute important insights to the scholarship of contentious politics. As exemplified by the Umbrella Movement, the intensity and innovative forms of Hong Kong's popular contention have often resonated with mass mobilizations happening globally since the early 2010s, including the Arab Spring uprisings, the Global Occupy Movement, the Spanish Indignados, and the Maidan Revolution in Ukraine.

In 2019, the eruption of the Anti-Extradition Movement once again brought this liberal enclave on the fringe of China into the global limelight, making it

arguably the most extensively reported protest event of the twenty-first century. As students of contentious politics, we readily deployed our research toolkits and studiously documented the unfolding events. This time, we were again surprised – not only by the scale of participation in the movement but also by its resilience, despite the lack of a centralized leadership. International observers would soon recognize similar dynamics in mass mobilizations emerging globally in the ensuing months in 2019 and 2020, from Belarus to Chile, France to Lebanon, Sudan to Iraq, Indonesia to Thailand, and even in the United States. Although these mobilizations were sparked by various causes, they shared a common thread of spontaneity and a conspicuous absence of leadership. The tactical repertoire on display also bore striking similarities, with many tactics evidently originating from Hong Kong. This is why we felt a compelling need to produce a comprehensive account of Hong Kong's protest trajectory and its gradual shift from organized contention to leaderful mobilization. We hope that this book will yield comparative insights for contentious politics scholars. For those interested in Hong Kong and China, we hope that this book offers a systematic account of the sociopolitical evolution of this semi-autonomous city, leading to the implementation of the National Security Law in 2020. While times and circumstances have undoubtedly shifted, our belief in the value of research and scholarship remains as strong as ever.

Academic research often feels like a solitary journey, but co-authoring this book has made it much less so. Being co-authors meant we were constantly exchanging our ideas and challenging each other. There were innumerable moments of intense debates and disagreements, but each time we were able to come to a consensus and ultimately refined our ideas. This book is a product of these intellectual dialogues and our friendship. Although we took the lead on different chapters, we spent a lot of time critiquing, cross-examining, and rewriting each other's work. Both of us equally contributed to this book and regard each other as co-first authors.

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We are extremely grateful for the numerous informants and respondents to our surveys. Without their support and trust, this book would not have been possible. Their willingness to share their experiences and knowledge has been invaluable, and this book would not have been the same without their contributions. Some of our informants have either left Hong Kong or, for various reasons, are unable to read this book. We hope that it will live up to the rigorous standards of academic research while providing an informed analysis of the protest events and social changes in Hong Kong.

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Our heartfelt gratitude also goes to scholars who generously gave their time, insights, and suggestions for early versions of the book. Ma Ngok has been a supportive mentor to both of us, always sharing his boundless knowledge of Hong Kong and offering insightful suggestions for the manuscript. Ming-sho Ho, Yao-tai Li, and Sebastian Veg read the entire manuscript and provided critical and constructive comments. Our long-term collaborators and friends Francis Lee and Gary Tang generously offered us suggestions, granted us access to our jointly owned data, and allowed us to use the articles we co-authored as

the foundation for some of these chapters. Anita Chan and Jon Unger made us thoroughly enjoy our short stay in Canberra and always challenged us intellectually with the ‘so what’ question. Michael Biggs and Patricia Thornton kindly chaired our book seminar at the University of Oxford and provided insightful feedback. Eliza Lee and Ray Yep have provided us with endless inspiration, illuminating a path of how public intellectual life can be guided by empirical scholarship.

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We are immensely grateful to the numerous institutions, including the Australian National University; Academia Sinica; the University of British Columbia; the University of California, Santa Barbara; the University of New South Wales; the Berlin Social Sciences Centre; the University of Tokyo; Tohoku University; Aarhus University; and Oxford University, which graciously hosted us, allowing us to present chapters, receive feedback, and further refine our work. These intellectual environments have been pivotal in shaping this book. We also thank Jean-Pierre Cabestan, Anita Chan, Chris Chan, Jay Chen, Cristina Flesher-Fominaya, Thomas Gold, Masaaki Higashijima, Ben Hillman, Swen Hutter, Minhua Ling, Kevin O’Brien, Jack Qiu, Hyun Bang Shin, Leo Shin, Kurata Toru, Akiko Toru, Mariko Tanigaki, Sebastian Veg, Jon Unger and Jieh-min Wu for inviting us to various conferences and workshops held between 2019 and 2023.

We would also like to thank various publishers, journals, and co-authors for permitting us to incorporate parts of our previous publications into some of the chapters of this book. Chapter 3 is derived in part from ‘Street Politics in a Hybrid Regime: The Diffusion of Political Activism in Post-colonial Hong Kong’, published in the *China Quarterly*. Chapter 7 is derived in part from ‘Instagram and Social Capital: Youth Activism in a Networked Movement’, published in *Social Movement Studies*. Chapter 10 is derived in part from

## Acknowledgements

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‘Dynamics of Tactical Radicalisation and Public Receptiveness in Hong Kong’s Anti-Extradition Bill Movement’, published in the *Journal of Contemporary Asia*.

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Samson Yuen is thankful to his family for being an unwavering source of love and support. His parents have devoted their lives to raising him while granting him the freedom to pursue his dreams. He is also grateful to his wife, Phyllis, who has filled him with boundless love, care, and understanding. Her kindness, wisdom, and patience have made him a better person and helped him survive difficult moments in life. Their children are the best gifts he has ever received. Despite occasionally testing his patience, they have filled his life with abundant joy and laughter. He enjoys every moment of being with them and wishes that time would slow down. It is to his family that he dedicates this book.

## Notes on Transliteration

In this book, important or noteworthy terms are transliterated into their Chinese Pinyin (included in the bracket following the terms). For terms that are specifically important in the Hong Kong context, Pinyin will also be followed by the *jyutping* transliteration, in which the characters are separated by a hyphen rather than a space.

## Abbreviations

API	Application Programming Interface
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CGLO	Liaison Office of the Central People's Government
CHRF	Civil Human Rights Front
CPPCC	Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference
ExCo	Executive Council
HKA	Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements of China
HKCTU	Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions
HKD	Hong Kong Dollars
HKFS	Hong Kong Federation of Students
HKIAD	Hong Kong Higher Institutions International Affairs Delegation
HKPTU	Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union
HKSAR	Hong Kong Special Administrative Region
HKSFF	Hong Kong Schools Sports Federation
HKUJMSC	Journalism and Media Studies Centre at the University of Hong Kong
HKUPOP	Hong Kong University Public Opinion Programme
KMT	Kuomintang
LegCo	Legislative Council
LSD	League of Social Democrats
NPC	National People's Congress
NPCSC	The Standing Committee of the National People's Congress
NSL	National Security Law
OCLP	Occupy Central with Love and Peace
OCTS	One Country, Two Systems

OLS	ordinary least squares
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PLG	Progressive Lawyers' Group
PRC	People's Republic of China
SAR	Special Administrative Region
SMOs	social movement organizations
SSStrike	Secondary School Strike