

Mobilizing Without the Masses

When advocacy organizations are forbidden from rallying people to take the streets, what do they do? When activists are detained for coordinating protests, are their hands ultimately tied? Based on political ethnography inside both legal and blacklisted labor organizations in China, this book reveals how state repression is deployed on the ground and to what effect on mobilization. It presents a novel dynamic of civil society contention – mobilizing without the masses – that lowers the risk of activism under duress. Instead of facilitating collective action, activists coach the aggrieved to challenge authorities one by one. In doing so, they lower the risks of organizing while empowering the weak. This dynamic represents a third pathway of contention that challenges conventional understandings of mobilization in an illiberal state. It takes readers inside the world of underground labor organizing and opens the black box of repression inside the world’s most powerful authoritarian state.

Diana Fu is Assistant Professor of Asian Politics at the University of Toronto. This book builds upon her DPhil dissertation from Oxford University. Previously, she was Walter H. Shorenstein Postdoctoral Fellow at Stanford University and a pre-doctoral fellow at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Her research has been supported by the Harold Hyam Wingate Foundation, the Chiang Ching Kuo Foundation, and the Rhodes Trust. Her academic articles have been published in *Governance*, *Comparative Political Studies*, and *Modern China*. Her writing and research have appeared in *The Economist*, *Boston Review*, *PostGlobal*, and Nicholas Kristof’s On the Ground Blog for *The New York Times*.

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Control and Contention in China

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For my family and for those at the front lines

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Preface

Behind every book is another untold story – this is mine. This book originates from my undergraduate years at the University of Minnesota. Under the tutelage of Raymond Duvall, Daniel Kelliher, Ann Waltner, Sharilyn Geistfled, and many others, I struck out in my junior year to do “fieldwork” in Beijing. I was only dimly aware of what this consisted, but I knew one thing for certain: I was and continue to be drawn to the everyday experiences of marginalized people. Every other day, I crammed into a sweat-stenched bus that jammed its way through the Beijing traffic and dropped me off at a *hutong* in the second ring of the city. There, I talked, played, and traded stories with participants of one of China’s first migrant NGOs. It was also there that I tried my hand at ethnography – the neck-deep immersion of oneself into the culture of one’s “subjects.” It was hard; it was exhilarating. I came back with a fistful of field notes and a “stomach full of words,” as the migrant women would often say. With the unflagging support of my mentors, this project became my first publication and set my research trajectory for the next decade.

During my first year of graduate study at Oxford University, I felt terribly lost in the city of spires. Lost among restless, active minds, the swooshing gowns at Rhodes House, and the Latin recitations at formal dinner. My supervisors Vivienne Shue, Rachel Murphy, and Maria Jaschok (M.Phil) helped me to stay on course, as did Rana Mitter and Patricia Thornton. Vivienne advised me to do what I was good at regardless of what type of research was a la mode, advice that I have echoed to my own students. For all of its dynastic traditions, Oxford gave me the chance to think unfettered by conventions, which brought its own burdens. Dear friends including Rachel and Deborah carried me through dark times, as did my dance partner.

Oxford also allowed me to disappear into fieldwork for nearly two years, supported by the Rhodes Trust, the Harold Hyam Wingate Foundation, and the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation. Back in China, I encountered new mentors

and friends including Ching Kwan Lee, Guang Lei, Pun Ngai, Shen Yuan, Zhu Jiangang, Zheng Guanghuai, and Huang Yan. Through their guidance, I discovered a new world of labor activism. I met some of the most tenacious and committed activists and workers during this period. I admired their resilience, humor, and wiliness in tough circumstances. I also realized just how little I could offer them besides an empathetic ear and some company. This book is really their stories, which deserve to be recorded.

But alas, scholarship demands more than storytelling – it must provide explanations of social realities and theorize hidden political processes. Many inspired me throughout this painstaking process. In Boston, I benefited from the intellectual might of Richard Locke, Elizabeth Perry, Roger Petersen, Edward Steinfeld, David Singer, as well as other faculty members and students at MIT.

As a postdoctoral fellow at Stanford University, I tapped into the brilliant minds of Francis Fukuyama, Jean Oi, Gi-Wook Shin, Andrew Walder, and Zhou Xueguang who helped me to go beyond the immediate case studies. I am especially indebted to Gi-Wook Shin at the Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Center for his support in book writing and to Andrew Walder for his incisive commentary.

I also benefited enormously from Kevin O'Brien, whose own work inspired me to draw connections between Chinese politics and contentious politics. Kevin also integrated me into a dynamic network of young scholars, including Rachel Stern and Daniel Mattingly who provided insightful critique.

The book would also not be in its current form if Sidney Tarrow had not challenged me to think “big” by linking my ideas to contentious politics. It would also have been impossible without Jessica Teets, whose unmatched problem-solving skills helped me to cut through uncertainties. Likewise, senior colleagues including Mary Gallagher, William Hurst, Andrew Mertha, James Scott, Susan Shirk, Elisabeth Wood, and Lesley Wood gave penetrating critique at various seminars at Yale, Cornell, the University of California San Diego, and the University of Toronto.

I am blessed with terrific colleagues at the University of Toronto. My chairs, Grace Skogstad and Louis Pauly, gave me unwavering support and candid advice. My colleagues including Chris Cochrane, Carolina De Miguel, Victor Falkenheim, Matt Hoffman, Paul Kingston, Peggy Kohn, Sida Liu, Kanta Murali, Neil Nevitte, Lynette Ong, Edward Schatz, Phil Triaphildophilous, Lucan Way, Melissa Williams, Joe Wong, and Yiching Wu navigated me through the writing and publication process. My doctoral student and stellar research assistant, Emile Dirks, tirelessly edited and gave feedback on the chapters.

I would also like to thank David Samuels and Ben Ansell, editors at *Comparative Political Studies*, for their confidence in my work and for allowing me to draw upon my 2017 CPS article in the book. Parts of Chapter 3 also draw from an article published in *Governance*.

I am also grateful to my editors Robert Dreesen and Doug McAdam for their thoughtful guidance in getting me to the finish line. Thanks also to Andrew Nathan and Ross Yelsey for including this book in the Studies of the

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Weatherhead East Asian Institute. Andrew Nathan also provided invaluable commentary on the manuscript.

The book's tale ends where it began – at home with my family and friends. It started with mama, who taught me to “set off my own kind of fireworks,” and baba, from whom I inherited a stubborn ambition. Along the way, I also picked up a fast-talking and sensitive guy in China who became my lifelong adventure buddy. In Toronto, friends from City Dance Corps and my faith community buoyed my spirit. Together with my dear friends Diana, Laura, and Christine, they walked me through the valleys and the peaks. They remind me that after all, a book is just a book. And that life is more than the mind.