



DEACON LIU

REVIEW

## Brave Attempt

*A new account tells the story of the 2019 Hong Kong protests, and their failures, through four individual lives. But we need more unmediated voices to speak for themselves.*

RHODA KWAN — MARCH 28, 2024

HONG KONG



During a winter evening in February 2020, two university students in Amsterdam braved the cold in their best dresses to cycle along its canals. It was a farewell ride. For one of them, Hong Kong journalist-turned-politician Gwyneth Ho, that evening would be one of her last moments of freedom before returning home. One year later, she, along with most of the city's political opposition, were behind bars.

Gwyneth's transformation from student to political prisoner is but one of many lives warped by the shackling of Hong Kong. In the comedown from the explosive impact of Hong Kong's 2019 [protests](#), the city's fight for democracy has been reduced to a cautionary tale. As Beijing and the Hong Kong authorities recast the protests as violent riots funded by foreign governments, a clear record of what happened to the city's pro-democracy movement is crucial to resist collective amnesia or paramnesia.

*Among the Braves*, a new book by journalists Shibani Mahtani and Timothy McLaughlin, is well placed to do just that. The book attempts to cover much ground: not just the roiling months of defiance in 2019 that catalysed the end of the city's freedoms, but the broader arc of the city's transformation from a rowdy escape for refugees from communist China in the 1950s, to its muzzled and uncertain present as part of China.

The book hinges on four lives: Chu Yiu-ming, a Baptist reverend who saw community activism as a way to serve God; Finn Lau, a chartered surveyor in London who coined the ideology of “mutual destruction” that radicalized the protests; Gwyneth Ho, the student-turned-politician who ran for Hong Kong's Legislative Council in 2020, but was disqualified and remains behind bars; and an art student “Tommy,” one of the many faceless “braves” on the protest front, who fled via speedboat to Taiwan rather than face the same fate.

Drawing on interviews and personal anecdotes from family and friends, Mahtani and McLaughlin — a married couple who landed in the city in 2018 as correspondents for the *Washington Post* and *The Atlantic* — provide these characters' stories to animate the historical milestones that informed contemporary Hong Kong: the beginning of the city's pro-democracy movement in 1989; the “annual carnivals of dissent” since 2003 that seeded a vibrant civil society and ingrained a sense of civic responsibility; the 2012 student-led rejection of patriotic education; and the 2014 Umbrella Movement that set the city on a collision course against an unyielding Beijing.

The book is a clear, if condensed, account of the city's trajectory from a British harbor for Chinese refugees, to an international bastion of hope and defiance, to a subdued city. When it reaches 2019, the journalists' own reportage from their time on the ground provides blistering accounts of the hubris-fuelled blunders by Hong Kong's then leader Carrie Lam, the break of public trust in the police, and the scenes of faceless solidarity on the streets.

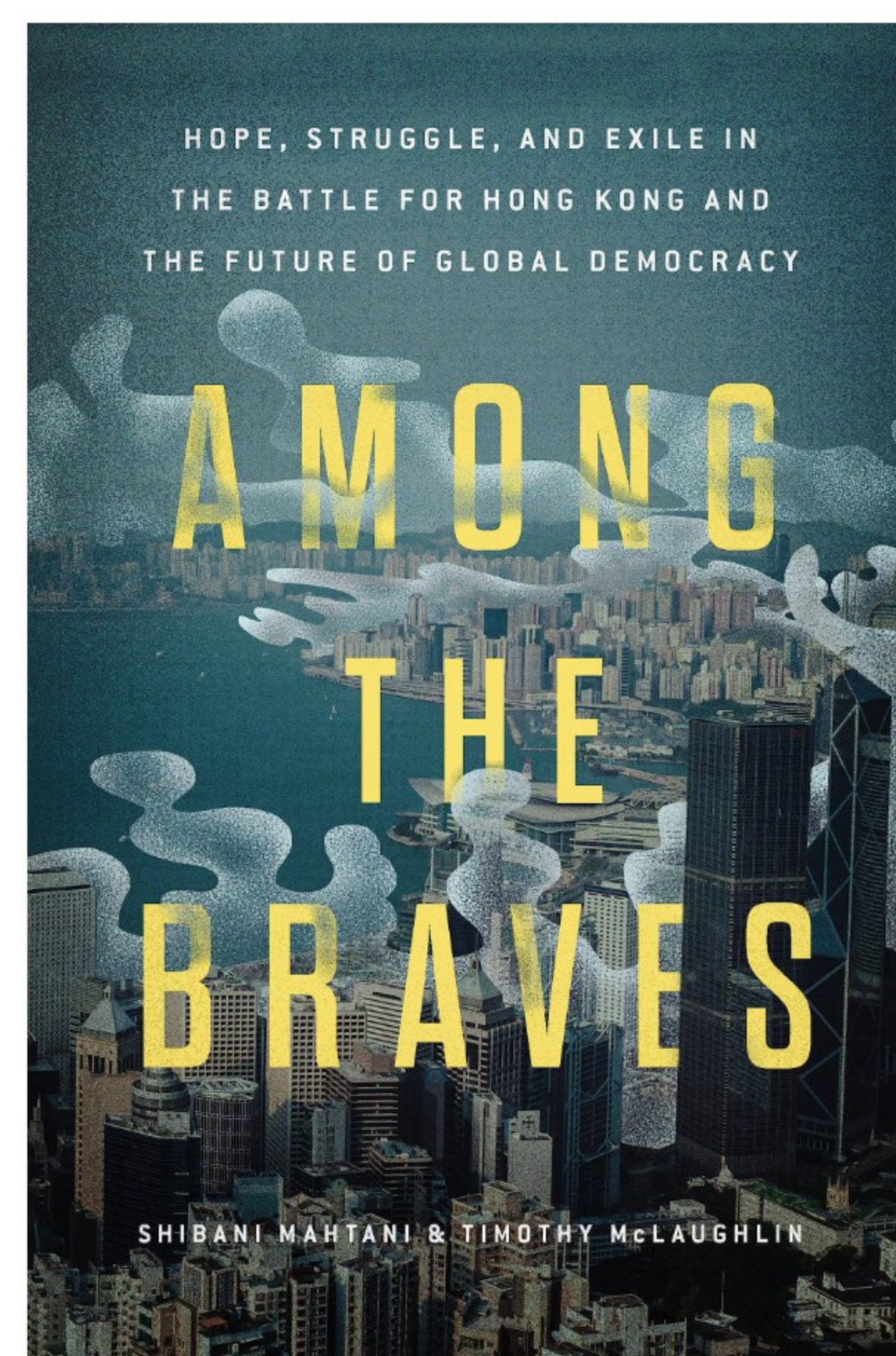
The authors have a propensity to prefer the dramatic, at times to the detriment of accuracy. Early on, they describe a typhoon before the 1989 Tiananmen massacre as prompting the T8 storm signal, asserting it was the city's highest (T10s have been [hoisted](#) since 1946). The book also gets bogged down in the intimate details of the four lives that anchor the narrative. The result is an uneven account, with the authors dedicating as many pages to the breakdown of Finn's marriage in London as to the police siege of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, which is reduced to the sum of its statistics:

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By the time the campus was cleared after twelve days, police had arrested 1,377 people, 318 of them under the age of 18. During their battles with protesters, officers had fired 1,458 tear-gas rounds, 1,391 rubber bullets, 325 bean-bag rounds, and 265 sponge rounds. Nearly 4,000 petrol bombs and 573 weapons were seized from inside the campus.

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The authors' focus on the personal detracts from the ultimate story they claim to tell: how freedom was lost in Hong Kong. Their account spends a surprising amount of time outside the city: in London's “upper-middle class neighborhood” of Richmond, where Finn waged



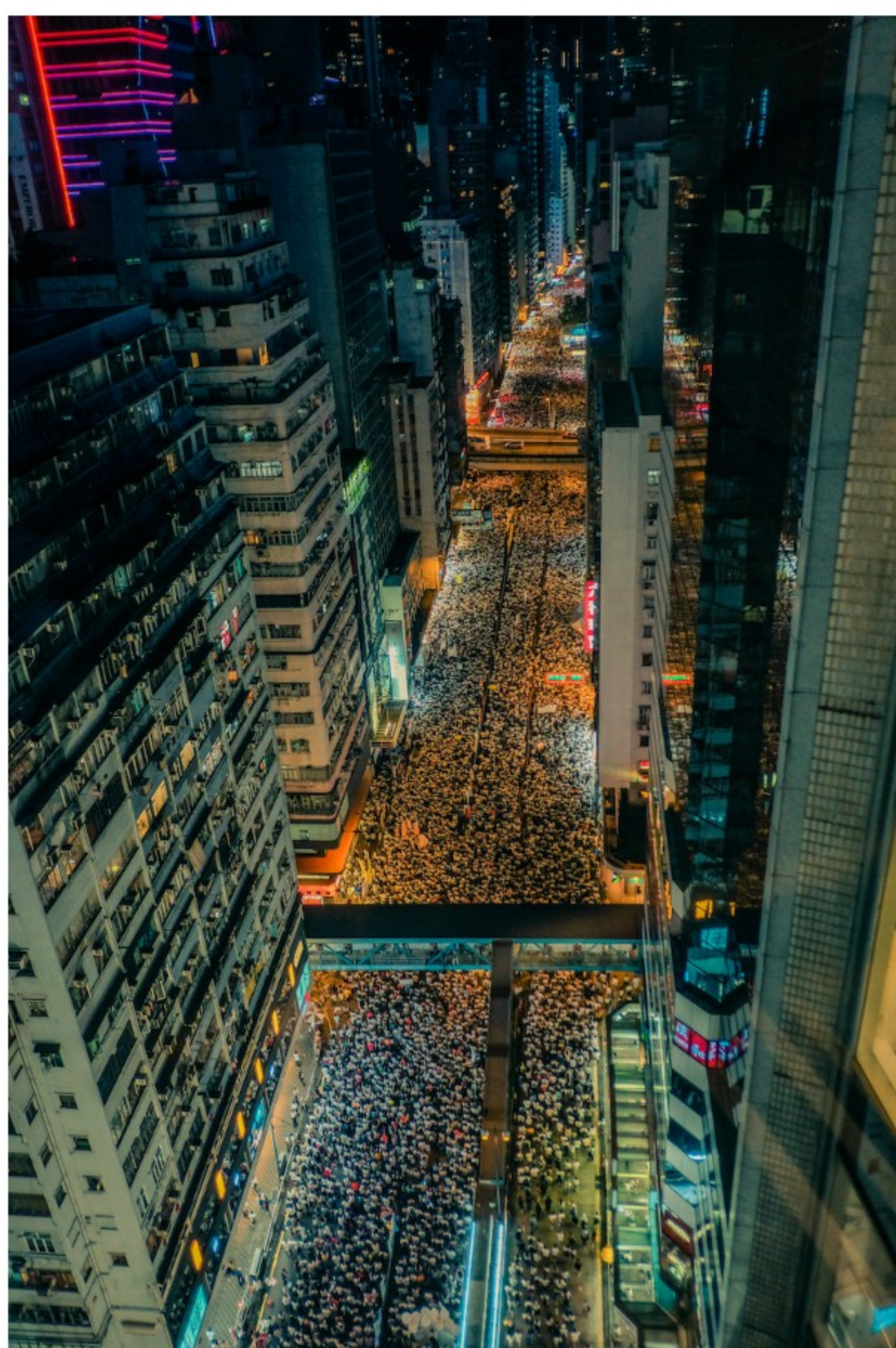
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revolution from his computer screen; in Danish and Dutch dorm rooms with Gwyneth; and in a flat in Queens, New York, where Tommy tries to keep the spirit of a stifled movement alive by drawing graffiti on a nearby bridge.

The four stories, like Hong Kong, find no easy ending. It ends on a litany of heartbreaks and frustrations that followed the swell of hope and solidarity: waning interest from the international community; bitter in-fighting amongst the activist diaspora; and familiar faces, such as Gwyneth Ho and Joshua Wong, still behind bars.

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Mahtani and McLaughlin write in their introduction: “Our access to this story is a privilege, as are our foreign passports.” And I felt the book is exactly that: foreign journalists reporting on what they witnessed, the destruction of a free city, from a lofty position of safety. From their relative remove (bar seeing police violence on the streets from their newsroom and a simmering resentment towards the self-neutering Hong Kong Foreign Correspondant’s Club), it reads as an exposé of a tragedy: look at how this once-vibrant city was destroyed; look at how these promising lives were derailed; look at their sacrifices, how they now seem to be for naught.



Protesting crowds through the streets of central Hong Kong in 2019 (Deacon Liu)

Their distance fuels an insensitivity to the continually deteriorating situation in Hong Kong. The book makes public that protest icon Joshua Wong [sought asylum](#) from the U.S. in the lead-up to his imprisonment in 2020. Wong remains behind bars, his future uncertain. In revealing what could be construed as damning evidence by a regime that has threatened “foreign collusion” with a lifetime behind bars, the authors seem to forget that they are writing about real lives.

For these lives, the story of Hong Kong today is not just the destruction of a city. It is the loss of home, the erasure of belonging. For at least this exiled Hong Konger (I left the city for the last time in December 2020), reading about home from Mahtani and McLaughlin’s distance was an uncomfortable experience. The book deals in the city’s past, with little contemplation on its future:

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By the start of 2022, freedom of the courts, the press, political pluralism, academia, and thought disappeared, along with the banners, slogans, memorials, and newspapers that were the fabric of the city. Beijing took all of this away because it could, with few repercussions beyond a handful of sanctions. The city they left behind was unrecognizable, the disappearances quietly carried in the hearts of those who remained and still remembered, and those who’d fled and longed for the home they once knew.

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That’s it, the authors suggest — the end. The question is not asked: what now? That defiant love for home that filled Hong Kong’s streets — where does it go? The sacrifices of so many,

what was it for?

The authors' attitude towards their subjects is sometimes jarring. "It almost felt like we knew her better than she realized we did," the authors claim in their afterword, describing a 15-minute prison visit with Gwyneth Ho, "and were speaking for her when she couldn't for herself." This presumption, when Ho has chosen to speak and advocate for herself in court, is at best insensitive. At worst, it flattens these acts of courage to tell a story the authors can wrap with a full stop.

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Despite its flaws, *Among the Braves* is an important entry in a growing library of Hong Kong books in English that testify to the city's defiance, and the freedoms it yearned and fought for. It is a timely reminder against forgetting the city's plight. Hopefully, an expanding repertoire will create the space for Hong Kongers to tell their own stories, on their own terms — as some have already in Chinese, such as Reverend Chu's recently published memoir [敲鐘者言](#), the memoir of the late political writer Lee Yee reflecting on losing the democratic fight, [失敗者回憶錄](#), and an anthology of 54 cross-generational Hong Kong writers on their memories of home, [我香港、我街道](#).

Many Hong Kongers today face a painful choice: to stay and make what home one can under the whims of Beijing; or to leave, as I did, and carve out an exile's existence. Either choice requires a daily search for answers to these impossible questions. Where is home now? Will this do? Where do I put all this love I carry for a place that no longer exists? Who am I now that I have become unmoored? This constant grappling with identity plagues those who longed for a Hong Kong that was democratic and free.

Freedom from such heartache and reflection while writing about Hong Kong today is reserved for authors who do not have to grapple with this loss daily, who have the luxury of considering it at a remove. They can write this story, then move on to the world's other tragedies. That is not a choice for the lives they mined to serve the story they told. ■



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