

Praise for *Umbrellas in Bloom*

“There is no greater tour guide to the Umbrella campgrounds than Ng – he offers a vivid and comprehensive account of the pro-democracy movement and a city in transition. *Umbrellas in Bloom* is a definitive compendium of on-the-ground reporting, timelines, maps, photographs, illustrations, a glossary, and a who’s-who of Hong Kong’s politics.”

– Tom Grundy, editor-in-chief, *Hong Kong Free Press*

“The Umbrella Movement was a seminal moment in Hong Kong’s history. This skillful blending of personal narrative and analysis represents a vital contribution to understanding what happened and indeed what might happen next.”

– Stephen Vines, columnist and author of
Hong Kong: China’s New Colony

“The umbrella flowers blossomed and withered. Ng captures the lifecycle of the occupy movement with compassion and wit.”

– Benny Tai, co-founder of Occupy Central with Love and Peace

“Ng’s authoritative account of the occupy movement is compelling and full of surprises. He combines a journalist’s precision with a Hong Konger’s passionate heart.”

– Zeb Eckert, anchor, Bloomberg Television

“Insightful, accessible, and a hugely enjoyable read, *Umbrellas in Bloom* is jam-packed with eureka moments. It is populated with deftly drawn characters and sprinkled with just the right amount of wit. Rather than a dry academic exploration of the causes and consequences of the Umbrella Movement, Ng’s story is instead a personal account of those 79 days that rocked the city. The movement in all its vibrancy jumps off every page. It is essential reading for anybody wanting to understand the existential crisis currently engulfing Hong Kong.”

– Matthew Torne, filmmaker and director of *Lessons in Dissent*

Umbrellas in Bloom

Hong Kong's occupy movement uncovered

Jason Y. Ng

BLACKSMITH BOOKS

Umbrellas in Bloom
Hong Kong's Occupy Movement Uncovered

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Introduction

Flowers bloom and flowers wilt. They flourish, wither and die, before new buds reappear in the next season. In this endless cycle of birth and rebirth, there are two truths we hold to be self-evident – that change is the only constant, and that beauty is not diminished but magnified by its transience.

That is the context in which we must approach the 2014 mass protests in Hong Kong, the largest anti-government insurgency the city has seen and a referendum on its relationship with China. We must analyze and accept the episode for what it was: a step on our epic journey to full democracy. That's why we prefer the word "movement" to "revolution," because all that happened was more akin to the 15-year social awakening during America's civil rights struggles, than to the one-off regime changes in the recent Arab Spring. To put things in perspective, many African Americans are still fighting their battle half a century later.

If England has its Tudor rose and Japan its chrysanthemum, then Hong Kong has crowned a new national flower: the yellow umbrella. In the fall of 2014, a twist of fate transformed that foul-weather friend – the humble household item that everyone ignores when the sun shines but desperately seeks when the rain pours – into a symbol of courage and defiance. Suffragists used it to keep off not the rain but tear gas and pepper spray. Its defensive, functional nature has made it a powerful symbol for a peaceful uprising. The versatile raingear also opens and shuts like a living thing. For 79 days, yellow umbrellas blossomed, grew and faded. But such is the cycle of life – what we have just said about change and beauty rings true for the political movement that is named after them.

This book is the last of a trilogy. It is a follow-up to *HONG KONG State of Mind*, a candy box of observations about Asia's hyperactive city, and *No City for Slow Men*, a more somber probe into our social and existential issues. It turned out that all the quirks and quandaries expunged in the first two installments were a mere prelude to the third – they were small waves that multiplied and swelled into a tsunami. Taken as a whole, the three volumes track the arc of Hong Kong's post-colonial development, from euphoria to frustration, to rage and rebellion.

The purpose of this book is twofold: first, to record history, and second, to reclaim it.

History is not a chronology – it is more than dates and events. History is a teacher, critic, mirror, weapon, agent of change and arbiter of truth. So much history begged to be written during those 11 weeks in Hong Kong; recording it is a delicate and sacred task. This book documents my firsthand account of the blood, sweat and tears at the three main protest sites as a writer and a freelance journalist. But it is in my capacity as a *citizen* that I feel most duty-bound to preserve the past against not only the test of time but also the trials of state-sponsored revisionism that are furiously underway.

Anyone who has watched Akira Kurosawa's masterpiece *Rashomon* knows that a single event can have vastly different – and often contradictory – interpretations, depending on who is doing the talking and why. Sure enough, competing versions of the truth about the Umbrella Movement have made their way into the public discourse. Local bookstores in Hong Kong are now flooded with a glut of Beijing-backed counter-movement propaganda (so far all in the Chinese language) aimed at doing one thing: controlling the narrative and drowning out dissent.

How sad it would be if 15, 20 years later, our children learned about these events through whitewashed news sources and bowdlerized literature. For posterity's sake, it is incumbent on each of us to seize back the narrative – my second motivation for writing this book. Since the fall of 2014, Hong Kong has entered a new political era in which common sense is turned off, outright lies are delivered deadpan, and a spade is no longer called a spade. To borrow George Orwell's prophetic words: war is peace, freedom is slavery, ignorance is strength. The need to reclaim history has taken on an unprecedented urgency.

But that's not all. The occupy movement is under increasing attack not only by those in power, but also by the young men and women who took part in it. Disillusioned with inexperienced student leaders and embittered by their failure to achieve tangible political results, many protesters are now taking out their anger on the movement and calling it a farce or a waste of time. Proving that history is not without irony, the very people who were awoken and inspired by the occupy movement have now become its harshest critics. Their change of heart has broken mine – but it has motivated me all the more to mount a rebuttal.

This book will not and does not purport to please everyone. Readers of different political stripes may find parts of it too liberal, too sentimental, too critical of some groups and not critical enough of the others, too focused on one protest site and too perfunctory with the other two. As

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much as I have tried to cover all angles (and fill in the gaps by interviewing key decision-makers and participants), the picture I present is seen through my own viewfinder and therefore unavoidably idiosyncratic. It is but one version of the truth being argued in the Court of Rashomon. My failings will, I can only hope, encourage others to pick up a pen and contribute to the debate. When it comes to recording and reclaiming our history, the bookshelf can never get too crowded.

Not a day has gone by since the last protest site was dismantled that I haven't thought about the protests and the protesters who turned them into so much more. The Umbrella Movement has shown me possibilities in our future that I did not know existed. It has brought out qualities in our citizens that I did not think they possessed. It has reminded me that, no matter how hopeless and helpless we feel, Hong Kong is still a place worth fighting for. I was given a front row seat to behold the human spirit in full bloom. If I did nothing else in my life, if that was all that I ever did, it would have been enough. I have always wanted to do something to show my gratitude for this life-changing experience. And so I try, in the only way a writer knows how: I write.

Jason Y. Ng
Hong Kong, 2016