

C & G interviewing Edison about Hong Kong's Harcourt Road

Interview Date: 29th August, 2024

The interview was conducted in Hong Kong Cantonese.

The following is the English translation of the transcript.

C: Clara Cheung, G: Gum Cheng, E: Edison

G: [01:13] Alright, let's formally start the interview. Today is Thursday, August 29, 2024, and we're interviewing Edison at 226 Studio in the City Centre.

Edison, how did you first get to know Hong Kong's Harcourt Road?

E: [01:36] I'm actually not from Hong Kong Island, so Harcourt Road was just something I passed on the way to Lan Kwai Fong[a bustling area full of locals, expatriate, and tourists alike for clubbing and dining]—nothing special. My strongest impression was definitely the first night they fired tear gas, because that event stuck with me. Why? Because I'd arranged to play basketball that evening. I was at the basketball court waiting to play, and the police started firing tear gas that afternoon...

C:[02:11] In 2014?

E: [02:12] Yes, on that particular night. Everyone I knew was calling me, telling me to leave. I told them, "I'm not actually there; I'm at home waiting for my basketball game." But as I watched the livestreams and social media, I kept wondering, "Should I skip basketball?" Still, I'd really been looking forward to it. So I kept waiting, not knowing if I should go. Until my mom called and scolded me, refusing to believe I wasn't at the protest. She said, "Stop lying. Come home now." But I really was already home...

G: [03:14] So on September 28, your phone was blowing up with calls telling you to leave?

E: [03:19] People were asking where I was, telling me not to get involved. I kept replying, "I'm just at home playing video games, waiting to play basketball." After I finished playing, I told my wife, "This won't do. If I don't go out there, it's like I'm letting everyone down. People who know me expect I'd be there. Not going makes me feel guilty." So then we thought, "Where do we even go? Can we still get in? Do we go 'down there,' or somewhere else?" It was everyone's first experience of tear gas...

After the game, we hopped in the car. Anyway, we didn't know what to do or where to go. I called John Lau. He happened to be with another colleague, also a social worker, in North Point near the MTR station, collecting supplies. People who wanted to donate things could drop them there, and they'd transport them in. He was doing that, so I said, "I have a car. I'll drive stuff over." Meanwhile, a few friends said they

were also going. So we all piled in the car with the supplies and drove out. Then we got tear gassed—police kept firing tear gas. Another vivid memory from that night: When I went out there, I wasn't super brave. I just wanted to snap a photo, maybe get a whiff of tear gas because that was the first time Hong Kongers had experienced tear gas. I thought, "You only live once. How many chances in your life do you actually get to smell tear gas?" I even imagined if they fired a canister near me, I'd just kick it back—since I'm used to playing football. So I showed up on Harcourt Road with a carload of water. When you arrive, people say, "Do you have supplies? Great!" We had our masks on. My wife had even prepared an emergency card, in case I got arrested—a bit of cash, my ID. We went in without wallets. And there I was, essentially waiting to encounter tear gas...

G: [06:22] Your wife, Crystal, was with you?

E: [06:23] She didn't head straight into the tear gas zone. She stayed near the car, knowing I wouldn't rest easy if I didn't go. She just said, "Go for it. If you get arrested, let me know which station you end up at." I rushed forward. Suddenly, there was a tear gas canister in front of me about to go off. I sprinted over, ready to kick it. We all had masks on. But at the last second, someone grabbed me by the arm, called out my name, telling me not to kick it, and yanked me aside—then they kicked it themselves.

In a flash, I was dragged out of range, although I still caught some in my nose and eyes—sniffing and tearing up, my first time inhaling tear gas. Turns out the person who pulled me was an old schoolmate I hadn't seen in ages. I asked how he recognised me. He said, "You look like an idiot!" He explained that they'd been there all afternoon, and some people had already hurt their feet trying to kick canisters—because you're basically kicking a hard metal shell. If you want to kick it, you need protective padding on your foot, front and back. Anyway, I never got another chance that night, never found another perfect moment—a canister in front of me just before it blew. That moment belonged to my friend. It was funny: ten years since we'd last seen each other, and suddenly we're in that exact spot, and he yanks me back. Then he's the one who kicks it. That was my memory of Harcourt Road that night. The night before—people were at the entrance to the government headquarters.

08:48 That period was tense. People were shouting "Occupy Central!" At the time, I was working in Mainland China, surrounded by people who weren't that politically aware. When Benny Tai [a legal scholar who co-initiated 'Occupy Central with Love and Peace' in 2013, sparking the Occupy Movement in 2014. He remained involved in democratic efforts after the 2019 Anti-Extradition Bill Movement, notably co-organising the 2020 pro-democracy primaries] announced the start of Occupy Central. I happened to be in Hung Hom with my company. I was thinking of going alone—wasn't sure. I was waiting for a meeting with my boss. My boss arrived and, in a cool move, said, "Forget the meeting, let's go downstairs." So I was there on the scene when Benny Tai made the announcement. After it finished, I went home, waited for my basketball game the next day, and eventually showed up to the protest site really late—maybe around 11 p.m. or midnight. I rushed in but never got to kick a tear gas canister, got pulled aside, rinsed off. Then we faced off with the police on Harcourt Road. Another friend, who grew up in Canada, was with me. He was yelling at us, "Why so polite? If this happened in Canada, losing a match would lead to

setting cars on fire! Why are we just sitting here?” That made me think, “Are we being too civilised?” At that moment on Harcourt Road near Tim Mei Avenue, people were confronting the police. It made me wonder if we were being too restrained—like, “They’ve fired tear gas, and we’ve taken over this road. Do we just keep on sitting here, or what do we do next?”

Eventually, one or two days later, the road was effectively occupied. We decided we should pitch tents, so my wife and I ran out to Mong Kok, bought two tents—one for each of us—and set them up right opposite the gates of the government headquarters. We said, “If anything happens, this is the best vantage point—also great for social media check-ins!”(Laughs)

We slept there for a few nights, with friends coming by my tent, leaving stuff there. Another vivid memory: in the morning, Benny Tai came out once to chat with people—very casually, not on a mic, just asking for thoughts. I remember realising everyone had a different view. Some people suggested, ‘Why not do it like certain countries—just occupy on Saturdays?’ That hit me as ridiculous. I was in my late twenties back then, so I’d have just said, ‘Oh, cut it out,’ probably wagging my finger right in their face. But Benny Tai, being a gentleman, politely said, ‘We can consider that.’ That’s when I realised everyone sees things differently.

I also recall telling Benny Tai I didn’t think we’d succeed this time. I compared it to 1989’s Tiananmen Square Protests [in China], saying it might just be a seed. You’re all being so polite that even raising your voices scares you. You can’t just occupy a road and magically get what you want. I felt no single person dared step up to be the figurehead, the one who’d take all the hits. That’s why people were calling it a “leaderless” movement. Of course, in hindsight, that might have been good or bad. Maybe having a Sun Yat-sen type would help. But we weren’t there yet in 2014. It was just a seed. It also made me and my wife think about emigrating. We had just gotten married and were thinking about starting a family—we were still in that phase of imagining how bright the future could be, making plans about our child’s education. Then this happened, so naturally we had to consider whether our future could still be in Hong Kong. That’s a big part of why we ended up leaving in 2018.

Another standout memory from Harcourt Road was the study area—someone set up a self-study room, and there were even tutors helping students.

C: [17:18] Do you remember how they built that study area? It must have taken a lot of materials to put it all together.

E: [17:25] Early on, I think people just used whatever was on the street—taking apart railings, even digging up dirt, pushing around plants. With no police around, there was a sense that the law didn’t apply there—trust among people was incredibly strong. That feeling was unique and impossible to replicate.

C: [18:09] Do you recall any instances that showed that trust? Maybe a conversation, or borrowing something from strangers?

E: [18:17] If you said, “I need something,” someone would immediately hand it to you—whether tissues or water. It was amazing because everyone was a stranger to

each other. And since no one knew exactly what was going to happen next, it felt like you could say or do anything. I remember the walkways being completely covered in sticky notes—it was very beautiful. It was a really special time. As for the clearance, I wasn't there when it happened. I just watched on TV and saw them haul everything away. Then I thought, "Well, there goes my 500-dollar tent..."

C: [19:54] A big construction truck came and...

E: [19:56] Yeah, they just scooped it all up.

At that moment—whether you agreed with the direction things were taking or not—everyone had different approaches, different views. For example, Tanya Chan [a pro-democracy legislator, was active in the 2014 Occupy Movement and continued opposing the 2019 Extradition Bill in LegCo] and Leung Kwok-hung[a veteran social-democratic activist and former Legislative Council member, was active in both the 2014 Occupy Movement and the 2019 Anti-Extradition Bill Movement] were sitting at the front, arms folded, while Benny Tai and his group were essentially waiting for that final moment. You'd wonder, 'What are you doing?' But now, in fact, most of the people who were sitting there waiting for arrest are in prison. When you look back on it, all you can say is that they gave it their all—nothing more to it.

And the biggest shock was that it took 30 years—well, 25 years—after June Fourth 1989 [Tiananmen Square Protests] before something like 2014 happened, and then we never imagined that just five years later, we'd see 2019. It all happened so fast. That, to me, was really the starting point of everything. Harcourt Road was where so many people's political awakening began—a seed planted right at that moment."

C: [21:36] "Let me ask more about the tent. You mentioned putting things inside. Over several months, did it change at all? You touched on that sense of trust—how people respected each other's space: 'Your tent is your stuff, I won't go in'—or maybe you'd share or let others sleep there. How did that actually work?"

E: [22:01] Well, with that tent, it was basically understood that it wasn't really 'yours'—no one would go in or touch it if it wasn't theirs. Everyone had a lot of respect for each other's tent. On the contrary, people kept adding to them—decorating with lights or artwork. In the mornings, there really were people making breakfast and sometimes leaving cookies, soda, or other drinks right outside your tent door. It was this wonderful little surprise—I found it really special."

C: [22:41] How did you all manage water and electricity? Did you bring everything back home when you were done, or go someplace else?"

E: [22:50] In the end, everything just got hauled away by the police during the clearance(laughs).They never told you when they'd do it, so you couldn't prepare. You knew it might happen, so you didn't keep valuables inside. You assumed it could get cleared at any time.

G: [23:25] Would you say this experience was unlike anything else you'd gone through? You never experienced something similar in school, right?

E: [23:50] I'd always been frustrated and cynical about the government, but 2014

was the first time I really asked myself, ‘Other than just complaining, what concrete actions can we take?’ It made me reflect on fairness, justice, freedom—things we’d taken for granted. You only realise how important they are when you might lose them. And you see that you can’t rely on others to defend them for you because everyone has different ideas. If you know your history, you know cycles like this happen periodically, but it hadn’t happened in Hong Kong for a while, so neither my generation nor my parents’ knew what to do.

My parents immigrated from the mainland, then rode Hong Kong’s economic boom and retired. They never went through real persecution. So by 2014, we really were at a loss. Before I got UK permanent residency, I worked in the mainland for quite a while, and I used to say, “I’m Chinese, so what? Why not overthrow the mainland government, not just the Hong Kong government?” I’d fantasise about ways to spread that message. I knew about advanced surveillance, but I also thought about how the revolutionaries 100 years ago did it with pigeons. Anyway, even after I emigrated, I still had a bit of that revolutionary spark, wondering if there was something I could do, even if I wasn’t the Sun Yat-sen figure. But eventually, I let things be, leaving it to fate.

In any case, regarding Harcourt Road, that experience made me understand what government, systems, institutions, and laws really are—it was a crash course in political awakening. It made me wonder why I was dealing with such heavy topics in my twenties. But it all started there, on Harcourt Road in 2014.

G: [29:04] So the Harcourt Road occupation—or the entire Umbrella Movement—was very significant to you?

E: [29:11] Yes, very. It taught me how to look more closely at how governments and institutions operate, how people can be terrifying or manipulative in pursuit of their goals and how people can justify or package their actions.

C: [29:50] During the 79 days, there were lots of ups and downs—debates about how to proceed. For instance, in the Admiralty site, some wanted to charge forward; others said they shouldn’t. Marshals thought certain orders had to be kept. Do you recall any friction around those decisions?

E: [30:31] I remember the night before it all started, the mood was already hectic. Benny Tai declared Occupy Central while I was there. I also recall seeing Wong Young-tat, who is now basically off the radar. At the time, I told my boss that he’s smart. While everyone was at the Central Government Office gate, he positioned himself across on Harcourt Road. When something happened, he already had a group there.”

C: [32:15] When it comes to different factions, different strategies, or disagreements throughout the occupation, do you recall any specific incidents of people wanting to do certain things?

E: [32:31] People were always discussing it. Whenever we sat down, we’d discuss how many people had shown up, what you might do next. Of course everyone had a different opinion, but you could only deal with the immediate moment. Nobody knew

what might happen two hours later—maybe riot police would show up from the tunnel, or a bunch of reporters would arrive, or they'd spray us with something, or something else might happen on the other side. One side shouts, and suddenly a bunch of stuff is hauled over; then the other side shouts, and more things move back. A lot of people would say, 'Let's just do the best we can now and see how it goes.' Nobody was planning, 'Once we gather enough people, we'll declare independence.' And you had some more timid folks, particularly older people close to retirement, who would say, 'Keep this up and tanks will roll in!' I recall older social workers warning about that. We'd just think, 'Alright, then you can stand off to the side...'

C: [34:17] About demographics: near your tent or nearby, did you see older folks, younger folks? The study area might have had more students. Do you recall the overall age spread?

E: [34:32] There weren't many under, say, 14 or 15. Likewise, those in their 30s or 40s who had families usually couldn't stay overnight. So the main crowd was late teens up to about 30, plus some nearing retirement in their 50s or 60s.

G: [35:10] So quite some secondary school and university students?

E: [35:11] Absolutely, which is why we had the study area. Meanwhile, office workers in suits would come by after work to take a quick smoke, breathe in that sense of freedom, and then leave. Those who actually slept there, were mainly in that 10-to-30 age range.

G: [35:51] You also slept there, right? What was it like overnight? Were you ever afraid you'd wake up and find the place cleared? What was your state of mind?

E: [36:17] Back then, we still had a certain... impression of the police.

G: [36:24] Like you didn't think they'd go too far?

E: [36:26] Exactly. I distinctly remember going around the corner by the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts in just shorts—no shirt—together with my wife. We turned a corner and saw maybe 50 or 60 riot police resting on the stairs. I literally posed in front of them, asked my wife to snap a photo of me shirtless. They were just sitting there resting. It never crossed my mind that they'd do anything. In those days, police and protesters weren't at total odds yet. Everyone's anger was directed at C.Y. Leung [then Hong Kong Chief Executive amid Occupy Movement]. We wanted universal suffrage. There was no talk of Carrie Lam [Hong Kong Chief Executive from 2017–2022, amid the 2019 Anti-Extradition Bill Movement] back then—that's a later chapter. I wasn't around for that. So the 2014 Harcourt Road moment is what I remember best.

G: [38:42] You left Hong Kong in 2018. Have you been back since?

E: [38:49] No. At one point, I wanted to go back in late 2019 [amid Anti-Extradition Bill Movement], around December, during the The Hong Kong Polytechnic

University(PolyU) siege[major flashpoint of the protests in late 2019, where prolonged campus standoffs between protesters and police involved police sieges, barricades, tear gas, and mass arrests—turning university grounds into intense battlegrounds and drawing global attention].

I wanted to try my hand at kicking tear gas canisters again. My friend was inside PolyU. We'd only met in 2014 on the front lines—like in Mong Kok when triads came out to beat people, we fought them off together, then lost touch. When I heard he was inside PolyU, I told my wife I might fly back with my camera and gear, because I'd regret not doing anything. But right as I was thinking that, my friend managed to escape—he ran out onto the streets and eventually made it to Sheffield, near Doncaster, and now he has a baby. So it all turned out okay. But that was my most impulsive moment.

When we left, we didn't have BNO status, I'd already prepared myself to make a clean break—my roots had been uprooted. I had no strong intention of going back—until that point in 2019. When we first emigrated, I stayed home watching live streams[about the updates of the protests] day and night, feeling frustrated—especially since it's happening on the other side of the world and you can't do anything about it. I recall that by the time PolyU was besieged, some protesters had already fled to the UK, and we started helping them out. Many were even younger. At that point, all I could really do was ship over to Hong Kong respirators or whatever gear the protestors needed.

My friend in PolyU sent me a photo of a “gadget”, a keychain—a little spring and metal ball that he wondered if it could snap plastic ties if you were trapped. So I bought ten and shipped them over. I carried one myself, thinking it was precious. Then someone told me it was useless, and when I tested it, yeah, it didn't work. Haha. Just a funny little anecdote.

C: [42:52] Did you meet anyone during the 2014 Occupy Movement who became a friend afterward?

E: [43:06] Not really in 2014. People were cautious—worried about undercover cops, so we didn't share contact info. If I already knew you, fine, but meeting new people on-site didn't usually turn into an actual friendship. My wife was with me, so I was also somewhat reserved.

G: [43:52] So it wasn't just you—likely everyone was that way? They'd chat and help each other out but maintain some boundaries?

E: [44:12] Yes. Often you saw small groups of two or three. Maybe you'd bump into each other by a trash can for a smoke and chat a bit. Kind of like how you'd talk to someone else on a quick smoke break.

G: [44:33] Could you describe how people interacted or communicated in the occupation area? Did they come up and talk to each other much?

E: [45:20] People didn't usually just randomly say hi. But if you shouted “Add oil!,” someone would respond the same. For deeper interaction, it was mostly about helping with tasks—moving supplies, tying up barricades. You'd jump in, lend a

hand, share opinions: “No, not like that. Maybe do it this way.” And sometimes artists were painting the barricades. In 2014, there wasn’t a culture of throwing anything at the police. We were in a defensive posture—just in case. We were still novices compared to 2019, with the petrol bombs and stronger counterattacks. Back then, people took lots of creative approaches, though, with graffiti and slogans. On Harcourt Road, there was total freedom to express your dissatisfaction—stickers of CY Leung’s face on the ground to stomp on some symbolic shrines. It was unique and rare.

G: [47:26] If you had to describe your own role during the occupation—were you a fully engaged protester, more of a participant, or just a bystander?

E: [47:53] More like a “check-in photo guy.” I was more like the person who’d rush in just long enough to snap a picture that looked really risky—like a quick photo-op from a safe distance. (Laughs) Because I’m somewhat athletic, I trusted myself physically, so I could get a bit closer. As long as I’m 10 meters away, I can outrun them [police]. They’re weighed down with gear. And because it wasn’t like 2019—nobody was throwing anything—the police would disperse people, and we’d just scatter. That was the dynamic.

C: [49:42] You mentioned watching the clearance on TV. Did you ever revisit Harcourt Road afterward? Because the vibe changed completely once the occupation ended.

E: [50:05] Only in passing, like on the way to Lan Kwai Fong or driving. But before I left Hong Kong for good, I did specifically walk around there—crossed the footbridge, walked down, revisited the places I had memories, lit a cigarette, mentally said goodbye. Since you can’t preserve it, the least you can do is say a proper farewell. After that, I mostly drove by. I never expected that only a few months after I left—January 2019, then fully by March—everything would explode in June 2019. Some friends told me if I’d stayed, I definitely would’ve been arrested. Maybe I’d be dead or in jail. We’ll never know. I sometimes joke in a parallel universe, maybe I ended up as a leader with my face plastered on walls in the Tiananmen Square [in Beijing]. (Laughs)

G: [52:11] You mentioned revisiting for a “last look.” So that place must hold significance for you, right?

E: [52:54] I wouldn’t call it home or any sort of mission or obligation. But it’s incredibly rare to experience something so historically significant while you’re still at a prime stage in life—before you have kids and major family responsibilities. Usually, we only read about these events or hear them mentioned by others—like June Fourth, or older uprisings—and we can’t imagine what it was truly like. But in 2014, we were there. I wonder how future generations will view this history; likewise, it makes me realize we only read about certain periods—like the three years and eight months of Japanese occupation—mostly for exam points, never truly grasping what people went through back then, especially with limited historical records. For 2014, though, we were physically on the scene. So for me, it wasn’t a matter of seeing that place as ‘home.’ It was more about doing my utmost to feel and absorb what was

happening around me at that particular historic moment, and that was enough. Even now, I still see it that way.”

G: [55:15] If you could go back ten years...

E: [55:23] I’d definitely kick that tear gas canister. I regret not doing that. I always tell my friend the same. He became a real front-liner in 2019. Back then, we said we’d never have kids—we were so disillusioned with everything—never return to Hong Kong, etc. but now that’s all changed, haha. So the environment really does change your outlook. Things have shifted drastically. Today’s Hong Kong isn’t the one we knew, yet in my mind, it’s still that bright, lively place: Lan Kwai Fong for partying and Harcourt Road for free expression. That’s the image I hold onto, even after 2019.

G: [57:09] One last question: have you visited any place in the UK or elsewhere called “Harcourt”?

E: [57:21] Not that I recall—no.

G: [57:43] That’s all for now. Thanks so much!