

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

Interview Date: 10th 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: Eric

G: [00:03] Today is August 10, a Saturday. We are currently in Studio 226 in Sheffield, and the time is 7:01 PM. We are interviewing Eric now. Hello! This interview won't be too long, about an hour. It's a relaxed conversation about yourself. If there are any questions you find difficult to answer, you don't have to answer them.

E: [00:44] Okay.

G: [00:39] First, I'd like to ask about your background. Could you introduce yourself? How did you come to Sheffield? Where did you come from?

E: [00:59] I am from mainland China. I came to Sheffield for my studies. I applied to Sheffield University in 2022 for a Master's programme. I started with a Pre-Master's course and then officially began my Master's degree in September 2023. So, I have been in the UK for about a year and eight months now.

G: [01:30] So, have you graduated?

E: [01:33] Almost.

G: [01:35] And currently, it's summer break?

E: [01:37] Yes.

G: [01:40] I won't ask about your studies (laughs). I noticed you have some connections to Harcourt Road. What are your thoughts on Harcourt Road in Sheffield? Do you have any impressions or knowledge about it?

E: [02:05] First, my faculty is Politics and International Relations. The faculty building is located opposite Harcourt Road in Sheffield—well, not exactly opposite, but across the street. Since I drive to university, I pass Harcourt Road every day.

G: [02:36] Oh, so you drive up from Crookes Valley Park, via Crookes Valley Road?

E: [02:42] Yes, I take the entire route—past the Arts Tower, then turn left into Harcourt Road. After driving down Harcourt Road, I will reach the university sports stadium.

G: [03:06] I see. So, about Harcourt Road... You must be familiar with Harcourt Road in Hong Kong as well?

E: [03:18] Yes.

G: Over the past year and a half, you've regularly passed Harcourt Road in

Sheffield. How does it compare to the one in Hong Kong? Do you have any different feelings about the two places?

E: [03:35] Walking down Harcourt Road in Sheffield is very peaceful and calm. But when I walked down Harcourt Road in Hong Kong, it was much more intense (laughs).

G: [03:48] Hmm... Would it be fair to say that your time on Harcourt Road in Hong Kong was mostly during social movements?

E: [04:02] Yes, during that period... 2019.

G: [04:05] If you were in Hong Kong and encountered Harcourt Road, was there a particular time frame when you spent the most time there?

E: [04:14] The summer of 2019. That was when I experienced it firsthand.

G: [04:21] The summer of 2019... that was a particularly intense period.

E: [04:31] I think the most intense moment was probably during the Polytechnic University siege. But I was busy then and couldn't be there.

G: [04:42] Can you describe your circumstances in Hong Kong? Were you there for studies, or was there another reason? (Pauses) Would it be inconvenient to talk about?

E: [05:06] Hong Kong was still considered a shopping paradise at that time. Many people went there to shop. The second reason... There's a phrase, though not entirely accurate, that Hong Kong was a stepping stone for migration. Regardless of the pathway, even if I just wanted to study abroad, my English test scores were taken in Hong Kong multiple times.

G: [05:40] I agree. It was indeed a stepping stone (laughs).

E: [05:51] So, I went to Hong Kong for language tests, shopping, tourism, and transit flights. Since Hong Kong had no sales tax, air tickets were often cheaper.

G: [06:07] Understood. In 2019, you frequently visited Hong Kong. Were you involved in the Anti-Extradition Bill Movement?

E: [06:34] I observed (laughs).

G: [06:36] Okay. You would have known about the movement through various channels. Compared to the mainland, was it difficult to access this information there?

E: [06:56] Mainland media did cover it, but always with a particular narrative. We saw news reports, but they would always frame it as the actions of a small group of "troublemakers."

G: [07:15] I see. We didn't have access to those reports, so I wouldn't know how they described it.

E: [07:23] The focus was on amplifying the actions of protesters while emphasising police victimhood to elicit sympathy. They never explained the root causes behind the movement; they never provided the full context of why Hong Kongers took to the streets in protest. They just reported on so-called ‘riots’ occurring at specific times and locations.

G: [08:07] Right. We knew the Anti-Extradition Bill proposed allowing criminal suspects in Hong Kong to be extradited to China for trial. That was the core of our opposition.

E: [08:30] That was never covered in mainland China’s media. Instead, they labeled events like “Reclaim Yuen Long” [a protest held on 27 July 2019 in Hong Kong’s Yuen Long district. It arose in response to violent attacks against protesters and passersby in Yuen Long MTR Station on 21 July] as violent riots while never mentioning the 721 incident [a mob attack on 21 July 2019 during the 2019–2020 protests in Hong Kong. A group of white-clad men stormed Yuen Long metro station and assaulted protesters returning from a demonstration in Sheung Wan, as well as bystanders] - they highlighted incidents like the “Reclaim Yuen Long” without acknowledging its cause.

G: [08:44] Oh, so when they spoke about the violence in Yuen Long, were they referring to the white-shirted assailants or the black-clad protesters?

E: [08:59] They blamed the black-clad protesters—talking about incidents on July 27 and 28 but never acknowledging that people entered Yuen Long because of the 721 incident towards the black-clad protesters by the white-shirted assailants. That’s just one example.

G: [09:11] I see. That must create significant misunderstandings. If people in mainland China are only exposed to that kind of news, it can lead to big misunderstandings. Anyway, you spent some time in Hong Kong, where you received information that might differ from what’s available in mainland China. When you arrived here in Hong Kong, you encountered the Anti-Extradition Bill Movement—some of which, more or less, took place on Harcourt Road. So, when these events happened on Harcourt Road, did they make you think of the Occupy Movement from ten years ago, back in 2014?

E: [10:13] I was too young at the time.

G: [10:16] Hmm, but hypothetically, would you have been present on Harcourt Road in 2019?

E: Yes.

G: Would that have made you recall the Occupy Movement in 2014... the events of ten years ago? Or at the time, did you not have much... not much awareness of it?

E: [10:44] I knew about the Occupy Central movement, and I also knew about those... Back then, I had heard a song by My Little Airport [a Hong Kong indie band] called *Tonight, Let’s Sleep Together on Connaught Road Central*.... But I didn’t

associate Occupy Central, the Occupy Movement, and the 2019 [social movement] with Harcourt Road. Not at the time.

G: [11:19] I see. Then let's talk more about the Anti-Extradition Bill Movement... that incident. How did the Anti-Extradition Bill Movement affect you? Did it influence your values, your way of life, or your aspirations in any way?

E: [11:55] In the past, I always said that Hong Kong was my enlightenment in democracy. With the changes in Hong Kong, I feel like I've lost a goal, a direction, or even a teacher. It's very heartbreaking because... ever since I was young, I had dreams of emigrating, my first choice was always to go to Hong Kong.

G: [12:38] And now? Do you still want to stay in Hong Kong?

E: [12:44] Honestly, now I'm brave enough to go back to China, but I wouldn't dare go to Hong Kong (laughs)... Yes, I dare to go back to China (laughs)... I'm familiar with how things work over there. But, if I ever wanted to go to Hong Kong just to shop and got detained, I wouldn't even know. I wouldn't know which lawyer to contact. I have no idea who could help me in that situation.

G: [13:16] Hmm, so would you say you're very disappointed in Hong Kong?

E: [13:26] The sentences handed down [by Hong Kong courts] are actually harsher than those in mainland China.

G: [13:28] Hmm... So, for example, those who participated in the Anti-Extradition Bill Movement—those we refer to as political prisoners—are you saying that their sentences are even heavier than those given by mainland courts? That even without a final verdict, even before being officially convicted, some have already been imprisoned for three years?

E: Yes (laughs).

G: [14:04] (Laughs) But isn't that also the case in mainland China?

E: [14:08] Actually, in mainland China, we're not talking about the leaders here. If we're talking about ordinary participants—not people like Jimmy Lai, because he's a bigger figure—if we're just talking about the most ordinary participants, like Tong Ying-kit [the first protester in 2019 charged under the 2020 National Security Law, was sentenced to 9 years in prison] or others who were only slightly involved - for regular participants, in China, they usually just try to scare you. They wouldn't hold you for too long. They put some pressure on you, and if you know how to say the right things, appease them a little, they'll usually...let you go fairly quickly. You might not even end up with a criminal record.

They might just impose an administrative penalty on you, and once they've accomplished their mission and are satisfied, you're free to go. I'm talking about ordinary participants here. In Hong Kong, however, ordinary participants are arrested, held for trial, and sentenced to prison. No matter if it's three months or six months, you still end up with a criminal record.

G: [15:40] Yes, yes—there’s definitely a record that you can’t get rid of. In contrast, there seems to be a difference in sentencing. I wasn’t aware of this difference until you mentioned it earlier about Harcourt Road. So, for instance, regarding the anti-extradition protests—during the 2019 movement, whether through newspapers or your personal experience, was there anything that left the deepest impression on you? Something that made you feel profoundly moved at that moment? Do you have any examples in that regard?

E: [16:48] I think there are two events. The first was on June 12, when tear gas was fired at elderly people, families picnicking, or citizens in the park. The second event—I can’t recall if it was during the second or third reading [of Extradition Bill], but it was after June 12—was when, very early on, I saw on the news that Hong Kong people had already surrounded the Legislative Council, preventing legislators from entering to vote on the Extradition Bill (it should have been during the second reading). These two incidents struck me the most: one was the abuse of power by the police, and the other was the genuine unity among Hong Kong people.

G: [17:54] That might be a slight tangent, but back then we all deeply felt that unity—truly a strong sense of togetherness. Now, after the pandemic, with people being completely isolated. Once that separation occurred, I feel that the sense of unity disintegrated very quickly.

G: [00:03]

Now, let’s continue our interview with Eric...

E: You mentioned that unity fell apart very quickly.

G: [00:15] Ah, yes, I think so too. And now... It’s so easy—mutual trust has almost completely disappeared. Back then, during the later stages of the social movements, there was frequent catching “spies”, so trust vanished quickly. Society is really very different. I’m not saying you’re disappointed—I am disappointed too with Hong Kong.

E: [00:50] Everyone’s become just people who only care about getting to work (laughs).

G: [00:53] (Laughs) Yes. Now, here’s a question: You’ve lived in mainland China for a long time. In the Mainland, have you seen anything similar—for example, during the Occupy Movement at Harcourt Road, or in 2019—where protesters, even if they were strangers, united to take action? Any examples of that kind of solidarity in mainland China?

E: [01:34] mainland China? But do you mean demonstrations not necessarily related to Hong Kong matters?

G: [01:40] Yes, not necessarily about Hong Kong issues.

E: [01:42] Yes, we did. At our school in 2019—it was pretty obvious—some schools, well, I won’t name names, but I’ll say our school. In 2019, our school faced a crisis—a risk of being shut down. Although now it’s no longer just a risk but a done deal; our school has been effectively “killed.” At that time, during the summer of 2019, we all

marched together at night, even surrounding the principal, and of course, the public security bureau sent a lot of officers over.

G: [02:35] Was this a university?

E: [02:37] Yes, it was a university. We were facing the shutdown of our school, and we definitely didn't want that to happen.

The whole incident wasn't reported by any mainland media; only Hong Kong media came to cover it. I recall later posts by HK 01 and Oriental Daily—both reported on the incident.

G: [03:15] So you mean that working together was a protest against the school shutdown?

E: [03:25] Yes.

G: [03:25] Was the shutdown something sudden and unexpected, or was it carried out for some unreasonable reason?

E: [03:40] Our school was a relatively prestigious one—you could call it a “parent university.” It had a partnership with the local government, and then the central government stepped in, stating that local authorities should run the school in a certain way. They took it back from the local government, and it became part of that parent university. We were an independent university, but then it was taken over. All along, the school was self-financing, entirely supported by the high tuition fees paid by students. And once it was well established, they shut it down. In other words, all the facilities, the teaching staff, every asset was built up bit by bit by many generations of students. After we had invested so much money, the central authorities said they were taking it back.

G: [05:02] So it's similar to nationalisation? (laughs)

E: [05:04] Yes (laughs), the central government said they were taking it back. And then our university, which once enjoyed a high degree of autonomy (laughs), ended up in a similar situation to Hong Kong. Essentially, we built a school with our own money—money from countless students—and now it's been taken back under central management. At that time, we also surrounded the principal, not letting him leave work, and a lot of police were sent over. We even used an excuse that one student had lost his campus card, so we all sat together to help look for it (laughs); we searched for several nights (laughs).

G: [05:58] It was like things on the street—like accidentally scattered a lot of coins on the road—a huge mess, as if everything had to be taken back.

E: [06:06] And we also had another action: a marathon-style rotation of occupying the school gate. Yes, everyone took turns standing there; some even set up tents to sleep, and parents participated as well. In fact, both incidents were very similar—they happened during the same period (laughs).

G: [06:32] So when you mention surrounding the principal's office, wasn't the

principal perhaps at fault? Was he made a target of oppression, or was he forced to explain something? Should that have been the case?

E: [06:55] Because, in the end, he wasn't transferred to Beijing; he got a promotion (laughs). He was promoted, like that former policeman who was promoted to become the Secretary for Security in Hong Kong (laughs).

G: [07:11] These really do seem very similar...

E: [07:15] Yes, indeed—their methods of handling things are the same.

G: [07:19] The tactics are exactly the same, they can use such tactics to push you upward—for instance, if you've been a high-ranking official or have been promoted several times, why wouldn't you agree? Once you see through it, you begin to understand a bit more.

E: [07:41] We also went through what you might call a “student washing” phase. For example, starting after the final year, they gradually filled the school with students who couldn't afford the high tuition fees. Meanwhile, the school's shops would just close down or move out. This process went on until they'd completely “washed out” the old body, and by this year they announced, “Okay, we're not enrolling anymore,” so that school—essentially, our branch school—was reverted back into just a campus.

G: [08:16] It's essentially like a complete castration.

E: [08:26] Yes, it's totally castrated.

G: [08:28] But why adopt such an approach? From what you're saying, the school was running well—collecting fees and operating self-sufficiently. In mainland China, it isn't easy for a school to be fully self-financing. It was basically on track, yet suddenly... Was it because someone got envious, or was there another reason?

E: [08:56] We probably thought that our school could indeed operate self-sufficiently. We had many excellent exchange programmes and extensive cooperation with other institutions, which might have given our school a certain prestige. Perhaps, out of that concern for losing that aura, they decided to join forces with the central government to force the local government to hand the school over.

G: [09:23] And that situation is basically a microcosm of what's happening in Hong Kong, isn't it? It's like a miniature reflection—interesting, though you wouldn't really call it “interesting” in a positive sense—but it does help you understand things more clearly, and really gain insight.

E: [09:41] That's one reason why I feel a deeper empathy for what's happening in Hong Kong.

G: [09:47] Let me ask another thing. For instance, the 2019 anti-extradition protests have been officially labeled a “colour revolution” in Hong Kong—viewed as an outright revolution. If they weren't defined that way, those arrested couldn't be charged under such severe laws. They have to be classified as part of a revolution.

You've seen or read quite a bit about this on TV and in newspapers. Do you think it's worthwhile to learn about this period in depth? Is it something that really makes a difference—in other words, is coming to Hong Kong to see these events firsthand worth it?

E: [11:02] I believe that maintaining a high level of transparency is essential so that people can make the right judgments. You can't simply report selectively—as I mentioned earlier—only mentioning, say, that at a certain minute there was an arson or that something was thrown, without explaining the context, like the transfer of suspects or whatever. If you leave out the background and just report that someone threw a bottle or damaged a street, that's very unfair and unreasonable. So, ensuring that everyone has a clear understanding is crucial, and in that sense, I do think it's worthwhile. No matter how events ultimately turn out—none of us can control that—but if you can spread the information and let more people know about it, then everyone can form their own judgment.

G: [12:33] Our project is called "Harcourt Road," and I'd like to know how you remember Harcourt Road in Hong Kong—or even Harcourt Road in Sheffield. Aside from walking down it every day and noticing the community there, do you really know anything about what the local residents do or how their community operates? Or are you not very familiar with it?

In our previous interviews with other people, some of those who once lived on Harcourt Road—or nearby—or studied at a university in Sheffield, they all know Sheffield's Harcourt Road. They know the street because many university students live there. Do you know any students who live on Sheffield's Harcourt Road?

E: [14:23] I don't know any, I really don't.

G: [14:24] I see. They say that Sheffield University once owned several—maybe even over twenty—properties there. At one point, there was even a plan to rent out these properties to students for further development, to renovate and repackage them for student accommodation. However, the local residents on Harcourt Road opposed this. They felt that if everything were rented exclusively to students—if all the properties were for student housing—then the community on that street wouldn't be able to sustain itself; students might live there for one, two, or at most three years before leaving. So, the residents argued with Sheffield University, insisting that if properties are to be sold, they shouldn't be sold solely to investors focused on student rentals—they should be sold to families, to households, not to landlords or developers. And that's why, when we sometimes run the Harcourt Road project, we hear that the people of Sheffield's Harcourt Road really unite together to fight for their community. We feel that their attitude is similar to that of Hong Kong people—even during the Occupy Movement ten years ago, when people shared resources and fought together. The underlying philosophies seem somewhat alike, which is why we wanted to do such an event. It's all about revealing the details of everyday life on Harcourt Road, which previously weren't well understood.

E: [16:39] (*Shakes head.*)

G: [16:41] So what about Hong Kong's Harcourt Road? Do you have any particular

impressions or deeply memorable events related to Hong Kong's Harcourt Road?

E: [16:53] Memorable events... Honestly, I'd say the most profound is still what happened in the 612 incident [an intense confrontation between anti-extradition bill protesters and the Hong Kong Police Force on 12 June 2019 outside the government headquarters. The peaceful protesters were faced with an onslaught of tear gas, rubber bullets, pepper spray, and baton charges-violence leveled by the police.]. 612 remains the defining incident sometimes... In this city of Hong Kong, I've always been merely a visitor, so I can't really say that Harcourt Road has a resident community.

G: [17:38] Harcourt Road in Hong Kong doesn't have a resident community at all (laughs).

E: [17:40] I'm really not very familiar with it. I do go to the parks, check out the waterfront, and of course, when I ride a bus I always pass along Harcourt Road on the main thoroughfare. But since I've never lived in this area, it's hard for me to develop that kind of rooted connection. Honestly, I'd need to live in Sheffield to truly understand who lives there and what the community background is like.

G: [18:32] Yes, that's fine...In the end, do you have any final remarks?

E: [19:13] Many people ask me—as someone seen as an outsider—though I feel I'm only half an outsider; many consider me a complete outsider. They often ask, "Do you think what Hong Kong people did was meaningful?" I say, whether it's encouragement or advice, that every group in any historical period has its own mission or role here. I believe that Hong Kong people did the best they could between 2019 and 2020—they sent a clear message to the entire world. So if someone asks whether what was done back then was meaningful, the answer is yes. As for what Hong Kong people should do now, ...well, I shouldn't say "we" but rather "you" (laughs)... you overseas Hong Kongers should continue to pass on this message, so that more people understand what happened back then. Ideally, the hope is that the growing discontent within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) will continue to build, and that over time this build-up will gradually inform people inside about what the CCP did in Hong Kong—prompting more to side with Hong Kong and even more with Taiwan. In fact, siding with Hong Kong is essentially equivalent to siding with Taiwan. I've always believed that spreading this message is extremely important—whether in the past, now, or in the future, I hope more Hong Kongers and Taiwanese share these messages with more Chinese people. You must understand that Chinese people have been deceived by the CCP for a long time, and if we truly want to realise the ideal expressed in those sixteen characters, it will ultimately depend on an internal collapse—which inevitably comes with losing all public support. So I think any of these activities, these so-called cultural events, are meaningful—whether publicised more among international students or otherwise. Regardless of what stance international students take, the key is to make sure they know what's happened. If it sinks in, then later—if they happen to be bullied by the CCP—they might recall these events. Just like our school shut down incident, many people eventually became indifferent to Hong Kong. But when the crackdown comes to their own door, they remember that what happened to us and what happened in Hong Kong are quite similar, and that can unite many people.

G: [23:36] Thank you for those encouraging words.

E: [23:41] Also, it was quite a coincidence—in Sheffield, the first friend I made was a Hong Konger (I met him in a U[niversity] So[ciety] group). That first Hong Kong friend then introduced me to others, and soon I was hanging out with a group of Hong Kongers. After about half a year of this, I gradually started to pick up my Cantonese accent again—those lazy pronunciations started coming back, haha. When I participate in these events, I've never proactively said where I'm from. If someone asks, "Are you Hong Konger too?" I'd give an awkward laugh, but I wouldn't say I'm... not that I'm pretending to be anything I'm not. I haven't declared it, but since you all assume I am, I avoid drawing too much suspicion. After all, in today's environment, if someone asks, "Are you from Hong Kong?" and I say, "No, I'm from the Mainland" (laughs), then such issues wouldn't arise.

G: [25:03] Thank you for your effort. That concludes our interview—thank you.