

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

Interview Date:19th July, 2024

The interview was conducted in Hong Kong Cantonese.

The following is the English translation of the transcript.

C: Clara Cheung, G: Gum Cheng, J: John

G:[00:05] Today is Friday, July 19, 2024. The time is 11:24 a.m. in Sheffield. We're now interviewing Mr. John Lau. Hello, we'll officially begin now.

J: [00:25] Sure.

G: [00:28] How did you come to know about Hong Kong's Harcourt Road? Do you recall when you first became aware of Harcourt Road?

J: [00:45] Well, I'm getting on in years, so I've heard of the name "Harcourt Road" for a long time. When I started working in Admiralty, I was aware that place was called Harcourt Road—back then it was a military barracks, decades ago. But now it's the government headquarters. Of course, the clearest memory is from the Occupy movement. I spent some time there—well, I didn't literally sleep there overnight, but I stayed there for a while. I was working in Wan Chai, so whenever I got off work, I'd walk over there and sit down. So Harcourt Road is definitely not unfamiliar to me.

G: [01:28] Before the Occupy movement started, had you visited Harcourt Road much?

J: [01:36] I didn't usually label roads in my head, like, "Oh, that one is Harcourt Road or that one is Electric Road," or anything that specific. But I knew that area well. To me, it felt like a premium district, full of high-end office buildings, and back then, there were a few newly built luxury hotels. It's a transportation hub, too, so you can catch a minibus or bus or MTR from there. I was always around that area, though at the time I couldn't tell you which exact street was Harcourt Road. I remember Pacific Place being built there, which was decades ago.

G: [02:33] What significance does Harcourt Road hold for you? If you look at it broadly across different times in your life, how significant is Harcourt Road?

J: [02:46/03:37] To be honest, before the Occupy movement, it wasn't particularly significant to me. It was just a place I passed through to catch a bus. But after Pacific Place was built, it felt quite upscale in those days—and it still is—a high-end mall. Pacific Place was a big deal; after it was completed, the area got an upgrade—very fancy, with many interesting shops. I worked in Wan Chai, so I would sometimes specifically walk over to Pacific Place to catch the bus, simply because it felt nicer.

Also, at one point, there were commercial art galleries in Pacific Place—back before the 1997 handover—on the third floor, selling Chinese paintings. I remember thinking, “Wow, these are amazing—how do they paint like that?” (Laughs) Now I can paint, too, haha.

C: [04:16] Great. Let’s move on to the 2014 time period. Harcourt Road takes on a different meaning during the Occupy Movement. How was it for you back then?

J: [04:36] Back in 2014, there was Occupy Central. Several main figures were involved, like 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] and Shiu Ka-chun[a former social worker and legislator, played a pivotal role in mobilising grassroots support during the 2014 Occupy Movement and later emerged as a prominent advocate for civil liberties and social justice in the 2019 protests], who are good friends of mine. I was in contact with them pretty often. They were there to occupy, and that made Harcourt Road feel much closer to me in a personal sense. I was there on the first night of Occupy.

C: [05:07] You mean the very first day, September 28th?

J: [05:13] Yes. I was there that day, and then I went to North Point MTR Station to help collect supplies. So I didn’t stay overnight, but that evening had a huge impact on me—it felt like the whole world had changed. And in some ways, it really did change. Harcourt Road became “the place” at that moment. Later on, people occupied that space, and I would head over almost every night after work, sometimes just walking around. My nephew, Edison, had two tents there. I would often hang out at Edison’s campsite, lying down or resting there. It felt so peaceful at the time—unimaginably so. Who would have thought it’d turn out the way it did later?

C: [06:15] Do you remember the scene in that occupied space, or “site”? You mentioned there were tents and so on. What else was happening there? What kinds of people or events do you recall?

J: [06:36] I remember some people were doing their homework or studying there. They had somehow set up tables and chairs as study areas. Then there were folks handing out sweet soup, like it was a carnival—people giving out refreshments, playing the cello and so on. The whole thing felt really peaceful. And it had a kind of community vibe, too. At the time, Mong Kok was also occupied, but that atmosphere was very different. I remember in Mong Kok, once someone threw a glass bottle from above. I happened to be right there when it happened. Mong Kok felt a lot more chaotic, whereas Admiralty—Harcourt Road—was calm and... well, “gentle,” if you will. Mong Kok was quite wild.

G: [07:32] Yes, we went to Mong Kok more often back then, and we had the same impression.

J: [07:36] Admiralty was notably more pleasant than Mong Kok overall. Mong Kok felt so rowdy, with glass bottles thrown out of nowhere. But what was also strange was that in Mong Kok, the police could walk among the crowd, and nothing happened to them. Gold shops and jewelry stores remained open, and no one was looting them. So, in a sense, everything coexisted strangely in Mong Kok—they called it a “riot,” but not a single shop got robbed.

Meanwhile, main figures in Admiralty were Benny Tai and other “high-end” intellectuals.

G: [08:41] Whereas Admiralty really didn’t have many amenities around. People had to support one another directly just to keep going.

C: [09:01] They basically built everything themselves...

J: [09:05] I’ve always wondered where they got their electricity. Even now, I’m not entirely sure.

G: [09:05] Probably portable batteries?

C: [09:11] Not sure about Admiralty. In Mong Kok, there were definitely people pulling electricity from certain shops...

J: [09:14] That’s easier in Mong Kok. But in Admiralty, where did they plug into?

G: [09:20] I recall at Admiralty, some people pulled power cables from the public toilets—long extension cords.

J: [09:32] Still, the entire street was powered. That must have been a lot of electricity.

J: [09:46] I remember they had a study space with lights on. It was quite impressive how they managed that.

G: [09:54] Yes, they even had generators—really impressive.

C: [10:09] Now that it’s almost a decade later—could you recap the movement’s initial aim? Why did the Occupy Movement happen? And did its goals change along the way?

J: [10:34] In the beginning, Benny Tai and the others proposed “peace and love.” I thought they were just talking idealistically, but I also thought, “Okay, if 10,000 people occupy Central, the police would have to arrest 10,000 people, and that would overwhelm the stations.” In my naïve thinking, that might be a way to paralyze them. Later, I realised the police can manage that easily. But at the time, a peaceful movement seemed normal to me, so I just felt, “All right, we’ll give it a try.” Then came August 31 [2014], when Beijing announced the “electoral gatekeeping” measure, basically restricting universal suffrage. That really angered me. I was in Admiralty that night. Then Scholarism (the student activist group who led the Anti-National Education Movement in 2012 and active in the 2014 Occupy Movement) took action, and we followed them. I wasn’t deeply involved in the planning, but I went along, thinking, “They won’t beat up kids. So if I follow them, it’s relatively safe.” Then the situation escalated after that.

C: [12:35] Could I ask a bit more about August 31, when they announced a very restricted framework for Hong Kong’s Chief Executive election? Where exactly were you when you decided to follow Scholarism?

J: [12:48] That day, there was a rally at the government headquarters waterfront in Admiralty. I recall it rained heavily. The rally was led by Chan Kin-man and the other two [Occupy Central with Love and Peace (OCLP) founders - OCLP was a campaign advocate for a democratic electoral system which sparked the Occupy Movement in 2014] banging drums, looking very determined. I was standing quite close to the front. After the rally, Joshua Wong and the Scholarism people started yelling at the back, saying, “We’re heading over there now!” We saw the police forming lines. It was unusual because typically, during marches or assemblies, the police do not carry firearms. But that evening, every officer had a handgun on their belt—even though they weren’t in full riot gear as in 2019. I found that odd, but we still went ahead because it was always a peaceful protest. After that, the Occupy Movement really kicked off.

C: [14:26] They were heading to Civic Square at that time, right?

J: [14:30] Yes, Civic Square. The occupation wasn’t yet official until closer to the end of September. The tensest time was around September 28 [the day tear gas was used]. The days leading up to September 28 were very tense.

I was onsite those few nights, which were quite intense. When they occupied Civic Square, the riot police surrounded them. I was just nearby. Some people were singing hymns. Then, from all directions, supplies started coming in for a long-term stay. Then on the evening of September 28, the police used tear gas. That day, I was at home doing something. When I heard the news, I went over by myself. In Admiralty, I ran into a friend who told me they were calling for people to gather supplies in North Point. So we went there. While we were in North Point, tear gas was being fired back in Admiralty. We were busy collecting materials at the North Point MTR Station to send over to Admiralty. I clearly remember many people heading from North Point to Admiralty that night.

We gathered items, put them in a basket, and told whoever was willing, “Take this over.” People who were strangers would say, “Sure!” and carry them over. I remember a teenage boy, maybe 17 or 18, kneeling on the ground and crying. I tried to console him, “Get up, just take these supplies to Admiralty.” Off he went. After that, I went there as well, but ended up returning to North Point later. So I didn’t stay overnight in Admiralty. I felt a bit regretful—everyone else was talking about experiencing tear gas, but I never actually got to smell it. (Laughs) A bit embarrassing. By the time they started firing tear gas in the evening, I was back in North Point. Later, I did return to Admiralty, but the police had retreated, so no more tear gas.

C: [17:30] They fired tear gas in the late afternoon?

J: [17:31] Around dusk, and then again at night. While they were firing, I was at North Point MTR Station. Eventually, I got to Admiralty, but by that time, there was no action. So I never experienced the tear gas myself. At that point, the police were more restrained—only firing a few dozen canisters, maybe 87 canisters total. But in 2019, it was a completely different story; they fired tear gas with lethal intent. Under Chief Executive CY Leung [in 2014], the police were more restrained, whereas under Carrie Lam [in 2019], it was a whole other level.

2019 was deadly. In 2014, I even saw police stationed around Mong Kok who just stood there, motionless, and no one did anything to them. Back then, typically, the police at large gatherings didn’t carry firearms for fear that large crowds might overpower an officer and seize a weapon. So the 2014 police approach felt very different to me compared to 2019.

C: [19:21] So how did you see Harcourt Road in 2019 compared to 2014?

J: [19:40] On June 12, 2019, there was a general strike, and many people headed to Admiralty. Several of my coworkers were on strike that day. I stayed at our headquarters, in the office. The atmosphere was basically inert; no work was being done. At lunchtime, I said to my coworkers, “Let me check how those young female colleagues of ours are doing out there.” So I went over to Harcourt Road, and I saw a large crowd of Hongkongers who had occupied the area.

The police were there in full gear, but a lot of them were just lying on the ground, not doing much, while protesters moved around them like gazelles around lions—very surreal. Around 3 p.m., I returned to the office. By then, I started hearing news of the clashes. When I got off work at 5 p.m., I thought of returning to Admiralty, so I walked from Queen’s Road East toward Admiralty. I saw many young people coming back from Admiralty, looking exhausted, like they’d just been in a battle. Some warned me, “Watch out, the police are searching people.” So I stopped short of Admiralty, went back to Wan Chai MTR, and took the train home. Along the way, I really saw a lot of... well, to put it this way: before June 12, specifically on June 10 or 11, I had also gone to Admiralty. At that time, I noticed some police vehicles parked in Admiralty—near Pacific Place. I also saw the police deliberately keeping an eye on certain young people. Back then they were wearing white shirts, not black. The officers lined

them up one by one. I literally saw that with my own eyes. I was always wearing a suit for work, so I didn't look like a frontline protester, which was probably why I could pass by without being stopped. But I could sense the tension that day. Then on June 12, things intensified even further. On my way, I saw many worn-out protesters. They told me the police were searching people on buses and the MTR, which I believed. That was the day that led to the 2-million-person protest on June 16. The atmosphere was completely different from 2014. In 2014, it felt like you could just drop by Harcourt Road after work, like going to a festival, even bump into Benny Tai for a chat. Now he's in prison—It's truly pitiful; it's really insane.

G : [24:22] Back to Harcourt Road: If you were to tell people to bring supplies, would you say, "Take them to Harcourt Road" or "Take them to Admiralty"? Which was more common?

J: [24:40] Personally, I'd have just said "Go to Admiralty." By then, that whole area was basically occupied. It wasn't so much about "Harcourt Road" by name—people just said "Admiralty" or "near the government headquarters."

G: [25:10] Among all the experiences you had on Harcourt Road—especially during the Occupy period—are there any that stand out as really unforgettable?

J: [25:45] My standout memories of Harcourt Road are from the 2014 Occupation Movement. I would go there almost every night after work. The latest I stayed was until 3 or 4 a.m. because my nephew Edison had a tent there. So I spent a fair bit of time in that space. I recall one night in late November—can't remember the exact date—but it was near the end of the occupation. Everyone was asking, 'What are you people still holding out for? Just retreat!' That night, Scholarism seemed to be in charge of that zone. They did something like a "show of action," which involved attempting to break through the police lines on both ends of the underpass near the government headquarters. The police were lined up on both sides of that underpass (Lung Wo Road). Public sentiment was split: "Should they retreat or escalate?" Later on, they escalated things ambiguously; they never explicitly said that night, 'We're going to escalate.' But at least the mood suggested they wanted to escalate.

I was there that night. I'm in my fifties or sixties, so when the front-liners successfully broke through, I followed behind them. And when the police surged forward, I left ahead of them. (Laughs) I stayed until around 3 a.m. and then went home. After I left, the police cleared the area around dawn. Somehow, I always ended up missing the moments of police action—I never actually got tear-gassed or arrested (laughs).

C: [28:20] So one of your most vivid memories is *not* getting tear-gassed on Harcourt Road. (Laughs)

J: [28:26] (Laughs) Right. That night, around 4 or 5 a.m., the police, including Special Tactical Contingent (STC) squads, cleared the site and arrested people. But I'd left an hour before.....

G: [31:40] We were talking about 2014. Now, comparing that to 2019, do you think the relationships between people differ? You said before that in 2014, people in Admiralty were supportive and peaceful, while in 2019, it was all masked and more intense. Could you share your perspective on how relationships between people changed from 2014 to 2019?

J: [32:10] By 2019, Harcourt Road had become a dangerous place. I went a few times at night, and there weren't many people left—just some leftover signage and debris, and a heavy police presence. It was a completely different vibe.

In 2014, I felt everything was still “civilised.” It really showed how diverse Hong Kong is. The police did their policing, the protesters did their protesting, and occasionally there were small clashes—like that one night on Lung Wo Road when people broke through the police line, so the police cleared them out. It was understandable: they crossed the line, so the police responded. But at least back then, each officer wore a badge number. No one was masked. Everyone followed a basic set of rules, as if in a “civilized game.” The rest of the international media lost interest eventually, because there was no dramatic violence to broadcast. But 2019 was night and day compared to 2014.

C: [34:23] The relationship between the public and the police was drastically different—very tense and hostile in 2019.

J: [34:33] Yes, and I don't know what changed the police so profoundly between 2014 and 2019. What training or messaging did they receive that turned them so hostile, treating civilians like enemies? If you had a police friend back in 2014, you might not anymore. Both sides basically parted ways. Where did that hatred come from?

G: [35:40] Perhaps direct orders from Beijing?

J: [35:49] But a culture of hatred and a mere order aren't the same. Usually, in workplaces, we can “obey in name but not in spirit.” But these officers went all in. They were full of hatred. It's bizarre. If I were their boss, I'd wonder how they made everyone obey so fervently.

G: [37:34] What about interpersonal relationships among protesters themselves? In 2014, different camps seemed to communicate easily. In 2019, everyone wore masks, so the dynamic was different. Do you agree?

J: [37:55] I can't speak for 2019 frontline protesters. In 2014, everything felt harmonious. People were extremely conscientious—no theft, no harassment. People suddenly held themselves to a high moral standard. In 2019, I didn't go to the front, I really don't know. I recall one time in Wan Chai... The riot police vehicles came roaring down Stone Nullah Lane. A bunch of newcomers were there for the first time

—I saw several protesters, including a mother with her daughter both dressed in black. She said, ‘It’s my first time coming to Wan Chai.’ I told them, ‘What on earth are you doing?’ So I led a bunch of them over to my building, and there... We let them change clothes and then sent them on their way. Because it was a Sunday—yes, I remember it was a Sunday—we opened up the top-level [area] of the building, opened the gates, closed them again, and told some colleagues to give her replacement clothing if they had any. Then that was that—they left. Afterward... I stayed put on Stone Nullah Lane, because going up that road takes you to Queen’s Road East or Kennedy Road. I blocked people, telling them, ‘Absolutely do not go up there. Don’t go that way. It’s not safe...’

G: [43:18] Situations like that—when you meet fellow protesters—how do they show you the ropes or tell you what to do? How do they look after you? The reason I ask is because in 2019, many people wore masks. Often I personally didn’t. So I’d see these folks; I didn’t know who they were—no idea. But they wore black shirts, so that basically meant you recognised them as on ‘our side.’ Then we’d do all sorts of things—move forward, fall back, take action, retreat—together. Sometimes I might go a bit forward on my own, and then these younger ones would say, ‘Hey, step back a bit... step back...’ Right, I’m obviously not one of the younger people.

So it seems the younger generation really played a bit of a leadership role there. The older ones ended up following their guidance. That’s different from your situation, because you were basically... the person in the highest position at that place.

J: The only reason I was ‘highest-up’ is that I was at the building at that time, but that’s not really some top position. In a mass movement, there’s this concept called ‘de-individuation,’ meaning you lose your personal identity and belong to the crowd, naturally following the group’s commands. And who gives those commands? Probably whoever shouts the loudest. At that moment, for example, if someone yells, ‘Everybody throw stones!’—just like in Leeds last night—then everyone starts throwing stones. Or if they shout, ‘Retreat!’ you follow them. There’s someone behind you directing your movements. That’s de-individuation. No matter what you’re like in normal life, once you’re part of that crowd, you’re involved in the collective. It’s not hard to understand. You get there, you hear someone commanding—often a young person, who might push it to extremes—and you just go along with it.

G: [50:07] Another thing that comes to mind is the way relationships between people changed. In 2019, people ended up distrusting one another, whereas in 2014, maybe they all trusted each other or had an idea of what sort of person someone was. But by 2019, my own sense of self-defense went way up; people were ‘ghost-hunting’ everywhere—looking out for undercover agents. That definitely happened, and it’s something that wasn’t so common before. Do you agree with that, or did you have any experiences along those lines—like ‘ghost-hunting’ [meaning spotting undercover officers]?

J: [51:03] You mention ‘ghost-hunting’, but I’d say it was more about self-preservation. For example, I remember on January 1 [2020], there were some

people carrying guns, fully masked, a few of them—I'm pretty certain they were cops—pointing guns at people along the route. There were some 'thugs' too, who I believe were also police. I passed by and saw several suspicious-looking, hooded, masked figures, so I assume they were police in disguise. It's not really a matter of whether we trust each other, but rather about protecting ourselves. Also, leading a march is different psychologically from actually taking part in what they call a 'riot.' I've never gone to the front lines throwing objects or charging. When it's just a march, there's a relatively easy sense of trust, because it's just a public demonstration—nothing too extreme. But when it escalates into a frontal clash, you must know how to protect yourself. So in those moments, being wary of people around you—suspecting someone might be an undercover officer—that's entirely normal."

G: So did that sense of self-protection rise to an especially high level in 2019?

J: [52:44] Honestly, I never went through that—because I never made it all the way to the front lines. But I can see from videos that people were more radical. They were risking their lives. We now know from the court cases how serious the consequences were. They had that sacrificial spirit—"If I get arrested, so be it." But that bigger picture in 2019 also generated deep distrust across society. People identified each other as either "blue" (pro-establishment) or "yellow" (pro-democracy). We ended up losing friends of decades because they turned out to be on the other side. My personal situation was simpler—my elderly relatives had already passed away—so I didn't have that family conflict. I do have one older brother who's pro-establishment, so we just don't see him anymore. So I emigrated; those who didn't emigrate—nothing much else to say.

C: [54:33] You mentioned a concept of "deindividuation"—I'd like to ask more about that 'de-individuation' state you mentioned. For example, in 2014 or during the protest days, or even in 2019, when there's a shared set of goals or demands among the community—basically fighting for these objectives—people can enter that 'de-individuation' state. And then they come out of it and return to normal life, as though everything's back to usual. How did it feel for you personally, after you finished marching or after being so intensively involved in the movement, and then going back to everyday life? Was there some kind of 'transition'? Do you recall any specific transitional point in 2014 or maybe also in 2019? Any memories of that shift?

J: [55:28] Actually, de-individuation is more about the immediate environment than the movement's goal itself. It's that once you participate—once you're in that environment—you naturally become part of the crowd. But the moment you leave, you're out of that environment—then that's that. Of course, you have to at least agree with what the group is doing in order to be there in the first place; if you didn't, you wouldn't be there. But once you join, de-individuation can happen very easily. Maybe you're a decent person under normal circumstances, but last night you actually went and threw rocks. Or you're normally a good dad, yet you found yourself helping to push a police car. Why? Because everyone around you—people you know—were doing it, so you did it too. That's de-individuation. It's not like you went in

deciding, 'I'll become a totally different person today.' Rather, as soon as you're in it, you're doing what everyone else is doing, and it's so easy to slip into that. If others throw things, you throw them too—very easy.

"How do you 'wash yourself clean'? Once you leave that crowd, you become yourself again—unless you're deeply embedded and entrenched.

G: [57:36] Let's talk about Harcourt Road again—outside of Hong Kong, have you been to any other places named "Harcourt"?

J: [57:44] Yes. In 2012, I brought my daughter here [to the UK] for school. I had to sort out banking issues. We tried HSBC in Sheffield, but they said it would take a while, and I had to go to London the next day. The HSBC branch in London was located on Harcourt Road.

G: [58:27] So there's a Harcourt Road in London?

J: [58:28] Yes, that's where HSBC is, or was, in London.

G: [58:29] That was in 2012?

J: [58:33] Yes. There are many places in former British colonies named after British places or figures. —like "York" shows up in many places. Hong Kong has "York Road," there's "New York" in the U.S., and so on. They felt homesick... so naturally, when they arrived somewhere, they'd rename a street after their own hometown, because they were in charge, and wherever they went. It's a colonial tradition.

C: [59:26] In Hong Kong's case, "Harcourt" was a British major general who accepted the Japanese surrender after WWII, though I'm not certain if that's the only reason they named the road after him.

J: [59:47] Could be. Or maybe it was named earlier. I'm not too sure. But anyway, the London Harcourt Road probably has nothing to do with him.

C: [1:00:31] Sheffield's Harcourt Road isn't related to him—it's a different Harcourt.

G: [1:00:45] Have you been to Sheffield's Harcourt Road?

J: [1:00:49] I know where it is, but I haven't actually visited.

G: [1:00:55] So the only other Harcourt Road you really remember is the one in London?

J: [1:00:57] Yes.

G: [1:01:19] All right, two final questions. This year is the 10th anniversary of the 2014 Occupy Movement. Looking back on that fight for democracy and freedom, do you think “Harcourt Road” played some symbolic role?

J: [1:01:50] I don’t have strong feelings about Harcourt Road specifically, because in 2014, the plan was to occupy Central, not Admiralty. It just so happened that events unfolded in Admiralty instead. It wasn’t planned. Now, Harcourt Road has become a kind of landmark or icon. But I expect the new [Hong Kong] regime will try to erase that memory—maybe even rename it. They can definitely do that, and I wouldn’t be surprised if they do.

G: [1:02:47] Setting aside Harcourt Road specifically, looking back 10 years at the Occupy Movement, do you have any regrets about your involvement or about the fight for democracy? Do you feel you did too little or too much, or do you have no regrets?

J: [1:03:23] I don’t regret anything. An experience is an experience—it’s part of your life. And I was fortunate I never got arrested or had something terrible happen to me. So nothing to regret. Did I do enough or not? Given my risk-averse nature, I think I did what was right for me. I’m not like Benny Tai or those who were so impressive, leading everything. In 2019, I was careful too—I’d wear a suit after work, so if the police tried to grab me, I could say, “I’m just coming from work.” Each time I went out, I calculated my own risk, figuring out an escape route. So yes, knock on wood.

G: [1:05:01] A way of participating that’s the safest and offers the most self-protection. So that was your safest way to participate?

J: [1:05:06] Yes. Because I also had to look after the classes and programmes I was running in Wan Chai. Sometimes the roads would be closed mid-session, so our students couldn’t leave. We had to figure out safe routes for them to get home and so on. So I had additional responsibilities, which meant I couldn’t be in the thick of the front lines. I also didn’t want to be like my boss, who publicly wrote statements supporting the government. So I just did what was appropriate in my position.

Once in Prince Edward, outside the police station at night. I had no mask, and tear gas was used there. A guy gave me one of his spare masks, and as we retreated, they were shouting instructions: “Watch your step, don’t trample others!” and so forth. I ended up at the Hollywood Plaza in Mong Kok and then headed home. In those moments, you just follow the collective instructions.

C: [1:07:14] Last question: You’re a social worker by profession, involved in community organising. From that perspective—or just personally—Hong Kong

people in 2014 were fighting for true universal suffrage, and in 2019, they were fighting against the extradition amendment and more generally for democracy. Some people say that these movements also forged a stronger Hong Kong identity. Would you say that, despite the sacrifices, disputes, etc., all these events have solidified a sense of community among Hongkongers? Or has society just become too fragmented?

J: [1:08:34] After coming to the UK, I realised a couple things. First, here I have the right to vote, and it's entirely normal. Meanwhile, in Hong Kong, mentioning universal suffrage can practically get you in trouble now. The situation in Hong Kong is so frustrating. I have friends from way back who have become unrecognisably hostile—like Law Chi-kwong [former Secretary for Labour and Welfare], for example. I helped campaign for him once, and now all his close comrades are in jail. Martin Lee, who he once admired, is being prosecuted. The Department of Justice staff—many are Benny Tai's former students. He taught first-year law at HKU, so they all had him. Now they're the same people prosecuting him. It's absurd. Or those older folks just singing "Glory to Hong Kong" who keep getting arrested. The same Department of Justice people could just close the file, but they don't. They go all out. It's like they're following a totalitarian script.

I find it all horrifying because these are the same people who were educated in Hong Kong's common law system—this wasn't from Mainland China. The same with civil servants at the Leisure and Cultural Services Department, the Education Bureau, the Social Welfare Department. Even academics like Professor Amy Chow at HKU—she once interned at St. James' Settlement the same year I started working there, and we even traveled to Macau together. She was just a normal young lady. We kept in touch—once we even co-led a training for social workers from Guangzhou who wanted to help in Sichuan after the 2008 earthquake. So we actually collaborated. Now, she's apparently fully supportive of the current regime. I don't get it, but it's not necessarily just about money or career. Some of them truly believe in being loyal to the system. Their priority is loyalty, not democracy or freedom.

Anyway, I won't keep repeating myself. Seeing how elections work smoothly in the UK just reminds me how we were told for years, "Hong Kong is not ready for democracy, it takes centuries..." Meanwhile, here in Britain, people treat elections like no big deal, even though it took them centuries to get there. Hong Kong is way more prepared for democracy than many places. It's just that the powers in charge won't allow it. So that's how it is...

G: [1:25:49] All right.

C: [1:25:50] We'll end the interview here at around 12:50 p.m. Thank you, John.

G: [1:26:03] Thank you.

J: [1:26:04] You're welcome. Thank you, you've done so much. It's great to just chat here.