

C & G interviewing Po-Hi about Hong Kong's Harcourt Road

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The interview was conducted in Hong Kong Cantonese.

The following is the English translation of the transcript.

C: Clara Cheung, G: Gum Cheng, P: Po-Hi

C: [00:01] It is 16th August. Gum and I are very pleased to be speaking with you, Po-Hi, about your impressions of Harcourt Road. As part of this project, we are examining Harcourt Road in Hong Kong as well as Harcourt Road in Sheffield. We expect Hong Kong residents—such as yourself—to be more familiar with the Hong Kong one, so we shall begin with that.

G: [00:34] How did you first come across Hong Kong's Harcourt Road? For instance, did you already know of it from years ago when you might have gone for dim sum with friends, or did you only become aware of it after 2014?

P: [00:50] I do not recall precisely when, but I have known about it for quite some time. My mother once lived in Tai Koo Shing. I remember taking a bus that passed along Harcourt Road. My impression was that it had very few pedestrians, mainly cars. That is how I became aware of the road. Later, I heard it was named after a former governor of Hong Kong, or was he truly a governor?

C: [01:35] He was not an official governor but rather a general who accepted the Japanese surrender on Hong Kong's behalf after the Second World War. He served briefly, effectively as an interim governor for a short spell.

P: [01:57] Yes, so I found out he was indeed someone historically connected to Hong Kong. That was all I knew. (Laughs)

C: [02:06] That is already more than many people know; most only recognise the road name without knowing its background.

G: [02:13] You said Harcourt Road mainly carries vehicular traffic, with few pedestrians. When did you first set foot on Harcourt Road yourself?

P: [02:25] I cannot quite recall. Possibly, if I went to City Hall in Central, I would end up in that vicinity. Sometimes I got lost around there, not knowing how to cross. It felt rather unfriendly to pedestrians—I did not know where the crossings were or how to navigate. That was my overriding impression.

G: [03:04] In 2014, when the Occupy Movement began, its main site was outside the government headquarters, effectively occupying Harcourt Road. Did you participate in that movement or pass through the area at the time?

P: [03:33] Yes, I did. Though I was never quite sure of the exact boundaries of Harcourt Road, because it connects with Queensway and also intersects with Red Cotton Road. That Admiralty area is somewhat mixed up. A little while ago, a friend in Hong Kong sent me a video recorded while driving; initially, I had no idea what or where it was. Then, at a certain bend, I realised: “Ah, that is the spot we once occupied!” At first, I thought, “Why on earth did he send this?” and then I recognised it as that occupied stretch. When I visited, I tended to sit near a group of trees...

G: [04:53] Outside the government headquarters?

P: [04:55] Yes, next to the government headquarters, there is a spot where you can take a lift—perhaps to a footbridge—and there is a cluster of trees. They have short retaining walls around them, and I would usually sit on those. That was my favourite place. I am not certain if that counts as Harcourt Road or Queensway.

G: [05:34] I suppose it is near Harcourt Road. Those streets connect seamlessly without a clear dividing line. People often wonder if they are at City Hall or still on Harcourt Road.

P: [06:06] (Looking at the map) So this is Harcourt Road...

G: [06:14] Yes, this part is Harcourt Road.

P: [07:23] I recall 28th September being very interesting. Around the 25th or 26th, I went to stay at Kadoorie Farm in Tai Po. We were there for about five days, starting in the twenties of that month. Then, on the 26th, Joshua Wong [A key Hong Kong activist who led 2012’s anti-National Education protests and was central to the 2014 and 2019 movements] and others were arrested, and it became tense. Fortunately, it was not a silent retreat, so we had access to news. We were not sleeping on-site; we would come in daily, bringing newspapers and learning how intense things had become.

Anyway, on the second evening, by about 8 pm, a few of us could not stand it any longer. So, two or three of us who were concerned just left. (Laughs) We ran off to the protest. By the time we arrived, the tear gas had subsided, but we were stuck near the Arts Centre. That reminded me: we entered the Arts Centre to avoid the tear gas. There was someone—an artist connected to the film scene, who had once served as a chairperson there—trying to calm people. Eventually, we left the Arts Centre, thinking of heading towards Central, since some people said, “If you are not afraid, let’s go.” But as we were about to leave, those around us said, “No, let’s not do that,” claiming it was too dangerous. So we ended up deciding to head back to the Kadoorie Institute, realising that the MTR might not be running from that direction, so we walked towards Wan Chai along Arsenal Street by the police headquarters. We were on the footbridge, and below were riot police holding large guns. That was my first truly frightening moment in the Occupy Movement, as we assumed they might

be real guns. We did not know at the time—rubber bullets or otherwise. Just seeing them with big firearms was shocking. Then we carried on across the footbridge to Wan Chai MTR. That was 928 [September 28] , if I remember correctly. When we heard there was a major clash, we dashed over to see.

C: [11:11] Over the entire Occupy movement—79 days, if I recall—were there other particularly memorable moments for you, aside from 928?

P: [13:21] 928 itself was genuinely frightening, as it felt like a close encounter. Seeing them holding guns was terrifying. At the time, we believed it might be live ammunition, only learning later it was rubber bullets. Even so, I had never witnessed such a scenario.

C: [13:46] At that time, do you remember riot police standing there while no protesters were immediately around them? Presumably, most protesters were near the government headquarters. Or had the crowd already scattered?

P: [14:05] As far as I remember, both calls were present. Some told people to stay; others told them to leave. I recall the Federation of Students saying everyone should leave, but people who did not leave might cause the student leaders to stay as well. The Hong Kong Federation of Students was the last to withdraw. I wrote on Facebook something like, “Let us not drag young people into this—if we do not leave, they will remain.”

C: [14:45] And as things went on in those 79 days, did you experience anything else that strongly impacted you?

P: [14:57] Another major memory was my arrest on the clearance day.

C: [15:06] Was it a large group sitting together?

P: [15:08] Yes, many of us. We were arranged in rows, side by side. I am not quite sure if that was officially Harcourt Road.

G: [15:17] That should indeed be by the government headquarters.

C: [15:40] I think you were sitting near the “Door Always Open” area, where everyone gathered at the time.

P: [15:46] So everyone who was arrested during the clearance was sitting there too?

G: [15:52] Yes, quite a lot. The authorities came from both sides, using bulldozer-like vehicles to push things together.

P: [16:04] Yes, in this photo, you can clearly see us sitting here, under the footbridge, among these trees. That should be the place—we were seated under the trees.

That was the day I was arrested. It was all rather peaceful, so it was not as frightening.

G: [16:33] Because you were all sitting there, hands linked.

P: [16:35] Yes—somehow less nerve-racking than confronting riot police directly. (Laughs)

G: [16:43] Let us step back to 2014. What were you doing then? Were you employed, or was it another situation?

P: [16:56] I had not had a formal full-time job for many years. I left Kadoorie Farm in 2006, then did volunteer work and later tried running a social enterprise until around 2012, when we closed it. After that came the Anti-National Education Movement, which drew me further into community activism. I had always been involved in local agriculture or eco-village concepts, and community economy. Before the Anti-National Education Movement came along, I had taken part in some social movements, but only as an ordinary participant—for example, during the Choi Yuen Village campaign, I took part in a fairly modest way. But with the National Education controversy, it became more official. We were that group of activists from the 1970s [P., recognised as the first female chairperson of Chinese University of Hong Kong's Student Union, was one of the leading pro-China faction student-movement figures in 1970s Hong Kong], and we felt we should support the younger generation. From that point onward, we sensed we had a duty to back the youth. So, for instance, when we learned they had done a brief hunger strike and were already feeling unwell, we stayed close by to support them.

G: [21:36] Do you think having no nine-to-five position gave you more flexibility to step forward in 2014, for example, in the Occupy Movement?

P: [22:13] Perhaps so. Yet it was not merely having free time—I also had a background in community organising and working on community economics initiatives. I believed strongly in building communities. So when the Occupy Movement ended and everyone spoke of dispersing into local neighbourhoods—or deepening that community focus, it made perfect sense to me. My friends and I continued with smaller local initiatives.

C: [23:29] During the Occupy period at Harcourt Road, did you see any moments of community-building that you feel contributed to lasting cooperation afterward?

P: [23:56] Yes, several. One was a group doing an “umbrella dance” performance[resonating with the alternate name for the Occupy protests—often called Umbrella Movement] using lights. Another was “24 Hours in the Revolution” (a project on Facebook), where they interviewed people who did not support Occupy Movement and turned their stories into short plays.

Also, I actually took part in two events. There was the “Mobile Democracy Classroom” run by individuals like Hui Po-keung [a Hong Kong scholar who backed the Umbrella Movement and co-launched the 612 Humanitarian Relief Fund, which assisted protesters facing legal or medical challenges], initially featuring university lecturers before opening to anyone. I gave a talk on alternative, community-based economics. At that time, people had already begun suggesting we patronise smaller shops. I am not sure if we were explicitly calling them “yellow shops”[the term later used for shops supporting the social movement in 2019] yet, but certainly there was talk of “conscience shops” and the like. Those ideas appeared, and people asked why we should not also support big conglomerates or go to McDonald’s, and so forth. Perhaps everyone was just starting to question these things, so that topic addressed some of their doubts. Because of that, I believe that particular sharing session attracted a larger crowd.

Also, together with a friend from the 70's Biweekly [a Hong Kong magazine founded in the 1970s by progressive activists and intellectuals, dedicated in social activism and alternative cultural production, an iconic platform for political critique, grassroots mobilisation, and protest movements of that era] circle, we co-hosted a session on protest or avant-garde music—songs by Leonard Cohen, Bob Dylan, and so on—handing out lyric sheets. The audience was not large. Moreover, after we had only been playing for a short while, some nearby campers complained that we were disturbing their sleep (laughs). We turned the volume down, and then we wrapped up earlier.

C: [33:39] Regarding that alternative-economics session, did people raise any particular questions? And did you see those ideas expand further into the community afterwards?

P: [33:51] In fact, we had been working on community economics all along. Whether it continued afterward? Yes, indeed, though in different forms. My impression is that after 2014, this grew. More groups formed to promote things like local production and local consumption in Hong Kong. There was an upswing in such activity.

Last year in Taiwan, both Taiwan and Hong Kong were doing what we call ‘joint purchase,’ basically community-supported agriculture, CSA for short, celebrating its 30th anniversary. Taiwan Homemakers Union initiated something very similar and invited us to share about Hong Kong’s 30-year CSA journey. I took a bold approach by linking CSA’s evolution with social movements—indeed, I suspect 2014 might have been a watershed or turning point, because after 2014, the focus on community economic ideas increased.

C: [36:02] If we are talking about local farming, I seem to recall that in Admiralty,

there was someone doing some sort of planting (laughs).

P: [36:10] Yes, they were friends of mine. Precisely at that corner, presumably Harcourt Road or some turning near it. I did not help them plant anything, but I know who they are—likely Ma Bo-bo's group [a Hong Kong farming collective based in Ma Shi Po Village that promotes local agriculture, sustainability, and community engagement.]. They hauled in soil and quickly planted some greenery. More experienced farming friends found it rather amusing, asking, 'Are they serious? If they plant like that, everything will die in a few days!' (Laughs) But I thought it was fine, just a gimmick. Actually, 2014 did spur more young people to get into farming or 'reviving agriculture,' so that planting on Harcourt Road or in Admiralty became an icon of sorts—symbolic of the movement.

G: [37:59] During the occupation, whether specifically on Harcourt Road or not, while you were participating in various activities, how did you find the community dynamics at that moment? They called it 'Harcourt Village.' What was the relationship between your tent and the adjacent tents, for instance? People would sometimes go out to charge their phones or do errands around the streets. Did you feel that sense of community yourself?

P: [38:42] In reality, that place had already become a cluster of small communities. Harcourt Village itself was quite large, with many smaller groups. After the main stage ended, each evening, you would see people in circles chatting or debating. I personally never pitched a tent, so I did not know the full extent of 'neighbourly ties,' but I did notice certain things. What struck me, for instance, was the study area, set up for doing homework—there were tables, chairs, and electrical connections.

I also worked on a project there for my book, which is divided into three parts. I decided to interview older participants—the silver-haired crowd—because I saw many seniors present but no one seemed to be capturing their stories. I realised plenty of people were writing about women's participation or other themes, yet few were looking at the elderly. They tended to chat quite openly. Some had never joined the July 1st marches, though they had attended June 4th vigils [Annual Hong Kong gatherings commemorating the victims of 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, calling for vindication of the protests and for democracy and freedom in China]. Others had come down from the Mainland, possibly fleeing the Cultural Revolution, and told me about their experiences in that era. Some had done business in China and said, 'You cannot fully trust the CCP on certain matters,' and so on. Because the Occupy area is such an open space, it was easy to seek help or have these exchanges with people.

G: [44:13] I personally feel that when you are in such an environment, many dormant abilities or potentials that you might not normally use can emerge in that space.

P: [44:25] Yes, exactly—that is why I call it highly creative. After the Occupy Movement, Chan Kin-man [a sociology professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and co-initiator of Occupy Central] did a summary, and I really agreed with him. Many people said we had 'failed,' that we did not achieve genuine universal suffrage

and so forth. But Chan Kin-man remarked that it was bound to ‘fail’ in that sense—yet we still gained certain things. He listed four points, and one of them was about creativity and artistic expression. I remember countless handmade projects at the time—someone crafted a ‘Lion Rock’ display, people were folding miniature umbrellas in yellow paper, doing umbrella dances, telling stories, plus that “Stand by Me” display. They projected messages from around the world in support of Hong Kong’s Umbrella Movement—very cultural, in ways we had not considered before.

Then there were the environmental folks picking up litter. As I wrote in my book, around 30 November—there was heavy conflict near Lung Wo Road. Yet as you walked back—indeed, I left that night—when passing across the big lawn, some people were there collecting rubbish. It was as though two parallel worlds. The community feeling, the way everyone cared for that place as though it were home, was very strong.

There was another example in Causeway Bay, not on Harcourt Road. One of the Causeway Bay occupations was on the tram tracks. One day, it rained. You know how water puddles on the tram lines when it rains. I saw some young girls sweeping away those puddles, and they did not even really know how to hold a broom. You think, ‘They might not do this at home, yet here they are helping out.’ Then a gathering would happen right after they swept away the water. As for Harcourt Road, a street-cleaning day was organised because it smelled awful, possibly the drains. They used bleach to clean the roads.

C: [47:30] In this project, we are indeed looking at how community-building happens—how it can emerge and be nurtured. We have discussed various examples of that utopian atmosphere during Occupy. P., you have also described how, even after we left the occupied zone in 2014, these ideals continued in some form. But comparing that with the period after 2019, it all seems much harder now, given the overall political climate has changed. Could you help us compare? From your perspective, after 2014, it felt as though we could carry on with that revolutionary or community-building spirit—organising at the grassroots—yet by 2019, it seemed extremely difficult. What do you think the main difference is?

P: [48:35] I see two main factors. Firstly, we no longer had an occupied zone. In 2014 we physically occupied Harcourt Road for over two months, so we built a “home base” and kept adding structures—study areas, seats, bicycle generators—and people grew attached. Secondly, the political landscape changed by 2019. In 2014, one could speak openly, exchange phone numbers without worry. By 2019, the entire political atmosphere had changed; that trust and creativity we had in 2014 was replaced by danger and fear.

C: [51:02] Might the escalation of police violence have influenced the entire protest camp’s atmosphere?

P: [51:14] The mindset changed entirely—you had to conceal yourself more. Or, looking at it the other way, the bigger the group, the more unsafe it became by 2019, right? In 2014, the bigger the crowd, the more effectively you could stand there, though of course there were dangers. But in 2019, it was all about agility, splitting up, moving around.

C: [51:45] Regarding locations closer to Harcourt Road in 2019, did you have any notable experiences there?

P: [51:55] Mainly I just passed by during marches—walking along for the protest. I did not really stop anywhere else in that area. In 2014, after they cleared the ‘Lennon Wall,’ [the mosaic wall of post-it messages created during the Occupy Movement at the government headquarters. This form of free expression later spread throughout various locations across Hong Kong during the 2019 social movements.]

I deliberately went back once—walked up onto that footbridge to look down. It was interesting: some of the stickers had not been fully removed, so I took photos. There were still faint words on the ground, ‘We will be back,’ ‘We will come back,’ traces that had not been washed away. Even after they cleared the wall, I would return occasionally to look. I was never especially depressed during the whole Occupy Movement. It gave me something very positive. Possibly because, in addition to my involvement in the protests, I had many community projects going on, which gave me hope. Even though the occupied zone vanished, or we did not fully achieve our goals, we were still doing a great deal of work.

However, I later heard that some people, who were not engaged much in community work—maybe they were just office workers—felt very depressed after 2014. They felt as though everything had ended, nothing was left, a sense of loss. I think the community offered us enormous support, especially on a spiritual level.

G: [53:53 / 54:39] In 2014, we assumed anyone turning up was trustworthy. By 2019, that trust seems to have vanished? Do you consider that regretful, and is there a way to restore it?

P: [54:39] I do find it unfortunate, but I also understand why people felt they had to be more guarded. I do not think there is a simple solution to bring it back- I believe there is no way to fix it.

G: [54:59] I also think there is no fix. Back in 2014, that mutual trust and community-building vibe included a bit of idealism, a bit of hope. But by 2019, it was truly gone, and there was no going back.

P: [55:16] Now that you mention it, I recall on the day we were arrested, a group of us were taken to North Point Police Station together. Their process was very slow, so we ended up exchanging WhatsApp numbers or contact details. But in 2019, I never tried swapping contact details with strangers like that. I really never did. It simply was not possible anymore.

C: [55:46] Might it be that friendships you formed in 2014—or in other community-based activities—helped you and others stay close through 2019 and beyond? So that some people you met then, with that openness and willingness to communicate,

were able to forge friendships that lasted, even surviving the very warped political environment of 2019?

P: [56:27] Not really. Perhaps one or two connections came about because we had mutual friends, but I did not forge brand-new friendships that continued onwards.

C: [57:22] Also you mentioned, for instance, that Mong Kok's scene was relatively chaotic...

P: [57:48 / 59:20] Mong Kok was unpredictable, and the level of mutual trust there was lower. I remember Mong Kok had... I do not know if they called it a 'main stage' or not, but there was definitely a place where people could go and speak. At one point, we were part of the 'persuade-retreat' faction—that is, we felt one should leave at the movement's peak, rather than wait for it to descend. But a friend warned me, 'If you go out there telling people to retreat in Mong Kok, which is more radical, you need to state your credentials—like that you were active in the Anti-National Education Movement—so people know you have some background and are not just popping up to urge everyone to leave.' Indeed, that was how things worked in Mong Kok—trust was limited. And Mong Kok had triads—various factions—and I saw people worshipping Guan Gong [also known as Guan Yu, a legendary Three Kingdoms general revered for his loyalty and widely worshipped in Hong Kong by both police and triads as a symbol of righteousness] I did not fully understand it myself (laughs). It was another culture altogether—another sort of 'installation.'

Mong Kok also had plenty of casual passers-by. They might still be supportive, but they were only passing through, so the atmosphere felt less cohesive. Nonetheless, interesting, more things did happen—so it was a bit looser, yet also richer in what was happening. (Laughs)

G: [1:00:12 / 1:01:13] Another interviewee, Ming mentioned she distinctly remembered 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] saying he once dreamt that Harcourt Road would be completely filled with people, shaping the movement's future. So, when the Occupy Movement began—on September 28—you saw signs that things were going astray and deliberately went to join. Once you set off, or even on the way, what did you imagine would happen on that street at that stage? Did you imagine how it might turn out?

P: [1:01:13] I had no specific imagination of how it would be; I never expected it to turn out like that. In previous demonstrations, even on 1st July marches, we typically only occupied one side of the road. But here, both sides were blocked, and people freely crossed that central divider—whatever you call that little stone barrier. I never dreamed that would happen. Some people even set up a short ladder there so we could climb over a few steps. I simply had not imagined it. It felt surreal.

G: [1:02:14 / 1:03:06] Have you seen any mentions of Harcourt Road abroad, in the UK or elsewhere? Such as pubs or streets named Harcourt?

P: [1:02:28] I have only heard of a “Harcourt Pub” in Manchester, apparently opened by people from Hong Kong. Maybe each city has something named Harcourt, like “London Road.”

C: [1:03:34] Yes, a Sheffield friend mentioned seeing an article about that Manchester pub. He asked me if I knew about it, so we found it quite an interesting connection.

G: [1:04:44] Just one last question. If you could rewind ten years back to 2014, would you regret anything you did or did not do on Harcourt Road during the occupation? Or do you wish you had done more?

P: [1:05:06] I do wish I had spent more nights there, so I could have explored more thoroughly.

Sometimes I was lazy about walking around. I would stick to the same stretch of road. It was only near the end—when people mentioned the clearance was coming—that I ventured farther, going up and down those slopes. I rarely explored those areas beforehand. I wish I had visited more angles of it and met different groups. I do regret that. I never gained a truly comprehensive understanding.