

Wu Liangyong. An interview by Lucio Barbera¹

WU LIANGYONG

Abstract: Wu Liangyong, the Maestro Wu, was interviewed by Lucio Barbera on November 17th 2014 in Beijing at his Tsinghua University office. Wu was asked about his studies, his early and life long professional and academic career. The interview was held the day after the inauguration of the exhibition of Wu's works at the National Museum in Tienanmen Square, where Lucio Barbera was invited to give a lecture and present the Italian and the English translation of Wu's book *A General Theory of Architecture*.² The following text has been collected as a continuous narration, based on the interview, which Wu Liangyong has divided in three 'parts' or three 'decades'. The interview is presented by Wu as an anticipation of his next book, an autobiography written upon request of the China Academy of Engineering.

Key words: Wu Liangyong, Modern China, Chinese Architecture.

Part I: 'Three Thirty-Years'

If my life can be divided into three or three decades, the first thirty years correspond to my growth, from the birth of my hometown of Nanjing, as well as my family, family background or education, etc., or my studies. I grew up in family with an academic background. My family started off running a satin business, which is a historic industry producing silk clothing. Later due to suffering from slump in the economy of Nanjing, the satin business had to close down. At that time, my father, mother, and brother, who was a lecturer at university, paid great attention to foster my character and emphasize my education.

1. The interview was held by Lucio Barbera on November 17th 2014 at Tsinghua University of Beijing, at prof. Wu Liangyong's office. Wu Liangwei's record; Zhou Zhengxu proofreading.

2. The book by Wu Liangyong *A General Theory of Architecture*, was translated in English and in Italian as: Wu Liangyong, *Integrated Architecture*, Wu Liangyong. Edizioni Nuova Cultura Roma 2014. Wu Liangyong, *Architettura Integrata*, Edizioni Nuova Cultura Roma 2014. Both these publications, promoted by Lucio Valerio Barbera, were edited by Anna Irene Del Monaco, Liu Jian, Jin Ying, Roberta Tontini, Michael Riddel.

My first 'Thirty-Year'

The first 'thirty-year' was a critical moment during which China was invaded by Japanese military. When I was at my third-grade, Japanese military has occupied North-East of China; by my graduation of my junior high school, 'Marco Polo Bridge Incident', also known as 'July 7 Incident' or 'LuogouQiao Incident' had outburst, Japanese military had occupied the northern part of China then progressed to Shanghai. On November 12th 1937, my hometown NanJing was intruded and fell off guard, so I had to flee away from warfare and ended up studying for only one month in high school. I had no choice but to escape from NanJing, passed by WuHan, and finally reached ChongQing, SiChuan. In 1938, I arrived in ChongQing, matriculated at a middle school founded by the teachers who had all exiled from Jiangsu Province. The teachers were excellent despite they also exiled from warfare, and they were all cherry-picked from the famous schools of Jiangsu Province.

I finished my three-year high school education here. On July 27th, 1940 is the last day of college entrance exam preparation after high school graduation, the city where I lived He-Chuan got bombarded by Japanese military. My high school was located outside the city, but flames were everywhere inside the city, and it lasted so long that if not the rain on the morning of the second day, it wouldn't have been put off. Dai JingChen, who was my Chinese Literature teacher, once was the prime teaching member of high schools' leagues in SuZhou didn't survive the bombard. This incident lasted deep impression on me, and has stimulated and motivated me to further study architecture.

I took the admission to the Central University in 1940 and decided to choose Architecture as my major. The purpose of studying architecture was to rebuild our homes. Therefore from 1940 to 1944, my aspiration when studying architecture was to rebuild our homeland after the war. In hindsight, the bombard experience was unusual, it was a life-long motivation to my life that I need to be strong, independent, to benefit our motherland, and conduct post-war rebuilding, etc..

The Central University was called National Central University, and it was very well-known. Because of anti-Japanese war, it was relocated from NanJing to ChongQing. Thanks to the excellent group of professors teaching there I have received a very good education. I was

interested in architecture studies, but I have also developed other interests during my study there. There were lots of renown experts from various areas in arts, science and technology, as well as in literature and history. The major impact on me came from the Arts school retaining nationwide renown artists and painters. So I also enjoyed studying painting, literature and arts in addition to learning architecture. In short, I was born in a well cultivated family, but due to the later recession of my family, I suffered from our poor financial status. I have received very a good education and cultivation from the excellent teachers I encountered in elementary school, junior high school as well as college. I still have memory of them. In addition to the Architectural studies, I have expanded my interest in arts, so I could affirm that I conducted two training courses in parallel.

On Spring 1944, when there was still one semester of coursework before my graduation, due to the needs of the war, all the recent graduates got appointed to do translation job for the country. Because of the escalating wartime, US consulting group came to assist us. At that time, the national route from Yunnan to Myanmar had been cut off, so no goods, no resources could be delivered to ChongQing. Therefore, my mission was to rebuild this route to bring back its transportation function on the way from Yunnan to Myanmar. It was indeed a very daunting and challenging task. At the beginning of 1944, I became a translator for US military at Yunnan frontline, and have worked in army headquarters, regimental headquarters, division headquarters. It was a very arduous life because the west area to Yunnan, especially the entire region nearby Nu Rivers, was severely underdeveloped. On the other hand, the landscape of this area was particularly nice as there were couple of creeks flowing through the mountains. It was raining season that time, life was particularly tough, the rain accumulation sometimes reached to the waistline during marching time, but thanks to the nice view and abundant free time at the troop, I was painting a lot and still kept some of the paintings from those times.

European wartime has ended by the beginning of 1945, and the opening-up of the route bridging south-western area of China with Myanmar was also at the beginning of 1945. Due to the ending of the warfare in that area, I returned to ChongQing with the hope that I could continue my studies.

However, the situation of the university was quite in a mess because of the war. The renown scholar Liang SiCheng was informed of my return and asked me to help him out on some work at wartime Heritage Conservation Committee. The work had been ongoing until August 15th, the end of the war, and surrender of the Japanese military had marked an ending on World War II, which also brought an end to the work of the committee. After the appointment, as promised, I then returned to Central Sanitary Research Institute responsible for municipal projects (currently termed as environmental engineering). At the end of 1945, Mr. Liang SiCheng contacted me again, and told me that he would like me to become assistant professor for his newly-established Tsinghua University Architecture Department.

This episode was another fundamental transition in my career path, and indeed I felt honored to come to Tsinghua University to work. It was already Fall 1946 when I actually arrived in Beijing. At the early stage of the Architecture Deptment at Tsinghua University, beyond me and Mr Liang, there was also the wife of Mr Liang SiCheng (Mrs Lin HuiYin), who was also an architect, architecture historian, as well as writer. During that period she was sick, mostly lying in the bed, so she taught until July 1949 when Mr Liang SiCheng returned from his US teaching appointment. I have worked in TsingHua University for two years from 1946 to 1948. During his visit in US, Mr Liang SiChen had visited Cranbrook Academy of Art founded by Eliel Saarinen, an renown Finnish architect. The curriculum in Cranbrook Academy included architecture, painting, textile, bronze manufacturing and arts, etc., comprising multiple disciplines within one school, which facilitates students to foster arts cultivation. In turn, the arts cultivation can create a mutual impact on future artists to facilitate themselves to become individuals who would be equipped with self-learning and creation capability. Mr Liang believed that I was an important opportunity for me to study in that school, so he contacted the school for a scholarship and I ended up to study in US. My accomplishments during my two-year study in US could be summarized in the following points:

The first is the inspiration I got from Saarinen, from his thought on combining architecture with city planning and designing. He believed 'Architecture is an Art of Space in Space'. This school of thought has matured during his teaching in Cranbrook Academy of Art, and was

succeeded by his student Edmund Bacon and then progressed in one of his books 'Design of Cities'. Unfortunately no one has succeeded Saarinen's thought after he passed away.

The second was the motivation and impact from Jr. Saarinen's passion in designing and his creative mind. When I was an intern at Jr. Saarinen's firm, his devotion and creativity has greatly motivated me. This will be expanded late more in detail later.

The third was the impact on my cultural understanding of contemporary architecture thoughts. L. Mumford has proposed to advocate local architecture, opposing to the 20th century 40s, 50s, Modern Architecture theory. For example, the Californian 'Regional Architecture Theory', proposed by the Green Brothers, made me realize that contemporary architecture thoughts had various development path.

The fourth was that under the influence of Cranbrook's comprehensive arts education, I had participated to a competition for the Rome Award with another painter and sculptor: our proposal had been awarded Honor Award.

The fifth was the influence I have obtained from Saarinen's visiting scholars and the renown academic figures and masters. During the study period in US, I have visited renown figures such as F.L. Wright, W. Gropius, L. Mies Van Der Rohe, R. Neutra, B. Fuller and M. Noviski.

Until the establishment of New China in 1949, and by the end of 1950 The Korean War has officially started, Mr Liang SiCheng wrote me calling me back. He believed it was the time for a re-establishment. His insisted that there were two reasons for me to return to TsingHua, one was that there will be an urgent need for talents to establish New China, and the second reason was that TsingHua Architecture also needed talents.

At that time, I could only arrive to Beijing from HongKong, as HongKong was still under UK's sovereignty, no one was allowed to land, so I had to return to mainland from ShenZhen, under the control of the military police.

The Korean War had made the living situation very intense, and there are other changes which had happened, including also the Architecture Department in Tsinghua University. In 1952, I was appointed associate director of Tsinghua Architecture Department: I

was only 30 years old. To conclude the first thirty-year period, I can say that I have received a very good education, including a foreign education.

My second 'thirty-year'

The beginning of the second 'thirty-year' was from the beginning of my appointment as associate director of Architecture Department to the end of Cultural Revolution in 1978, and onward to 1983. In 1972 Mr Liang SiChen passed away due a illness. Then, I have been the director of Architecture Department for five years, since 1978 to 1983. It was a time in which the department could revamp itself, including the destroyed Architecture Department. This period has lasted about thirty years, all my efforts have been addressed in contributing to the re-establishment of the department. In terms of my duty, At the age of 60 I retired and resigned as director of department. I was very young when I was appointed, and I had been working hard and in diligent way. I have devoted to my tasks and also participated in the actual construction of New China Architectural work. I have also conducted a lot of exploratory research on Architectural education.

Certainly, I have also considered many issues that the development of Architecture in New China would face. Therefore, I have been very well cultivated during this thirty-year period. Due to my diligence, the breadth of my knowledge base has also been expanded.

My third 'Thirty-year'

My third 'Thirty-year' starts from 1984 to this year. During these thirty years, I have founded a research institute. The exhibition you have attended yesterday at the National Museum in Tienanmen Square, represents my work during this last thirty years, which I consider the most important time in my life. Looking at the development progress of China, these thirty years of Reforming and Opening has largely compensated the destruction and slow down from the Cultural Revolution. Therefore every individual in the country has been working very hard to change the situation. I have accomplished a lot during this period and have also written many articles. To name a few, I have re-planned the City of Beijing and I have done planning at regional level; I have also did some work for the

Yunnan Dian-XiBei as well as published many book. It is also during this period that I have also assumed some social responsibilities (including international academic society duties), which have also prompted me to understand more about the national and the international development.

During the third ‘Thirty-Year’, several important things happen. The first was the publication of ‘General Architecture Theory’ in 1989, of which you (Lucio Barbera) are holding the translated version in your hand right now; I have also published another book called *Introduction to the Science of Human Settlements*. This science was proposed in 1993 at the UN Global Summit in Rio, where many countries proposed the 21st Century Agenda which is the most important charter for the future development of the world. At the conference of Chinese Academy of Sciences in 1993, I launched the *Science of Chinese Human Settlements*. Why? First, it was originated from the international academic background; second, it was derived from the problems of city development. With the rapid development of urbanization after reform in 1980s, we made much achievement in increasing productivity, expanding city and improving lives, but meanwhile the increasing city population also brought the problems of resource waste, environmental deterioration, etc. Such background gave rise to the Science of Human Settlement. This theory was originated from the western academy, but more importantly it was raised for the problems of China. Architecturally, this science was developed on the basis of the Chinese situation. Apart from the theoretical research, I also made a series of investigations on the cities of Yangtze River Delta Area, Pearl River Delta Area, northwest area of Yunnan, Beijing area, etc. Before publishing *Introduction to Science of Human Settlements* in 2001, I finished another book *The Old City of Beijing and Its Juer Hutong Neighborhood*. This book is about protection and renewal of old city, traditional architectural heritage, housing improvement, garden design, etc. In the third thirty-year, I received the State Preeminent Science and Technology Award, the highest scientific award in China.

Let me make a summary of the three thirty-year in my life. First, I’m very lucky to have been well educated from the childhood to the grown-up years, and I very much grateful to all teachers’ help. Second, I kept working at Tsinghua University for almost seventy years since 1946. I’m very honored to have been focused on the development

of the Architecture Department during these seven decades, which were engaging in teaching, academic research and engineering project. Third, I followed the principle of combining theory with practice. Growing up in the war time, I never forgot the mission of developing architecture for our country and society. I participated to social academic institutions and took leading positions like the Vice-President of International Union of Architects, Chairman of World Society for Ekistics, Deputy Secretary General and Vice-Chairman of Architectural Society of China, Vice-Chairman of Chinese Society for Urban Studies and Chairman of Urban Planning Society of China. Although I am not a social activist, I keep working on academic research for the social development.

Part Two: Academic Pursuit

The first part covered mostly my biography. In the second part I will talk about my academic pursuit. During the war time, the young people were inspired to devote whole heart to the country and people's wellbeing, and I was not an exception. After returning from US to China in 1950, I was involved in the development of new China. At that time, I had an important academic attitude: architects should take the fate of their nation into consideration when making academic research.

In the second thirty-year, I mainly engaged in establishing the Architecture Department; in the third thirty-year, I published nearly 300 papers and 2 books (*A General Theory of Architecture and Introduction to Science of Human Settlements*).

The first aspect is focused on the establishment of a General Theory of Architecture. When I was in Mexico for a conference in 1987, I saw a picture of Mayan tribe in the National Museum of Anthropology. It was the first time that I saw the environment of ancient tribe with houses. Afterward, I visited the Museum of Anthropology in Osaka, in Japan, and the countryside of Sichuan where spent some time. I realized that the traditional architecture was only about practical aspects like being solid and good-looking. Only by connecting with human traditions the architecture can be extended to the economic and social function. At that time, talking about the trend of architecture, people generally said that architecture was the combination of science and art. I thought it

was too abstract, because architecture was composed of many aspects. Why didn't we make detailed analysis? At the seminar of the Future of Architecture held by the National Natural Science Foundation Committee in 1985, during the second day I proposed in the preliminary idea of a *General Theory of Architecture* which aroused much interest. Later, the theory was discussed at the seminar held by the vice-president of Tsinghua University. After three years, in 1989, I published the book and the following versions in English and Italian, just issued, proved its popularity. In 1990s, as Vice-President of International Union of Architects, I proposed the international seminar of Regional Architecture to be held in 1996.

The second aspect was referred to the concept of *environment*. After returning from America, Mr Liang Sicheng proposed the concept of "physical environment" which made a great impression on my mind. Afterward, I presented this concept many times while participating to international conferences including the 13th World Architects Conference (Mexico) in 1978 and the 14th World Architects Conference (Poland) in 1981. At the Poland Conference the meaningful concepts of "people", "environment" and "architecture" were presented. During the United Nations Conference on "Environment and Development" held in Rio in 1993 it was proposed the 21st Century Agenda and afterward China also raised the 21st Century Agenda of China. Over those years, the idea of human settlements gradually came into being in my mind and finally developed into the *Science of Human Settlements*.

The third aspect was related to the book *History of Chinese Settlements*. Sponsored by the National Natural Science Foundation, we conducted the research program in the Yangtze Delta Area (covering Shanghai, Hangzhou-Jiazhou-Huzhou Area, Suzhou-Wuxi-Changzhou Area and Nanjing-Zhenjiang-Yangzhou Area). Then, we did town planning projects for Wuxi County and investigate the development of Wuxi city and Neixiang.

Our work got positive comments from socialist Fei Xiaotong as well as the vice-minister of Ministry of Construction. On the basis of research report Protection and Development of Urban Settlement Environment, I proposed the protection of historical city which was later further developed into the rule of initiative protection and overall creation. All these ideas contributed to the book *History of Chinese Settlements* that

was published in 2014. It took over ten years to develop the framework from the very beginning. Generally speaking, we should discuss the overall construction of China from various aspects including architecture, planning, gardening, etc.

The fourth aspect is about the practice of architecture. Practice helps us know the things, and it is the sole criterion of truth. It is also same to the development of architect. No matter in theoretical research, or in historical field, no practice, no right to speak. Practice gives the opportunity to think of the theoretical questions. I managed to be involved in city planning and architectural design works. As director of the Architecture Department in the second thirty-year, I tried to help the young teachers having more chance in designing and building architecture projects. After establishing the Architecture and Urban Research Institute in the late 1980s, I've completed six architectural designs and constructions. In design, I gave much importance to the local culture, historical environment and natural environment. The new-style Siheyuan of Juer Hutong was the pioneer project for exploring reform of traditional community, which received the World Habitat Awards.

The fifth aspect is about the methodology. When I studied in America in 1948, Saarinen raised two points: first, Chinese people should be aware of protecting traditional history and culture in the modernization; second, it is important to learn method of thinking. At that time, this impressed me a lot. Over many years, I have always thought that philosophy is the main course to learn the method of thinking.

In the method of thinking, the most important thing is the consideration of wholeness, that I called *the growing whole*. Each period gives birth to new things which are related to the whole system.

When I visited Christopher Alexander in Berkeley, 1988, he suggested the consideration of the wholeness in the progress. His idea seems common nowadays, but very far-sighted at that time.

In the following research and practice, I have always stuck to the principle of *the growing whole*. This philosophical thinking helps in keeping clear mind in the construction of China.

Part Three: Some thoughts

Firstly, the famous Confucian scholar Xunzi once said that an

efficient way of learning is to communicate with master. During the period in Tsinghua University, I got to know many scholars in the academic conferences and learned a lot through exchange with other academics and architects. For example, I knew a few about you (Prof. Lucio Barbera) before, but I was astonished by your marvelous works when reviewing the design of “Three-Mountain and Five Garden” Field Workshop held at Tsinghua in 2005.³ After that, we became good friends. So it happened with the encounter with Charles Correa. Since the conference of “The Changing City and Countryside” in 1981, I’ve kept exchanging correspondence with Charles Correa till the latest.

The Second is about the hard-working and the pioneering spirit. When I worked in Eero Saarinen studio in 1950, I was one of the team member which took part to the design of GM Tech Center. I could discuss the plan with Saarinen only after his dinner time and I had to return to my town by bus before 11:30 pm. When I arrived to the Saarinen’s studio the next morning, I saw many cigarette butts in the ashtray. I could realize that he had continued working after 11:00 pm.

Although the design was finished, after three months, I was still very impressed by his hard-working attitude.

This interview started from a conversation with you in 2014 and still continue today. In the coming Spring Festival, I am going to be ninety-four years old.

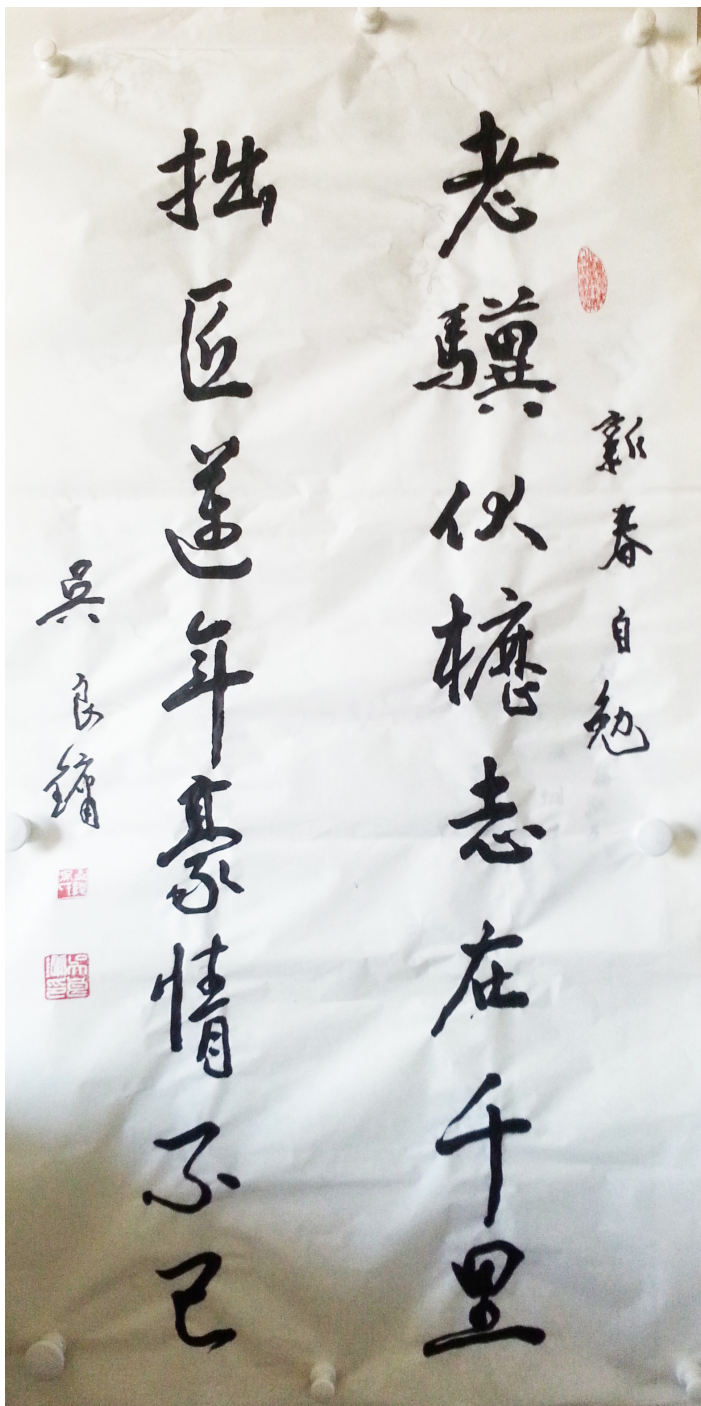
An architect is always pursuing in the whole life the harmony of human settlements through the communication with nature and people.

With the love and friendship rotted in the heart, I fulfilled myself in the pursuit of academy and architecture.

During the last Spring Festival, I wrote the following Chinese couplets:

*Although resting at the stable,
the old horse still aspires to run another thousand miles;
Although growing older, my ambition never wanes as times goes by.*

3. Professor Wu Liangyong is talking about a workshop chaired in May 2005 by Lucio Barbera and Laurie Olin who, at that time was director of Tsinghua Landscape Department. Professor Wu participated in the Final Jury. The outcomes were published as Anna Irene Del Monaco, Eros Congedo (edited by), *Pechino: Storia, Paesaggio, Città*, Casa Editrice La Sapienza, Roma 2006.



Chinese Calligraphy
by Wu Liangyong.
“At the Spring
Festival, I wrote the
following Chinese
couplets:
Although resting at
the stable, the old
horse still aspires to
run another thousand
miles;
Although growing
older, my ambition
never wanes as times
goes by”.