INTERVIEWER: This is the interview with Professor Yung Ho Chang, for the 150th MIT celebration. And let me start by asking where were you born?

CHANG: So I was born in Beijing.

INTERVIEWER: Can you tell me a little bit about your family?

CHANG: Actually, my father was an architect. So my family, both my parents were from the Shanghai region. And then my mom's family, which was huge, she had nine sisters and two brothers and they all moved up north. And then my father went to Beijing to work, so the family ended up being in Beijing, and I have a brother. So, in China -- my accent is very northern, actually, very Beijing, and even my locas actually very northern, but actually I got the southern genes, that's who I am.

INTERVIEWER: Are there any significant events or influences from your childhood that you think have contributed to your professional work?

CHANG: That's an interesting question because as far as my life, or really the life of my generation is concerned, probably the most influential historic event is the Great Cultural Revolution which happened during the late '60s to early '70s. That really changed the outlook of, again, probably more than one generation even. So now, although I became an architect, my friends were doing work in different fields, but we think that that was really the life-changing event.

INTERVIEWER: Can you talk a little bit about the way in which it changed or shaped?

CHANG: I was using the American term. I was a third grader at that time, I was in elementary school. I don't even know how to begin to describe it to you. So basically we, my brother and I, the school closed down and then one day the so-called Red Guards, and they were just a little older than I was, they were probably teenagers in high school, high school students. They came to our house and smashed the place and took things away, and so for me it happened like this. And then after high school -- well, my brother was not as lucky as I was, so he went to the military farm in the inner Mongolia and worked as a farmer for five and a half years. So I was able to finish high school. He missed out the entire high school in a period. After high school -- I was in high school for five years, although I missed a couple of years, maybe three, and then I started to work as a laborer on a construction site. And then that place I was helping to build was a research institute for chemistry and metallurgy, right, that's how you say it. And then I always study in English, so I landed a job in this library. Nothing was really -- it wasn't a typical sort of a childhood in years for anyone. It was a whole series of totally chaotic, incomprehensible for a kid, events, and very traumatic too -- the events, I don't know how to describe them to you. Like my father, and I suppose both of my parents, were put on a stage to be -- what would be the English word -- they were in a punished, right. So, I don't know if you get an idea.

INTERVIEWER: Yes. It sounds like you felt in danger and uncertain a lot.

CHANG: Yes. So our lives were literally threatened. I had a problem coming and going to school because the kids in the neighborhood would beat me up and -- because of my family.

INTERVIEWER: Was it the work in construction that started getting you interested in architecture or was that earlier from your dad?

CHANG: See, the construction part at that time really didn't mean anything. But I was lucky, of course, to do that. What happened was that -- so in 1966, the Cultural Revolution broke out, and then it took ten years to finish up. So in 1977 all the colleges reopened and held the first entrance examination after the Cultural Revolution. So, my brother, ten years of a high school student, we all took the exam at the same time. So my brother and I we all took that. And then, of course, all of a sudden we had to decide what we wanted to study. I was interested in art. You know, had to do with influence from my dad. So I wanted to study painting, you know, western oil painting -- that was really the thing I was into. And then, however, my paintings were really terrible. We got relatives who are actually painters to take a look at my paintings, so very consistently they also said don't apply. Because there were two things -- children were able -- young people were able to learn at home is painting and music. You can't study science, for instance, at home and so on. So there were a lot of very talented young painters.

And then my family is very different from a typical Chinese family, otherwise my parents couldn't care less what we were doing. You know, the Chinese family's like study, study, take some additional courses or really work at home -- not my family. My brother and I we just had a good time. We always play. So anyway, so I felt since I couldn't really go to art school, I thought maybe I could study design -- I thought about product design. And then even the design school was very crowded with people who can really paint and draw. So I was at loss with what I wanted to study. One thing was clear was that I want to go to college -- it really doesn't matter what to study. That's what my brother did in the end. It wasn't terrible, but he actually wanted to be an engineer, but as soon as he had no high school, he couldn't possibly get into the engineering school, so he studied economics first and he got an MBA later. But anyway, so in my case, I thought maybe I could study design actually, industrial or product design. But I also was just hopeless to get into the design school. And then my father made a suggestion, and he said to me look, you know, you may want to consider what I do. You don't have to be good with painting, you don't have to be good with math or science courses. And you know I wasn't good with any of those things. So when we considered that, and then that's exactly what I did.

So I went to Nanjing -- that's the oldest school of architecture, still one of the best and that's where my father went.

INTERVIEWER: So how did you come to go from Nanjing to Muncie, Indiana?

CHANG: So, in '78, I was already in Nanjing, and then I heard from my father there is a professor in Muncie, Indiana at Ball State University, contacted him. His name is Marvin Rosenman. Marvin was interested in China, but at that time, very few people had the opportunity to visit China, and he was reading a magazine, I think it's House and Garden, a magazine he shouldn't have read, right -- just kidding. Not very professional, more for the housewife. Anyway, he read that magazine. There was an interview with a Chinese architect -- you know, very, very unusual. And that architect was my father. And so he contacted the magazine and then he wrote to my father and asked if my father could help him to arrange a trip to go to China. And then my father, through the China Society of Architecture, extended an invitation to him and probably helped out in some other ways. So, Marvin came to China in '89 or -- I'm sorry, '79 or '80 to China with 19 students from Ball State. And then they visited four cities, each has one of the architecture, you know, the better architecture schools. So, Beijing, Kenjing and Shanghai and Nanjing. So, I saw Marvin for the first time.

So that's one story. Another story was that in the late '40s, my father got into, I think it's in University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign to study. So everything he got, he's in the passport/visa scholarship, so everything was set for him to go. And then there was a regime change, so the Communists took over the country, and so he was like a lot of young people, he had hope for the new regime. But also as an architect he thought there were opportunities for him as an architect. So for the second part he was actually very much right, so he got a lot of job for a short period of time. And then for the first part, he was actually very much disappointed. So he regretted later in his life that he didn't go to the US, or he regretted that he didn't really leave China. He wasn't a very ideological kind of a person, he thought he would do better as an architect elsewhere, maybe in Hong Kong and so on. So he really urged my brother and I to go somewhere else.

My brother who's older, who's two and a half years older, he left China for -- we have relatives, we had even more at that time in the California in the Bay area, so my brother left for the US in 1980. So the combination of the Ball State delegation and my father's encouragement, so I left for the US in 1981. And I knew nothing about the US and the English textbooks we studied were from England -- it was all about London poverty in, I don't know, 1930s, they were pretty old. And about in Oxford and Cambridge, you know, the other Cambridge. And so I didn't know what to expect. You know the only image of the US was really a postcard sort of Manhattan. So anyway, and then I ended up in Muncie. I took a Greyhound bus from San Francisco, so that was the real cultural shock really I experienced.

INTERVIEWER: You saw a lot of the country.

CHANG: Yeah, a lot of corn fields and a deteriorating downtown, which I just -- I didn't know what I expected, maybe Manhattan. So that was very interesting.

INTERVIEWER: When you got to Ball State, what were your first impressions or what did you -- that must have been quite a culture shock.

CHANG: Yes, very different in every way. I wouldn't -- again, I wouldn't know where to begin. One thing I had a lot of difficulty with the music in our studio. It was rock and roll, it was not something -- I never heard -- well, it was something I never heard, but listened to it, and also I just really didn't appreciate not until at least -- you know, that's at '81 -- probably somewhere between '84, you know, three or even four years later, maybe -- yeah, probably around '84, and I discovered the Beatles for the first time, which I actually liked. So that was sort of the turning point for me to appreciate the more contemporary popular music of the west. But you know, among other things.

INTERVIEWER: I'm a huge Beatle's fan. So, from Ball State, what made you decide to go to UC Berkeley?

CHANG: So again, although I was away in Nanjing from my family in Beijing for three years, and to be in the US all by myself was more difficult. So I just wanted to be with my brother -- my brother was at UC Berkeley. And then because of that, I didn't really apply for any other graduate schools. I applied for Berkeley, and my brother applied for more than one. So, in the end, he didn't get in Berkeley, it's a graduate school, he got in at Yale, so we went like this. So I ended up on the west coast. So my dream really didn't come true. So it was that. I had no idea about the school, but I was happy about my decision. I met in Muncie at Ball State and Berkeley some really excellent teachers and I became also an educator myself. So looking back, I just had some of the amazingly good teachers, so I am very thankful for my experience at both institutions.

INTERVIEWER: And you did work briefly for an architect in San Francisco?

CHANG: Yes. I worked for several, actually. I worked for several architects, but during the daytime mostly for a Chinese-American architect. His name is -- was -- you know he passed away a long time ago -- Clement Chen, Jr. And then in the evening, I also moonlighted for a number of architects. Stanley Saitowitz who was my thesis advisor at Berkeley, and there were several other architects.

INTERVIEWER: What made you decide at that point to focus on teaching rather than becoming a working architect?

CHANG: One reason really was the teachers I had. At Ball State I had a teacher whose name is Rodney Place, he's a South African British, and he came to the US from Architectural Association School of Architecture -- it's kind of a silly name, so people usually just say AA. So he came from AA, the most experimental, radical school of architecture in the world at that time. So he came from AA and to discover the US -- he's like one of those -- I didn't know that until later. He was very much in a way a romantic kind of a South African/European, so he had this idea of an America that took him to teach in, especially in the midwest, he wanted to see the real America. It sounded like a Sarah Palin, but that's not important. A lot of people kind of see the middle part that way. So anyway, and he was more than an inspiration. You know, I came from kind of an isolated society at that time. To be exposed to Marcel Duchan, and French new wave movies, all of that, was an incredible experience. And then he's the best teacher I ever met. He could do one thing I still cannot, and other teachers I had were not able to. He would not give the students answers, even if we begged him, he wouldn't given in. So you really had to think about it on your own and figure things out.

And then at Berkeley I had a Swedish professor, Lars Lerup, who was also just really outstanding in his own ways. He could read the minds of the students, and I didn't know how he does that. Partly it has to do with his experience. So those people, you know, when you have really good teachers, you tend to also want to teach yourself -- that happened to me. And then Clement Chen's office it was a let-down. Clement was a very good architect. If you have been to San Francisco, he actually designed the Holiday Inn hotel in Chinatown. It's a landmark building, it's a concrete structure -- you may or may not like it, but it's a very unique structure, you know, original. And then he became a developer. He did mostly hotels and so on. So, when I was working for him, he was already in the developers mode, he wasn't really interested in architecture or design.

And then I always remember my teachers, and by the way, they were -- both were also flamboyant in their lifestyles, and so Rodney would drive a car from the 1940s, always have a fresh flower, and imagine in Muncie, quite something. So I just decided try to teach.

INTERVIEWER: So you taught at Ball State and Michigan and Berkeley and Rice. What made you decide to go back to Beijing?

CHANG: While I was teaching, and actually in '86, the first year -- I started in '85, and it took me a year to really get into teaching. So in '86, I decided to start to do my own work. So I was doing design competitions, just doing -- there is a kind of odd phrase, theoretical design, meaning that I really didn't have clients to ask me to do anything. I would come up with design problems and then just work on them. I did that for eight years. And then through that process there's an increasing desire of really to make buildings. I got [INAUDIBLE] really very anxious, but yet without the social connections in the United States, and without also the social skills. Actually I'm otherwise a very quiet person. I don't enjoy socializing/talking as much. So there weren't any opportunities.

And then I, at that time, so I was at Berkeley as a visiting assistant professor, so I wasn't on tenured track or anything. And I won the competition to receive a traveling scholarship, to travel in Europe for a year. And actually, you know, I tried to make everything a little more coherent and logic -- the reality wasn't that as much. So the trip was -- I'm still not a very good planner, and so I never had much money and I had a credit card with I think a $3,000.00 limit. At home, my wife and I really with that money we have more than enough, but once we were traveling, we constantly had problems. And then already for how many years, we were never home for the Chinese New Year, which is still going on now this year, so we decided to go home. That's in January of 1983.

So, we went home during the holidays, there was a friend of a relative's a neighbor, that kind of a thing, just came to our apartment, my parents apartment, actually, to say hello because he knew my wife from their childhood. And then he asked if we would want to design an entertainment center -- it actually meant a casino in Southern China. That was our first commission. I was so thrilled, because I just couldn't figure out for years who's going to ask me to design a building. And then that's how we started. And although, again, I got a teaching job at Rice University in Houston, but I was going back and forth. I really just wanted to build. So going back to China to build buildings, and then from Houston, so made the decision kind of easy. I had a hard time with Houston. It's the south, I'm a northerner. And then also the city in my mind it wasn't much of city, right, it's sort of an extended suburbia, so we were glad to leave Houston to some extent, although I had a really good time at Rice University, made a lot of friends and so on.

INTERVIEWER: So this was the beginning of your company.

CHANG: Yeah. So the beginning of the company was the dining table of my parents' apartment.

INTERVIEWER: So the name of your firm I understand translates to unusual architecture?

CHANG: Or it's like this -- it can be pronounced with different connotations, so the name of our firm, if I say Feichang Jianzhu, it's my thought people would treat it as really a noun, so it means in unusual architecture, extraordinary architecture or abnormal buildings, whatever. And then if I make a comment and say that looks pretty feichang jianzhu, it's very subtle the difference -- it means that something looks very architectural, has a pure geometrical shape, for instance. So we casually picked up the name because we realized in the early '90s, individuals' qualifications and so on was not really acknowledged as much as a company, so we registered our company in Houston at that time, paid for $7.50 I think, I don't know what kind of a registration that was, so we could hang onto a name for ten years. In the first part of '93, we actually had five commissions in the end, and then none of them really worked out. So out of the frustration, my wife, who is also an architect -- you know, we have been practicing together all these years. So she said maybe we should call the company Fei Jianzhu which means like non-architecture, so and non-architecture maybe. So I knew that wouldn't really be very attractive with our potential clients. So I added one word Chang - I added the word ordinary. So, it went from non-architecture to not ordinary architecture. Really it was a joke.

INTERVIEWER: But became very successful.

CHANG: We can't change another -- people won't -- they wouldn't be able to find us.

INTERVIEWER: Why do you think the firm has been so successful in China?

CHANG: We were -- early, we were dumb -- I think that's very important. I'm not being modest, actually. I think Chinese culture, which I'm, of course, part of it, but I had some element, I don't -- to say the least, I'm not very good at, probably to some extent. I don't even agree with. So basically, my years in the US was, how should I put it, I don't mean in any kind of a negative connotation, but it's kind of a brainwash for me. In a way I really didn't know it happened. When I went to the US, I came from an ideologically-heavy country, and there were political studies every Saturday afternoon for half a day, which is ridiculous for me. So like a lot of people from China, I was very tired of politics and ideology, all of that. And then Harvard -- so while I was in the US, so I had that attitude for many years. I didn't quite understand why all my, especially when I was teaching my colleagues, were all so much into politics and so on, let alone most of them, all of them were and are in an all leftist anyway. So I just didn't quite understand that either. And however, not until I went back to China that I realized, in the process somewhere, I have become a leftist myself. You know, I'm probably center-right, still not on the far right -- center-left, not on the far left, and I also realized how important that was for me because I was able to resist some of the temptations of the market economy. And that ideology I have, you know, I had, I was able to focus my work. Most people being this, you know, Chinese thing, they were a lot more flexible. I was far less flexible than they are. They could do anything to be successful. I was too, just too damn principaled, but I kind of think I -- and I want to be that way. So that's the difference.

INTERVIEWER: You must have, maybe not being as flexible, you must have offered something in your design that people actually wanted.

CHANG: At the beginning I tried to bullshit people to buy in my ideas, and I wasn't very successful, but I think I did well by moving my clients with my sincerity, because a couple of them told me so. They told me in the end they really weren't convinced by what I was trying to tell them, but they saw, you know, if these guys really want to do it, maybe he really, you know, he got the point. So they let me to do it. And then my stubbornness, although I work very hard from the very beginning, so brought some field projects that eventually started to snowball. So it wasn't my, in the end, my worst, but these projects that people can see and appreciate. Now that's something actually very interesting about architecture. Architecture, it's actually one of the least probably profound disciplines, although if you read architectural theory, especially produced, in a series produced in the past, three or so decades, they were pretty thick, it's not easy at all to decipher. But actually, architecture is a very down to earth essential discipline. But the difficulty lies in the fact only when the building's up, everyone can really understand it, otherwise, it is pretty abstract when it's on a sheet of paper. Even a very realistic drawing doesn't give you the experience of architecture. So that's what the difficulty is. So anyway, I kind of new that, so I just wanted to -- it doesn't matter how small a project is, I only wanted to do projects I could realize. So and then I started to build a portfolio of work.

INTERVIEWER: So, for a number of years you developed your company and you had increasing success, and then at some point you decided to come back to the United States, and I believe you were teaching at Harvard?

CHANG: That was just one semester. And what happened was that I -- still today, Beijing's a little like Boston or in New York, you see every architect from all over the world. So while in Beijing, I was teaching at Peking university. I had at that time a very unusual lecture series, having a lot of the really big name architects from all over the world. So I made friends. So one -- I think his was -- after I taught at Harvard as a visitor for a semester, and then on my way back to Beijing, I went to a party, an office Christmas party -- oh, at actually, at Steven Holl's office. Steven Holl designed the Simmons hall dormitory here at MIT, so I got to know him in China. So went over to Steven's office to party and we were just gossiping and he teaches at Columbia. He started to talk about the dean search that was going on at Columbia. And then all of a sudden in the middle of the conversation he said hey, you know, you could be the dean at Columbia. The position was held by this really influential Swiss architect, but not Tschumi at the time. He's one of the, you know, for the younger architects, he was one of the gods of architecture. So I thought he must be joking, but he looked very serious. So and he said if the provost of Columbia contacts you, would you at least say you're willing to take part in the process? So I said oh, why not. And then they were other friends there and I ask them, is Steven serious? Both -- I ask probably a couple of people, they said just ignore him, he's drunk.

So, and then, of course, I saw they were right, Steven's looking a bit drunk anyway. And then I didn't hear a thing for a few months, pretty much forgot about it. And then all of a sudden I did hear, and I got an email from the provost of Columbia, and then I was told there was a very long short list -- there were 20-some people on the short list. And then from that point on, I would receive an email every week or two and say the short list being shortened, and then you'd see it was 21 last week and now it's 20. But I stayed on that short list until the very end and the search committee I heard that actually decided I was a top candidate, although I think the runner-up got the job. So at that point there were two things -- one was that I started seriously considering a teaching position in the US So, it started as a joke in a way. And then I got approached by various institutions. So one morning I went to the office and there was a fax -- you know, today when you receive a fax, it's just a quite unusual event. It came from MIT, it came from Dean Adele Santos, inviting me to have an interview. I said in the next, I don't know how long, several weeks at least, I wasn't able to go to the US And then probably that was another fax from her saying in that case, I'm coming over to Beijing. So that's how it started, and then it turned out, really among all the offers I had, MIT's was by far the most challenging and most exciting. So I thought I was not that old, you know, five years, so I should really take MIT rather than the more comfortable ones. So here I am.

INTERVIEWER: What was it about -- what was the appeal of coming back and teaching in the US since you were teaching in Beijing?

CHANG: It wasn't really just teaching in the US, I -- because I taught for a long, long time, I started to get some ideas about what architecture education probably should be, so I was getting very ambitious. So, in China, I was tackling some more basic issues in architectural education, but I wanted to also tackle some more of the cutting edge issues, and I wanted to really change the way architecture education was, in a way still is, in the US And with that, you know, with my overblown ambition, I thought coming back to the US was very interesting. So I had an interest in education, US would be the country, and MIT would be the right school, because I sensed already, now it's crystal clear, but at that time, still they were a little vague, but I sensed really the importance of a number of things, you know, including, of course, technology and environmental issues and so on and how they would reshape architecture, the practice. It's happening in practice actually faster than in education, and so education ought to be very different than the one I had in a way, especially than the way I taught. Now I look back, really I was teaching not the right thing to my students, so I decided to come back. And also nobody told me it was impossible to do this transcontinental, global practice. Thanks to technology, in fact, it did work out. It wasn't, you know, it's still not easy, but it's actually in a way it's possible. So, again, I wasn't -- you know, I was hot-headed, as I have been always I guess. So I just came. It's like the way I went to Rice University -- I never really visited Houston. I put my things in a car with my wife from California, we just drove to Houston and we discovered a city, so we weren't as sure anyway.

INTERVIEWER: How would you define what you think architecture education should be about?

CHANG: At MIT, if I say that way I think architecture or architectural education should be, everyone understands. But if you know how architecture is being taught in the US, and so that's a different story. For the past, again, probably close to four decades now, there was kind of a revolution in education, not only in architecture. I read in the Financial Times actually fairly recently, maybe a year ago, an article about English education at Harvard, this guy who is a Brit, he came here to study English -- he ended up learning everything but English. They discussed racial issues, gender issues, so, of course, literature and everything else, but not English. Architecture has been taught sort of that way, not as bad. We actually didn't use the word building because that considered to be too perfunctory was the dirty word. See, architecture is okay to say and you have to talk about pretty big abstract theories, so architects were reading Jacques Derrida of grammatology -- I don't remember the names of his books. So they were pretty thick, post-structural philosophies, and hoping that it would generate ideas. Of course, it might for some architect, but I don't believe that's how architecture should really be taught, because there are a lot of things. Number one, they are more fundamental.

Secondly, there are the issues we are confronted with in an urgent way than French philosophy and we got to take on. You know it's like the energy issue, the environment issue, the advancement of technology, globalization, the changing of practice. And so basically architecture has become for a while really kind of an abstract subject, and that when you do design a building, it's always a house for ideally for a monk poet. There's only one architect ever get to do that -- somebody in Japan did it, but otherwise, where do you find a monk poet? Or you do an art museum and nothing bigger than that. Architects don't do shopping malls, don't do factories, and don't do this and that, and we don't do much in the end. So, I was actually -- you know there are actually many other reasons for me to be here, and one of them actually is also the long tradition of covering social concerns in design work at MIT. So anyway, I thought so social, environmental, technological, all these things got to be part of the curriculum so that our students one day graduate so they can be better prepared to contribute to the society. We are the architects, you know, we are designers. We need to think about contributing to the discipline first. I think it's only a slight difference and in the end it's probably the same thing. But I felt very strong about that.

INTERVIEWER: If you could sort of take yourself back to 2005, can you remember what your first impressions of the students at MIT and how MIT felt different than other places you had taught?

CHANG: I actually told -- it doesn't matter. Anyway, so I had kind of an interview at that point, so I still remember what I -- probably that was Scott Campbell in our school, and our amazing experience at MIT. Because I've taught in the US, I've taught in Chinese universities, at Peking University also is one of the -- Peking University and Tongji University, you got the best students from China there. But my wife and I were here for the interview and maybe for house-hunting already. We just remember one thing. I wish I still got that, because after being here for so long and then I got used to it, just the faces of students and people actually looked different. You see how smart they are and you can see that in their eyes. It's an amazing thing for us. So you look at the eyes of these young people -- you know maybe today I would say probably has to do the kind of a nerdiness, you know, we kind of cherish that here, but they looked totally intelligent and we were impressed. I only remember that instance one more time when I was in the US only for a year, and Rodney Place, whom I was talking about, took some of the students to Cranbrook and I remember seeing the students had a very different sort of a gaze in the eyes. They looked kind of like they were a bunch of people working in the basement and they looked like monks, got this kind of ascetic kind of a look in their eyes, which I remember and otherwise is the MIT look in the eyes. Sometimes I still look for that -- I don't really see it because I see it every day now, but still once in awhile people here always remind me how really intelligent human beings can be.

INTERVIEWER: In what ways does MIT, being at MIT help your work, help your architecture work, your professional side?

CHANG: I just told my student how much I made him. If I were a student here I think MIT would have helped me even more. I really wanted to study here. But anyway, I'm very lucky as it is. So basically, is this -- so it developed a perspective on architecture through my practicing in China. I realize how important that is for an architect to really understand how a building, first of all is put together, so we need to understand the nuts and bolts. And also I realize that there are a lot of technology out there would really help us to make a better building, a cheaper building, and a more sustainable building, and we really need to know these technologies. And then the structure of the knowledge in architecture as a way I learned were not really helping us in that direction. So when I came to MIT, I did want to learn all of that. Again, as I was saying earlier, of course, I was not a student and I wasn't able to have the time to take courses, but I got exposed to a lot of different things within our department. Some of my colleagues, one of them actually studying the kind of new materials, like fiber, concrete and so on. And then I remember going to the Department of Chemistry to listen to a lecture, it was very interesting, it was about really designing new materials on the nano level.

And so I started I don't know how many years ago, probably close to the time I -- maybe a year or two, even before, maybe in '03, '04, I developed an interest in plastic. And that interest now is also, it's still there, we're doing a number of projects using fiberglass, polycarbonate, polyethylene, although I probably didn't directly pick up some of these things at MIT, but I really pick up that kind of a spirit here very much. This is the, you know talking about, I don't mean to be disrespectable, but actually I mean in a very kind of a good way, I have this kind of a stereotypical image of an MIT professor who would I have a beard kind of on the bigger side wearing shorts and tee-shirt all year round. I don't know if you interview people that actually look like this, somehow probably not. They are PAC student -- there are people who look like that, believe it or not. When I see people like this, I don't know them and I don't know what they do. It's a reminder of why I am here. You know, I don't know, you probably should edit that out and it politically probably is not correct. It's kind of a funny thing.

So, in that way, I'm just talking about I probably got an education at MIT, and that's -- the look of the people, their lives, when I look into them again I am clueless as to what they are trying to achieve, but they're a reminder of the things I'm really interested. So I'm building a house using fiberglass for the structure, and then we are completing the Shanghai Corporate Pavilion for the Expo in Shanghai, World Expo that opens in early May using a lot of polycarbonate tubes with LED lights, with water for mist-making and with water for energy. We're doing solar thermal and then thermal electricity exchange and so on.

So, I think that's all had to do with my MIT side.

INTERVIEWER: So you're able to take ideas and concepts that you pick up here and then put them to work in your design.

CHANG: Yeah. Again, it really is just the spirit of it. You know this and the atmosphere, I don't know how much is in my department, but here. You know that's why I was saying you just see it -- you see it on your way to your office, on your way to maybe the lunch place, Stata Center.

INTERVIEWER: How would you describe the great strengths of the Department of Architecture?

CHANG: Our school, you constantly probably hear it is really one of the oldest schools of architecture in the US For me, the process is very important, but also we are, in a way, one of the youngest schools also in the US because we're a school on the rise, and we're are, as a faculty, we're very much determined to really make big changes. And I started to talk a lot about changes before President Obama -- just kidding, but in a way it's true. So anyway, so we're not burdened by our history and right now in the past five years, one thing I did I'm very proud of is to in a way to rebuild the faculty by hiring so far nine new people. So we have a lot of peer schools, they have a world class visiting faculty, especially the Ivy League schools, they were able to have a lot of visitors from elsewhere here for a semester or on a fairly regular basis even and so on. But I'm very comfortable to say that as far as an in-house faculty, and right now we're the strongest in the country. And then our design faculty are from all over the world -- from Asia, India, Korea, Japan, China and so on, and from Europe, from the UK, from Belgium and so on. And then also there are the middle aged more mature level of people like myself and like Rahul Mahrotra from India, Nader Tehrani who has a local practice, one of the best offices in the US, but he's from Iran. And so then we have a tier of upcoming and young designers and scholars and so on. So, university is all about the faculty. We could have a bigger -- you know, this I'm actually paraphrasing the first president of Peking University, because in Chinese we say university the big school, in Chinese "da" meaning big. So he said the big school is not about big facility and big buildings and so on, big campus, and he said big school is about big ideas, and it's about a -- and not a lot of people -- not the big in terms of size, but about a big faculty. So I really believe what he said.

INTERVIEWER: What do you think MIT's Architecture Department and school, what does that offer that other schools in this country or around the world do not offer?

CHANG: We're not quite there yet, but eventually we ought to offer two things, which other schools may not able to do as well because they don't have the resources. One is our core technology. You know the way technology has infiltrated our life here with the iPhones and all these i-this and i-that and all these things. And the other thing it has to do with a long MIT tradition is on the urban front. So in the 60s, 70s, at MIT we developed a very strong research about city and in urbanism -- when we say urbanism it's how we see cities being designed. Although actually it started in the mid-'40s. So that tradition -- so we have the best department of planning here at MIT, especially in the US, and then I see -- although they don't really design -- I see the combination of their knowledge and of our design ability, we really have the opportunity to be the best for urbanism and for urban design and so on. So in these two fronts, architecture that embraces technology and architecture combined with urbanism and, again, there's a bit of the other things, but I think we really have a very good chance to excel, to be the best.

INTERVIEWER: Since you're head of the Department of Architecture, is being an administrator, is that something that helps you achieve your goal, is it something that is time-consuming and keeps you from your design work? How does that fit in?

CHANG: That's actually a question I'm still trying to figure out. First of all, I'm not very good at administration and management maybe. But as an architect it really is a very important part of our work. By having this job, I've become better in managing things. Again, it's a very good learning experience. Still to balance my time really -- what would be the word -- to further develop my own administrative skills and these things, it actually is quite a struggle I have to say. But luckily, I have a really, a fantastic side-kick -- I have an associate department head, Leslie Norford, he's a professor of building technology, his field is mechanical engineering. I have to say our engineers are better in that front. I imagine a lot of architects are pretty good, but I -- and with his help, I'm so lucky that really as a team we worked out very well. And then I have also a really first rate assistant, Anne Simunovic. She's been at MIT for 30 years, maybe by now 35 years, and most of the time she's spending in architecture. She would for me, although it's not only that she helps a lot, so kind of make up my shortcoming in administration, but one remarkable thing, she would say, you know, I was mentioning a name, probably an icon in design, she would say yeah, yeah, I remember him. He used to come to MIT. It was quite a remarkable thing. The other day she -- I don't know if you are interested in design as much -- I didn't know, I think George Nelson used to -- if you go -- go to Design Within Reach, probably he's like the Eames, you know Ray and Charles Eames. He designed so many things we still use -- wall clocks and chairs . Anne would know him -- no, that's of course beside the point. It has nothing to do with administration. But when we were talking about administration I couldn't help but think of people I work together in the department headquarters.

INTERVIEWER: There was something intriguing that you said, you thought that wisdom is important in architecture. Can you talk a little about why wisdom is so important?

CHANG: Today if we talk about aesthetics, probably we can't get two people to agree on much. Right, if something is pretty or ugly. There is just no one set of criteria that we can use. And then what is funny, what is humorous, what's not? What would make you tickle and laugh, what would make me tickle and laugh, who knows. But I find what's consistent is actually the intelligence in art, even in comedy, and in the true sense of humor has to do with intelligence or wisdom. So in design, I'm afraid it's probably also true. So it's not so much an expression of a personality or other personality expressed in architectural forms, and if it's geometry or shape or material choices and so on, but rather the architect or designer has really discovered something and then put that something into the design, so that's wisdom. So in my case, I don't do it that well, but I'm not really interested in big formal expressions. I think architecture is really interesting because it's an integral part of daily life. So I watch too many of the French new wave movies, right, so they could be pretty boring, they could be very interesting, it all depends on your outlook of daily life. And then there are these little small wisdoms you'll pick up. You'll look at how people would appreciate a setting of dinner and so on, that gives the pleasure to people. And then often there's something smart about it, so that it's not sake for -- in a form for the sake of a form. There's something you discover you learn. I think that's really nice. Again, every day our philosophical often that they could come together. Have you seen the movie Over the Sky of Berlin?

INTERVIEWER: No.

CHANG: It's made by what's the director's name who also made the Paris, Texas -- he's famous. Anyway, it doesn't matter. So in that movie there was an American actor who used to play a detective call Colombo--.

INTERVIEWER: Peter Falk.

CHANG: Peter Falk. He was in that movie. In a cold Berlin morning, Berlin was 15 degrees below zero Celsius about a week ago still -- Berlin gets cold. In a very cold morning he was holding a cup of coffee, very hot, in his hand, he's standing outside and he was talking about his philosophy of life -- of course, it was that. That's kind of a wisdom. You know, the cold morning with a hot cup of coffee in his hand. And so although in that case it's his revelation, but I think wisdom is on that level sometimes.

INTERVIEWER: When you approach a design or a design problem, is there a particular goal that you have in mind?

CHANG: My goal, if there is one, I want to -- you know, there are a lot of pretty serious yet basic goals, you know, there are needs of people, but architecture should meet, be it comfort or convenience, and there are loftier goals of inspiring people. So that's why an old big library would look like a cathedral. I may not do that myself, and I understand why it was designed that way and so on. But yet, there's one goal, if I could, I would like to always achieve is to delight people. I don't actually like things serious. I have to do things serious because I got the responsibilities, but otherwise if anything that is delightful, I love to do that.

INTERVIEWER: Is that why you think one of your designs, split house, has gotten so much attention?

CHANG: You know, I don't think I -- I'm not even old enough, I'm pretty old but not enough to develop some really good wisdoms yet, but I got clever from time to time. So that was one of those projects, there were some actually very clear intentions. It means that I did understand something, I digested what I observed and spit out, so it's better than something still un-digested, you know, half-baked. So, split house really had to do with a number of things, and one thing it was very important for me personally was the fact I had a courtyard house in my mind. I grew up in a courtyard house in the State of Beijing. I left the courtyard house when I was 13 years old. Of course, I had no idea that was still a house I lived the longest. I never lived in the house that long ever since. I moved around a lot, a lot. So in that house I understood a particular kind of in a living environment one might design the split house, it was there. So basically, a courtyard house would allow one to live in an introverted cosmo pretty much, so you'd have a piece of sky, you'd have a piece of ground right in the center and then you live around it. However, when I worked on the split house, I realized that was also an urban house. The introverted quality is for the density of the city. It wouldn't make sense when we were doing the house in the open landscape. And then after many runs, actually, I came to the final version of it. So basically, there is an enclosure of a courtyard, but yet it's enclosed half by the natural element, the slope half by building, half by the artificial, so that's where the house came to be. And then as if a house being split in middle to make the artificial half and then a slope. So that was one of the ideas.

INTERVIEWER: Your area of interest is around the intersection of city and tradition and materiality -- is that how I would understand it? Can you talk a little about--?

CHANG: That's what I put down many years ago. I am interested in these subject matters. Tradition sounds very general -- they all sound very general and generic and broad. But the reason I had it is that for my generation and the younger generation of Chinese architects and designers, there is a very strong tendency to ignore traditions, which I find really problematic actually, because I'm actually a big fan of Japanese design from architecture to industrial design to fashion design to graphic design. Japan is a big design country. What I learned from my Japanese counterparts, they were able to come by the tradition and almost ultra modern. I believe that we could do that as well. Our traditions are different from the Japanese, although we share a number of them and so on. I just remembered, again, as a person, I'm interested in the way people look very much-- who actually I know pretty well who's a structural engineer. He designed some of the really the most fascinating structures. His name is Kawaguchi and he works with the architect Isozaki and so on, designs structures can be lift up from the ground, so it could be built very quickly and so on. So, Kawaguchi used to take me and others to karaoke and he would sing very traditional songs. And then I got to know him better, he actually told me that he belongs to, how do you say, you know, singing group. What's the word?

INTERVIEWER: Choir or choral group.

CHANG: Yeah. So anyway so, he actually told me he would dance a very traditional outfit and then to sing. So can you imagine, I don't think it's a split off a personality, but rather it's a pretty hell of a lot of integration of a culture, so I'm kind of interested in that very much. And then, of course, city is something people are actually living in. I don't believe people living in a building or a house first, people live in a city first, otherwise, if you only live in the building you're in a prison. And so the importance of city is something cannot be really underestimated. And then today, of course, I'm actually very much interested in technology and environmental issues, energy and so on. So, I am interested in material very much and I'm interested in new materials, actually in the plastics, again. So my material interest has to do with my environmental concerns and my technological concerns that really haven't really changed that much in that regard. However, in the past few years with a colleague in my office who's a graduate of MIT, we have also been working on product design, so that's something new for our office for myself. So we have then Chinaware, we have then glassware, decanters for western wine and kind of a, what's the word, carafe -- no, something--.

INTERVIEWER: Carafe, yes.

CHANG: Carafe, right, to hold rice wine, and so we're designing a teapot. We just finished the design of an oil and vinegar set. Now we're working on a salt and pepper set, we're working on a teapot using traditional purple clay. That probably doesn't make sense. It's this kind of a thing -- you see it [INAUDIBLE], you know. It's kind of a very dark chocolate-colored clay. It's the best thing for making tea, because the clay is porous would absorb the flavor of the tea in a way. And then even more recently, we are starting a clothing line, our office. So my interest is all over. That's the only thing I can't really convince my students is to focus because I don't do very well myself.

INTERVIEWER: What do you see ahead for architecture? What kind of advice do you give your students?

CHANG: And I think to prepare the career of an architect, a student really should -- you know, it sounds like a cliche at MIT. It's really it's about mind and hands, right. Man and manners, whatever. Because although we, of course we think, right, but we are dealing with the physical world. So an architect is interested in this and that. You don't only want to look at it to understand -- you want to touch it. It's wood, it's not cold. If it's metal, would have a very different feel. Before I ever lifted a piece of stone, at Peking University there were a lot of old relics laying around because it's part of the royal garden palaces from the Ching Dynasty. So one day I saw this piece of architecture -- this stone really very nicely sculpted in somehow in the wrong place. So, I wanted to move it. I got some students -- initially I chose three and plus myself, four of us. I thought we could move it. I really had no idea how heavy stone was, and then eventually we got eight people to move it. So when you understand the heaviness of stone, you can truly appreciate the lightness of a gothic cathedral, which is also made out of stone. So the Medieval Europeans, they were able to come up with this challenge -- let's make a very light stone building. It's just really outrageous, totally crazy. See, that's architecture. So if you only look at architecture buildings, you could be a scholar, but I don't think you can be an architect. So it's very important to do hands-on work. And we don't do enough of it in our department at this point.

INTERVIEWER: Are you involved at all in the expansion plans for MIT?

CHANG: No, I wish. I think I have ideas. At one breakfast I had to, over at the Gray House with our president, I was talking a bit about that. I'm not sure if she thought I was crazy anyway, because my understanding of city -- you know, my understanding of architecture is about life. So city is a place where people live. So it means that unless you are doing some heavy industrial production, you pretty much can live at a place, your work, your social, you'll do your shopping and then you have cultural activities and so on. So a mixture of these different needs is very important. Cambridge as a city is not as mixed as Boston, for instance, and it doesn't really have the right density. MIT as a campus could have used more density, could be a lot more mixed in the way it's planned. Now there's too much segregation of the dormitories and the teaching facilities and we don't have enough amenities. We could have more cafes and shops and all of that, and again, mixed with our classical monumental buildings. I think we ought to lighten up. We need some daily little delights here and there.

INTERVIEWER: Well maybe they'll ask you to design something.

CHANG: No, there's a policy which wouldn't allow, a rather recent policy, that wouldn't allow our faculty, 'our' meaning architectural faculty to be involved in designing things on campus. I don't think that's right.

INTERVIEWER: We're getting close to the end of our time. One thing I want to make sure I ask you is that despite the fact that your family did not think much of your art as a child, you are reasonably well-known as an artist. And I'm interested in what it is you're able to do and say in your art that you aren't able to do or say in your architecture?

CHANG: That's an interesting question. I still have an interest in art, not that I would never come back to painting, but right now at least, I find architecture a lot more interesting as an art form, actually. More challenging, too. You know making architecture is like making film -- you work with a big team of people, and then you have to really be very careful with the resources, exactly because you get to be in charge of big money and so on. And then when it comes to art, we do art installations for Biennale's, for museums and so on. They are really smaller, just much smaller architectural projects with not as much resources and it's done quickly. And so they're more light-hearted in some way. That's probably one reason I could never really be an artist because real artists, although they may, again, have wisdom or delight, but they treat their art projects just as seriously, right. But for me -- I'm getting more serious because when I started to do art projects, they were like really extracurricular activities. So today, coming back to your question, if I'm going to really pick up art again, it can't be installations, because they are too close architecture. I would rather paint. The last painting I did was probably in 80 -- I'm sorry, in '92 or '91 when I was teaching at Berkeley. Painting is something, oil painting is something that it gives me freedom, I think a kind of freedom usually I don't even desire. I like the limitation of a design work, lots, lots of it. And then I work like a detective and I work through the limitation. But maybe if I paint again, I'd rather want the freedom.

INTERVIEWER: Well maybe it's easier without the whole team.

CHANG: Exactly.

INTERVIEWER: To just say what you want to say.

CHANG: Right, right.

INTERVIEWER: So, I didn't get to all of the questions I had, but we have about five minutes and what I'd like to know is is there anything that we haven't talked about that you think is important to add about MIT, about your philosophy of architecture, about the future of anything?

CHANG: I have -- really I have a very serious suggestion for MIT I never really get to say. Maybe I'll say it to you, so it's on record. You know, after all we talked about, I really think the quality of lives are very important. So I was reading Time magazine the other day, I do know that I have a whole foods lifestyle, but I fit in that category so well I was a little surprised. Not only we shop at Whole Foods, we actually drive a Prius, and my wife does yoga, so we do all of that. And you don't have to do that, but the point is, of course, in the end we should care about the quality of life as we do as architects for other people, we should do that to ourselves. So, my grand suggestion for MIT is to officially have a one hour lunch break for the entire Institute. During that hour, of course, we need better cafes and restaurants and now we can eat a decent meal, and my recommendation it wouldn't hurt to have a glass of wine even during lunch break, and then you meet more people at MIT, you enjoy life at MIT a lot more. So a one hour lunch break is my suggestion to MIT. I know it's a long tradition not to have a lunch break, but it wouldn't hurt to start that. I think the creativity and productivity would go up. I believe in that.

INTERVIEWER: That would be everybody taking the same hour. CHANG: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. And class meeting work would be totally forbidden during that one hour. 12:30 to 1:30 sounds pretty good. That's it.

INTERVIEWER: That's a very interesting -- you could just imagine all the collaboration and connecting that people could do, if that's what they were supposed to do for that amount of time. Well thank you, and it is on the record.