

WANG DAHONG'S IDEA OF CHINESENESS

KO Shengchieh / 郭 聖傑 JSPS International Research Fellow (Kyoto University)

1. Introduction

The pioneering Taiwanese architect Wang Dahong (1917-2018) was Walter Gropius' protégé, and this background led him to become the spokesman of modernism in postwar Taiwan. Like many architects in postwar Taiwan, Wang highly advocated for Chinese architecture, but with an original approach that aimed at the creation of a "living environment that belongs to Chinese exclusively." However, having finished all his architectural training in Europe and United States, Wang had almost no professional knowledge of Chinese architecture and lacked practicing experience in China; for him, "Chinese" might have been more of a cultural image or ideal. This article focuses on Wang's idea of Chineseness in space, which is considered the most important idea of his designs and an unavoidable issue for postwar Taiwan architects.

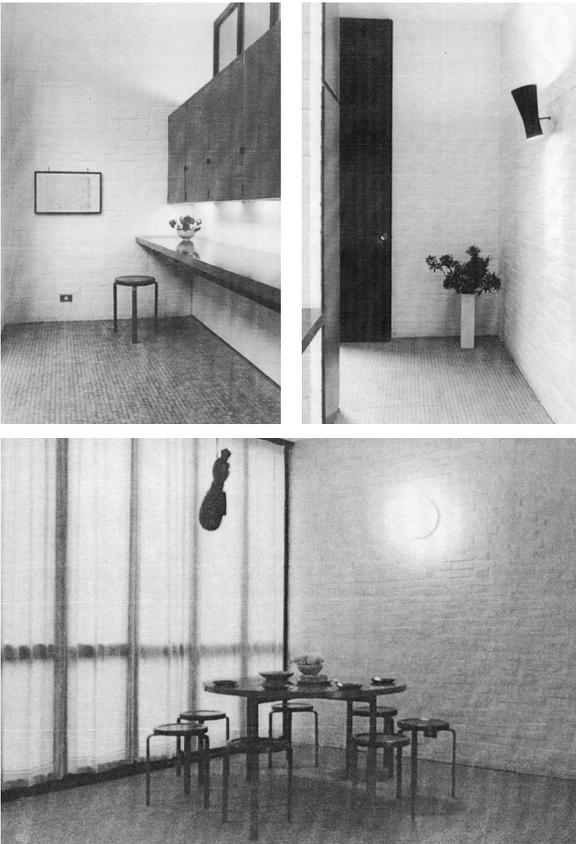


Fig.1 photos sent to W. Gropius

2. A Letter for Walter Gropius

In 1961, Wang addressed an important letter to Walter Gropius, which was revealing in terms of design intentions. In this letter, which was sent together with three photos of his first house built in 1953, Wang wrote: "here are a few photographs of the interior of my own house, built more than ten years ago. I hope that I have succeeded in making the building look Chinese"¹. One of the photos portrays the view

¹ File no.1691, Series III-Letters to and from Walter Gropius, Walter Gropius papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

of the kitchen from the entrance and the other shows the opposite view. The third one shows the dining space (Fig. 1). Wang did not explain what was Chinese about the space, and he consciously hides the Chinese motifs, which he will reveal later;

as the use of red brick, the circular window, and the traditional doors. We can find the traditional doors are covered by a curtain, while the red bricks are painted white, and the circular window is nowhere to be seen. Wang intentionally hid those motifs from Gropius, and this may imply that “motifs” are not the essence of his idea of Chineseness. Also, Wang asks his mentor Gropius whether his house looks Chinese; it is worthwhile to contemplate Wang’s intentions here. Gropius was considered one of the great masters of modern architecture, and yet Wang does not ask Gropius’ opinion about whether the house looks modern. Wang instead asks if Gropius thinks he has succeeded in making the house look Chinese. A mutual understanding of the idea of “Chinese” must have existed between Wang and Gropius, otherwise Wang would not have asked Gropius this question.

Unfortunately, the reply from Gropius cannot be found. However, a connection to this subject can be found by tracing back to Wang’s early years in America, when he worked on a project named Huatung Christian University (華東大學, 1948, Fig. 2), which was designed by Gropius and his firm, The Architects Collaborative (TAC).

3. Exchanging ideas with Gropius and I. M. Pei

When designing a large-scale campus in the Far East, Gropius asked two of his former Chinese students in Harvard — I. M. Pei and Wang — what is the “spirit of Chinese architecture (中國建築的精神).” For this reason, the Huatung university project may provide a primary understanding of Wang’s idea of Chineseness. Gropius mentions, “the spirit of Chinese architecture is retained by keeping the building low, by slanting the roofs and making them the dominant weight in the design”. Accordingly, the university project was designed with the following four features: dispersive building

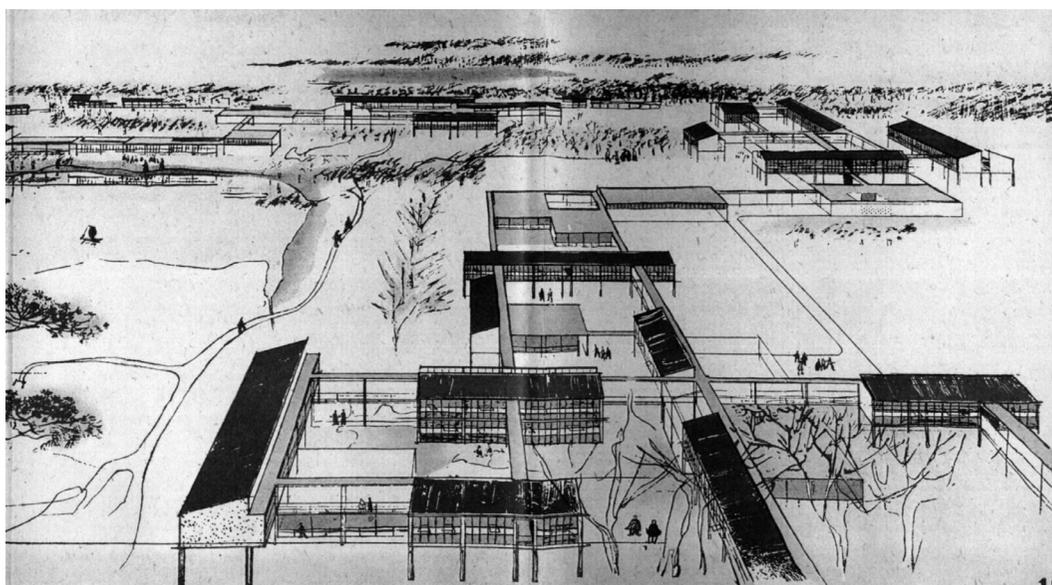


Fig.2 Huatung Christian University

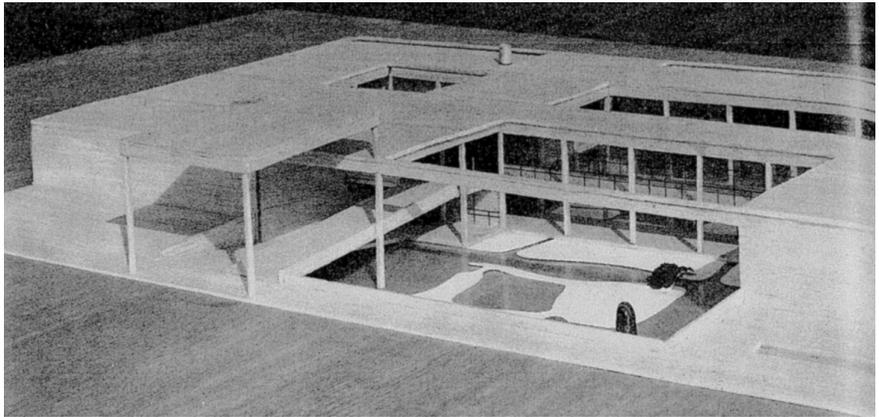


Fig.3 Museum for Chinese Art

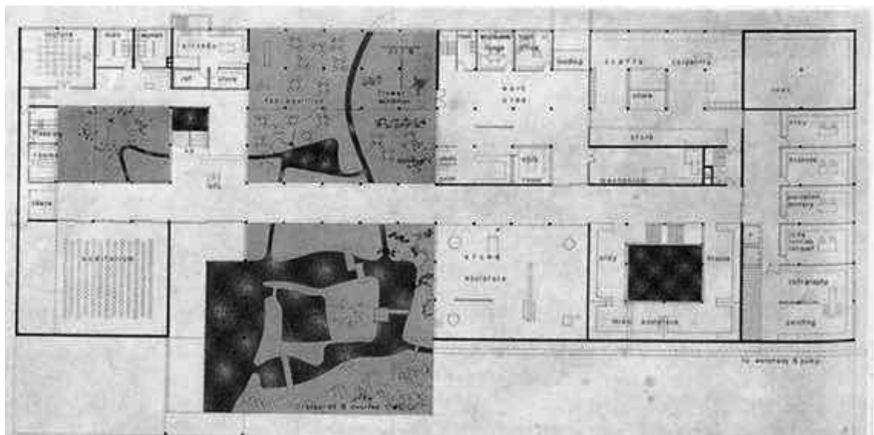


Fig.4 Plan of the Museum for Chinese Art

² ed. by Walter Gropius, *The Architects Collaborative 1945-1965*, Teufen AR, 1966, p.58.

arrangement, appropriate building mass, low building height, and the conspicuous lack of the typical Chinese curving-up style². Furthermore, the most prominent feature of Gropius' design is how he connects the pent-roofed buildings with the open corridors, creating courtyards between the buildings. In the perspective, we can see that buildings surround the courtyards and are interlocked with covered, open walks (Lang, 廊). This feature reflects an interesting observation of Gropius that "the Chinese like to walk".

During the same period, Pei completed his diploma design at GSD, a Museum for Chinese Art (1947, Fig. 3, 4), with exhibits similar design features. Referring to Pei's design, Gropius stated: "Pei and I discussed the problems of Chinese architecture... we decided that the bare Chinese wall, so evident in various periods of Chinese architecture, and the small individual garden patio, were two eternal features which are well understood by every Chinese. Mr. Pei built up his scheme entirely on a variation of these two themes"³. It becomes evident that, in his project, Pei also emphasizes the relationship between buildings, the courtyards and open corridors, which follows Gropius' scheme in Huatung University. However, the underground courtyard which highlights the existence of walls in Pei's design cannot be seen in Huatung University.

After all, we may say that Huatung University's design approach is similar to

³ Walter Gropius, *Museum for Chinese Art, Shanghai, China*, *Progressive Architecture*, Reinhold, 1948. 02, p. 52.

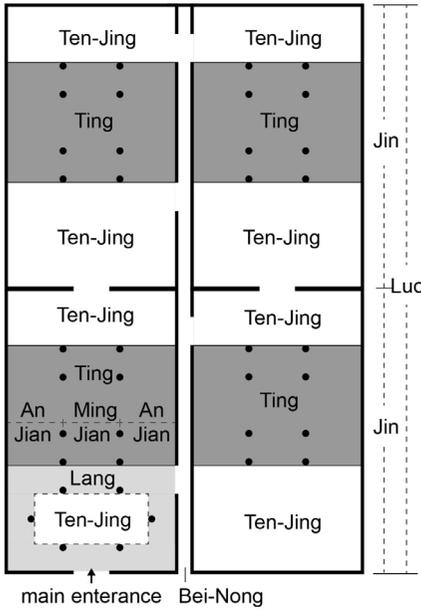


Fig.5 Plan of a Suzhou house

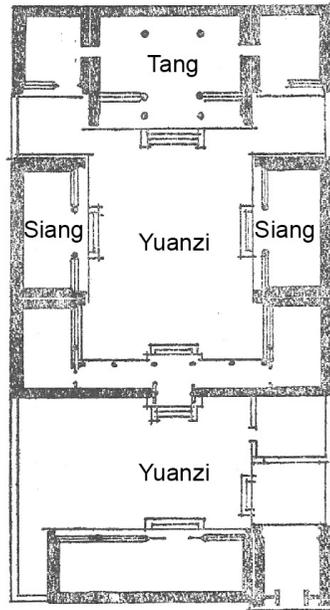


Fig.6 Shiheyuan

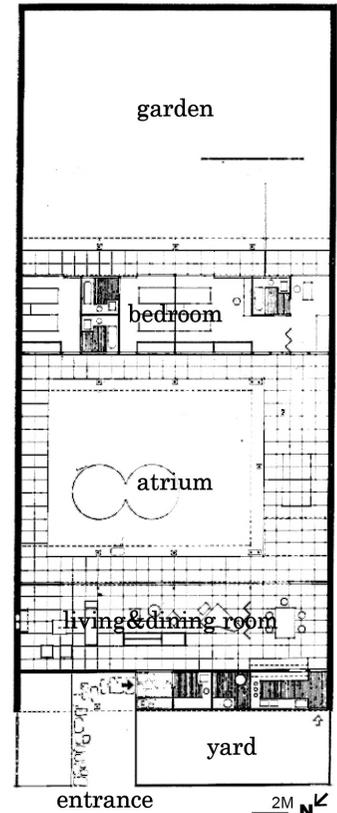


Fig. 7 Plan of the Atrium town house

what we can see in Chinese gardens (園林). Pei share the same strategy of design, but his plan also resembles the composition of Suzhou houses (Fig. 5), where Pei and Wang spent their childhood, which differ from the so called Chinese houses, the Shiheyuan (四合院, Fig. 6).

4. The Atrium Town House project

In 1945, two years before their discussion, Wang proposed “The Atrium Town House” project in American magazine *Interior*. It is the first project in which Wang expresses the idea of Chineseness. In the design (Fig. 7), he sets a walled rectangular site with an entrance at the north side, and next to the entrance, a parking space for one car. Inside the walls, from north to south, Wang arranged in linear order a front yard, the living and dining space, an atrium, the bedrooms and a garden. The living and dining space compose the front building, which is unpartitioned. Four full-height glass doors are set at the south side of this room, which make it completely open to the atrium (Fig. 8). Three bedrooms compose the rear building, which also fully opens to the garden at the south through the glass doors but with limited openings facing the atrium. The atrium lies between two buildings, which are surrounded by corridors. The corridors are covered by canopies on all but the east side. Inside the atrium, there is a water basin, while pavement surrounds the atrium to show that this atrium should serve as interior scenery. The plan for the garden, however, shows a vacant space for plants.

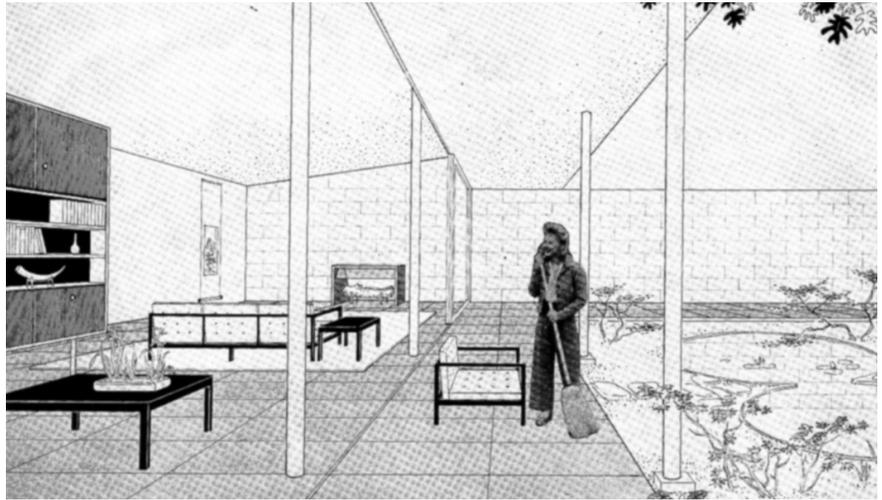


Fig. 8 Living and dining space of the Atrium town house

Wang explains that the plan of the project reveals “antique origins” in his captions, saying the atrium resembles the houses of ancient Greeks, Romans, and Chinese. Indeed, the plan resembles the composition of Suzhou houses. Comparing Wang’s project to Suzhou houses, they are extremely similar in plan composition, especially in the way Wang surrounds the atrium, a feature named Tenjin (天井) in Suzhou houses. Differing from Gropius and Pei’s open the space designs, it is obvious that Wang intentionally creates a walled and closed space to express his idea of Chineseness.

Wang’s words about Chinese architecture may help us understand the essence of space that he tried to create. In those words, Wang also mentioned the importance of courtyards, walls and corridors^④, however, the following description for Suzhou houses needs to be carefully considered.

④ For more detail, please reference to 郭聖傑, 田路貴浩, 台湾建築家王大閼における「中国的」という観念——中国住宅に関する言説を通して, 日本建築学会計画系論文集第80巻 第710号, 2015, pp. 971-979.

“According to my childhood memories, the Chinese house is a very mysterious (神秘) place. As everyone knows, there is a courtyard (天井, Tenjin) right after you walk into a Chinese house, and another small courtyard (天井) will be at the side; these Tenjin are connected by a very long corridor (走道, Zoudao). At night, it is very scary. It is very mysterious but also very scary. I walked through there quickly to go back to my own room. I did not appreciate the atmosphere at that time. I eventually came to realize that it is a feature that cannot be felt in Western houses”

“In a Chinese house, gardens (庭園), corridors (走廊), and buildings are all connected together. You would understand if you ever visited Suzhou...if you visit Suzhou, you have to visit the private houses. Not the gardens (花園), but the houses. These houses do not have big gardens (花園) in them, just a courtyard (天井) and another courtyard (天井). At the rearmost part of the house, there will be a backyard (後院, Houyuan). The backyard (後院) is also a very romantic (浪漫) place; it is the place where young masters have fun with their young female servants—a place that is very mysterious and romantic”

When describing the plan composition of Suzhou houses (Fig. 5), Wang's words emphasize the consecutive walled spaces connected by a narrow corridor, called Beinong (備弄), where he felt scared but that also created a mysterious spatial atmosphere; we can see a similar design in his Atrium town house project.

When comparing Wang and Gropius' representation of the ideas about "Chinese" in their designs, we can see that while Gropius expresses the idea of Chineseness by explicitly creating an interior-exterior spatial continuity, Wang focuses on the reference of the consecutive closed spaces, but creating a continuity between them to recreate the mysterious, scary, and romantic spatial experience that deeply impressed him, and which shaped the essence of his idea of Chineseness.

5. The Selene project - from deepness to profoundness

Wang has developed his idea of Chineseness through several particular projects, such as his apartment⁵ in 1964 (Fig. 9). However, the most significant project could be the "Selene project" from 1969 (Fig. 10, 11), which was designed for the celebration of the success of the Apollo 11's mission. Although it was designed to commemorate an achievement of the United States, Wang nonetheless claimed that the monument possessed "*deep significance in its spirit of Chinese culture (濃厚的中國文化精神)*"⁶ and "*elegant Chinese taste (典雅的中國風味)*"⁷. The project is a white monument that stands on a podium and is characterized by its twin stelae reaching toward the sky. Wang designs a blunt cone-shape void between two concrete structures. Studying

⁵ For more detail, please reference to Sheng-chieh KO and Takahiro TAJI, *Chineseness in Wang Dahong's residential projects*, *Journal of Architecture and Planning* vol. 82, no.738, 2017, pp. 2097-2104.

⁶ File no. NWDH12068024, Wang Da-Hong Collection, National Taiwan Museum.

⁷ 建築師雜誌, 中華民國建築師公會, 1988 3月號, p.97.



Fig. 9 The interior of Wang's apartment

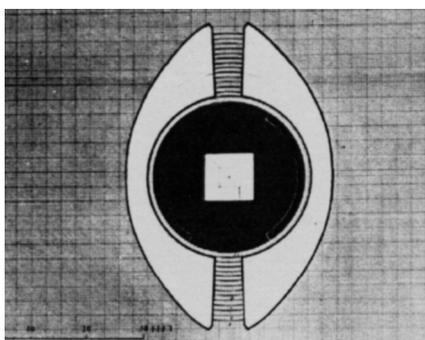


Fig. 10 Plan of Selene project

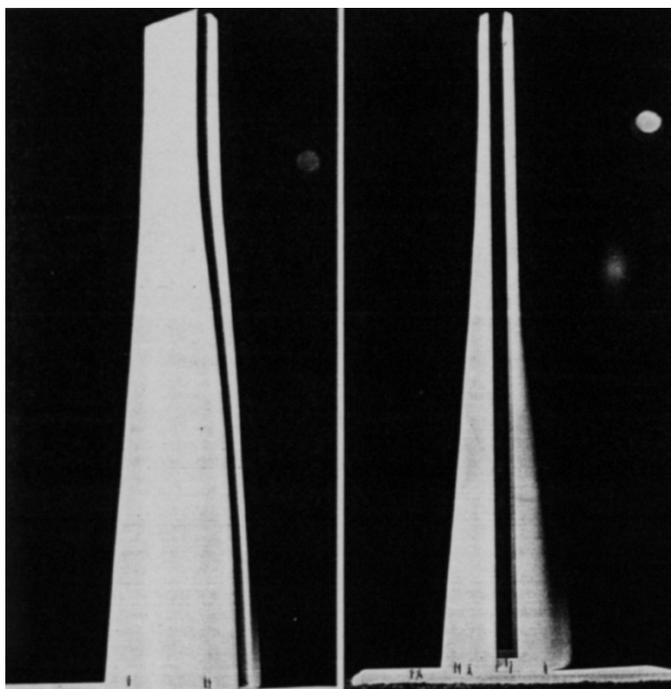


Fig. 11 Selene project



Fig.12 Beinong

^③ For more detail, please reference to Sheng-chieh KO and Takahiro TAJI, *Wang Dahong's project "Selene monument to man's conquest of the moon" in the Chinese cultural renaissance movement*, *Journal of Architecture and Planning* vol.81, no. 727, 2016, pp. 2071–2081.

Wang's revisions of the project, we found that although the height of the monument is maintained in different versions, the cone-shape void space is extended in vertical direction in every revision, which according to Wang was a conscious attempt to create a mysterious space — the most significant feature of his idea of Chineseness^③.

It can be said that in both the Selene project and the Atrium town house project, Wang tried to create a spatial deepness, directly related to a mysterious spatial atmosphere. However, the Selene project and the Atrium town house show two different design approaches. The Atrium town house is composed by buildings and courtyards, which create a constitutive deepness of space, feature which is characteristic of the archetypal Chinese house. In the Selene project, Wang proposed an interior space with un-constitutive deepness defined by two simple constructions; furthermore, Wang mentions that his images of this space extend to an unknown universe, which communicates a space of un-constitutive profoundness.

Wang might be also inspired by the space of Suzhou houses also in this project. The space of Beinong (Fig. 12), where Wang was so deeply impressed, may relate to the spatial image of un-constitutive profoundness of the Selene project. The long and dark semi-exterior corridor in between two units of Suzhou houses — the Beinong — is similar to a tunnel, this caused a deep impression on Wang, which he describes as mysterious and scary.

In addition, Wang's reasons to change his design approach may also relate to the changes of his personal feelings. Wang's most prolific period were the 1960s, when he worked on his most recognized project; the Sun Yatsen memorial hall. It was also the period when he shifted his focus from architecture to literature. At the time the Selene project was designed, Wang also started to translate and rewrite the famous novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde, the standard-bearer of aestheticism. Wang's design approach highlights the sense of mystique, creating a useless monument as he talks of reaching the moon, and of an existence beyond of what is known. For this reason, it was many times inferred that Wang might have empathy for Wilde's ideas, and admired his romanticism.

Conclusion

Referencing the above, it may be said that Wang seeks his idea of Chineseness

by simplifying the composition of Chinese houses, which shows a transformation of spatial quality from a space with constitutive deepness to one of un-constitutive profoundness. For Wang, he subconsciously felt and consciously recognized this spatial quality of un-constitutive profoundness from the Suzhou houses. The transformation of spatial quality reveals that Wang's approach to the idea of Chineseness emerges from the application of his general understanding of Chinese houses to the embodiment of his personal spatial experiences. Also, his idea of Chineseness is not only based on the Chinese architectural culture but is also combined with his personal tendency towards romanticism. In other words, through Wang's works, the idea of Chineseness may be more than just nationalism advocacy, relating to deeply personal experiences and individual ideas of creation.

References of images

- Fig. 1) File no.1691, Series III-Letters to and from Walter Gropius, Walter Gropius papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University.
- Fig. 2) Interiors, vol.111, Whitney, 1952.01, pp.68-69.
- Fig. 3) Progressive Architecture, Reinhold, 1948.02, p.50.
- Fig. 4) *ibid.*
- Fig. 5) made by the author.
- Fig. 6) 梁思成, 清式营造则例, 中国营造学社, 1934, pp.21. (retouched by the author)
- Fig. 7) Interiors, Whitney publishing company, 1945.1, p.69.
- Fig. 8) *ibid.*, p.68.
- Fig. 9) 姚仁祿編, 中國當代建築師王大閔, 1978, p.46. unpublished.
- Fig. 10) Far East Builder, Far East Trade Press Limited, 1970.08, pp.18-19.
- Fig. 11) File no. CWDH12022011, Wang Da-Hong Collection, National Taiwan Museum.
- Fig. 12) taken by the author.