

# WE ARE ETH – Episode 15

## With Mulan Sun, Founder and President, Swiss-Chinese Chamber of Architects and Artists (SCAA)

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[00:00:00] **Mulan Sun:** In 1976, my family experienced a big earthquake. And many relatives past because of the collapse of the house. When I firstly heard about this family tragedy, my wish was to quickly grow up and build the strongest house in the world to protect people and animals.

[00:00:23] **Susan Kish:** In this episode, I'm talking with Mulan Sun, who's the president of the Swiss Chinese Chamber of Architects and Artists. She's also the founder of an architectural and interior design firm based in Zurich, and a lecturer at the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts. This is the We Are ETH podcast and I'm Susan Kish your host.

[00:00:51] **Susan Kish:** Mulan, you were born and grew up in China. How did you find the ETH, and how did you make your way to Switzerland?

[00:01:00] **Mulan Sun:** You know, I was born in China in the early 1980s, a time of Chinese economic revival and my generation was the so-called "post-eighties".

[00:01:10] **Susan Kish:** Why is it called post-eighties?

[00:01:12] **Mulan Sun:** I think it is... it's not a Chinese definition, it's an American definition. They gave out the name of post-eighties in comparison with post-nineties and so on, post-seventies and so on.

[00:01:26] **Susan Kish:** So this is after the Cultural Revolution?

[00:01:29] **Mulan Sun:** Yes. This is the young generation of China. After the introduction of the One Child Policy, and the first generation to grow up entirely within the reform era.

[00:01:42] **Susan Kish:** Got it. So you had, did you have restrictions on what you could read or were you able to study pretty openly?

[00:01:49] **Mulan Sun:** You know, my parents were not able to get enough education they wanted. Because of the Cultural Revolution, (that spread) up to mountains, down to the countryside movement. So my family tried to give me the opportunities to obtain the best education and develop my hobbies.

[00:02:07] **Susan Kish:** I bet they did. And where did you study in China?

[00:02:09] **Mulan Sun:** In 2000 I entered one of the best four architecture schools in China. It was a very fascinating time. When all kinds of ideas collided, and I could read cutting-edge books in the university library.

[00:02:23] **Susan Kish:** But I bet at that time you still did all your drafting by hand?

[00:02:28] **Mulan Sun:** Yes!

[00:02:29] **Susan Kish:** If I understood correctly, there was a particular book that catalyzed your interest in Switzerland. What? Tell us that story.

[00:02:36] **Mulan Sun:** Yes, exactly. One day I happened to open a book in our school library titled Swiss Architecture. And this whole book has been translated in Chinese. I was struck by the book cover, an extremely simple but powerful expression of a black concrete facade. Afterwards I learned about this building. It was the Kunstmuseum Lichtenstein.

[00:03:04] **Susan Kish:** So was it a piece of brutalist architecture on the cover or just something very simple and very powerful?

[00:03:11] **Mulan Sun:** At this moment it looks for me so simple, like minimalist architecture. And I haven't seen such architecture before in China.

[00:03:21] **Susan Kish:** Oh, is that right? So it was a whole new school of approach to architecture and you found out about the museum, and how did you connect the dots to figure out that you had to go to the ETH?

[00:03:34] **Mulan Sun:** Just at that moment of reading, I was like struck by lightning and made up my mind that I wanted to study architecture at the best university in Switzerland. I wanted to know this country, and this best university is of course the ETH.

[00:03:52] **Susan Kish:** I understand that. Who was the architect who did that building and did you ever have a chance to meet him or her?

[00:03:58] **Mulan Sun:** I found out at that moment it was Professor Christian Kerez. I was very lucky to have him as my supervisor for my master thesis at ETH.

[00:04:09] **Susan Kish:** Oh, well you really closed that circle, congratulations! That is great. That is great. So you went from seeing a picture, a cover of a book in a library in China to going all the way over to Switzerland. And actually being able to study with that professor. That's a great story. Once you decided you wanted to do that, did you apply to the ETH and get accepted, or did you have to move to Switzerland and then apply? Or how did you actually get into the ETH?

[00:04:40] **Mulan Sun:** I got my confirmation from the ETH in 2005. With a requirement that I should, I must pass the German examination, which is C2.

[00:04:55] **Susan Kish:** That would've been a little bit intimidating.

[00:04:58] **Mulan Sun:** Yes... Actually, I didn't know how difficult was C2 at that time.

[00:05:04] **Susan Kish:** How long did you have to study?

[00:05:06] **Mulan Sun:** 10 months.

[00:05:08] **Susan Kish:** Oh boy. That must have been very intense.

[00:05:10] **Mulan Sun:** Yes. I came to Switzerland with the level of zero.

[00:05:20] **Susan Kish:** Which was harder: learning German or studying architecture?

[00:05:24] **Mulan Sun:** Both are difficult, but both are also very happy for me. You know, I still tell people that I spent the best part of my twenties at ETH Hönggerberg.

[00:05:36] **Susan Kish:** I can only imagine. And it must have been a really interesting time to study architecture at that point.

[00:05:41] **Mulan Sun:** Yes. To be honest, I had much cultural shock when I first arrived in Switzerland in 2005 because here was so different from Chinese culture and mentality.

[00:05:55] **Susan Kish:** Well, Zurich must have felt very small and very different.

[00:05:58] **Mulan Sun:** Yes. I had a problem understanding the scale. Because if I look at a map at the time from A to B in China, I should calculate how many hours take a bus and metro and so on. But if I look at the map in Zurich from A to B, it was just by walk 10 minute.

[00:06:21] **Susan Kish:** It's a real difference in scale. That's great. That's great!

[00:06:26] **Mulan Sun:** But I think the first year for me is not very comfortable. It is also, it is a sense of a discomfort and full of skepticism because I was not sure if studying abroad was really the right path for me.

[00:06:45] **Susan Kish:** So what was it like being a master student? Did you meet new people? Was it a different approach? Was it more difficult than you expected? What was it like to be a Master's candidate at that time?

[00:06:59] **Mulan Sun:** At the beginning when I passed the C2 exam and arrived at the ETH Hönggerberg, I took a lecture by architecture professor and I couldn't understand anything. So at the end of this lecture, I cried. I cried just in the lecture hall and another Swiss colleague, he came to me and said to me don't worry, don't cry. We also couldn't understand either...

[00:07:30] **Susan Kish:** So what? In other words, it wasn't just you!

[00:07:37] **Mulan Sun:** I really appreciate that so many friends knew my feeling and support my feeling, and there was a very magical moment as I arrived at ETH Hönggerberg HIL, the architecture school building and reached the library. I had a feeling of space traveling, like being alone in the outer space, the quiet surroundings made me my whole heart settle down. So I loved it very much.

[00:08:10] **Susan Kish:** So you come to Switzerland, you figure out you're going to learn German, you do that, you get in the programme, you survive the programme and flourish, it sounds like, even though it's so different. So what was it like afterwards when you had to practice and actually be an architect? It's always tough in those first few positions in architecture, but what was it like in Switzerland? Because you don't look like what I imagine a Swiss architect looks like.

[00:08:36] **Mulan Sun:** Yes, that's true. I think ETH is one of the best cradles for training professional architects. I don't have any problem to enter the profession as an architect. So I have worked in several architectural firms after graduation, but, it was not always easy if there was standard image of a Swiss architect, it would be an older man and a native architect. And you know, I'm the opposite. A young, relatively young female foreign architect. Now I accepted this prejudice from the beginning, but I found it challenging and interesting to turn this kind of advantage to my own advantage. I think there, to be a unique architect is my goal because my upbringing in China and how ETH shaped me have become my invaluable values.

[00:09:39] **Susan Kish:** Did you find that your difference in perspective and your difference in view because you were not native, was that helpful as you worked as an architect in these firms? Did you challenge them? Was it comfortable?

[00:09:56] **Mulan Sun:** Being an architect is the job, you know, where you must use all your sensitivities to life to identify problems. And use your creativity to solve them. So this is a common sense and I'm fortunate that I love what I do. I'm willing to work hard at it...

[00:10:16] **Susan Kish:** Sounds like you need to.

[00:10:20] **Mulan Sun:** Yes. So in 2015, I founded my own firm with my partner, SML Architecture, because I wanted to make a unique architecture office that relies on a blend of Far East, Eastern mentality and concepts with Swiss appreciation for precision in execution. At the same time, I also founded the Swiss Chinese Chamber of architects and artists to exchange in the academic and professional views between China and Switzerland. And I think, I have a lot to do, but at the same time, I didn't give up my academic career. After working as a teaching assistant at a half for several years, I was invited as a guest lecturer at the Tianjin University in China to continue my academic teaching work, and in 2020 I was very lucky to start to teach at Hochschule Lucerne and lead an architecture research project, the Cultural Water with Kyoto Institute of Technology in Japan. And this is a very exciting, interesting project. We use architecture, design, and social science as a creative method of research to develop plausible versions to contemporary positions with, on and next to the water around Lake Lucerne and Lake Biwa in Japan, and explore the interaction between nature and culture.

[00:11:55] **Susan Kish:** So what is the current status of the Culture of Water Project? What are you doing right now?

[00:12:01] **Mulan Sun:** This year I'm working on the publication of the results. Of our research and teaching experience in the last five years and related exhibitions are also in preparation. I very much look forward!

[00:12:19] **Susan Kish:** So one of the things that I read about in your background was around the tea ceremony which I always think of as a very Japanese ceremony. How did you as an architect, as a teacher, as a researcher, become so engaged in a Japanese tea ceremony? How did that happen?

[00:12:39] **Mulan Sun:** I think it is not a matter of time or energy, but a matter of self-orientation. Years ago, I went to museum in Zurich to participate in a Japanese tea ceremony. When I first walk into this tea room, you know, I'm Chinese and I also understand there's common things between China and Japan. So as soon as I entered this room, the wood, the smell and the proportion of the space immediately made me understand that this was the ideal architecture for me.

[00:13:17] **Susan Kish:** Huh!?

[00:13:17] **Mulan Sun:** And it was there that I first met my tea master and for the past eight years, the tea ceremony has become an integral part of my life and career.

[00:13:29] **Susan Kish:** When you say that, does that mean you practice the tea ceremony on a regular basis, or you design tea ceremony spaces, or what does that mean when you say it's an integral part of your life?

[00:13:40] **Mulan Sun:** So now my “sensei”, my tea master, retired, and they left the tea school to me and the other two tea colleagues to manage, and life pushed me to teach not only architecture, but also tea ceremony. But eventually the two things are, one, because teaching is for me the best way to learn and explore the world. I think for me as an architect, I have many teahouse projects. We have once per month our tea school, which take place in sometime in my project in tea house, and this is a really magical moment for me.

[00:14:19] **Susan Kish:** How does one take a class in your tea school? Do you still do it at the Museum Rietberg or where do I sign up to take your class?

[00:14:28] **Mulan Sun:** Oh, in many places in Switzerland, Bad Ragaz, Sargans, Basel, Zurich, Winterthur, Neuhausen and some of these places are the projects from our architecture company.

[00:14:42] **Susan Kish:** Very cool. All right, so that sounds like I'll have to do that on my next visit.

[00:14:46] **Mulan Sun:** Yes, please! I'll invite you!

[00:14:49] **Susan Kish:** Thank you. So can you explain what. Specifically, what is it around the tea ceremony and architecture that you find most interesting and what have you been doing in that area?

[00:15:01] **Mulan Sun:** Yes, my architecture firm has many completed and ongoing tea house projects. Why is the tea house such a special category of architecture? Because I think a tea house is not only an object, but also a stage for perceiving the four seasons, for example. There is a lot of wisdom, um, of architectural biodynamic in the tea house: how to use the least amount of energy to create a space that is warm winter and cool in summer. Tea house is a very good example of such typology, so I most believe in practice and teach typology, not technology.

[00:15:48] **Susan Kish:** What is architectural typology? What does that mean?

[00:15:51] **Mulan Sun:** Architecture typology means that you use this smart or clever architecture typology to solve thermodynamic things and to kind of bring the cool air inside and make the waste air outside. So all of this, you can make a solution by architecture itself, not by technology, you don't have to use air conditioning, you don't have to use heating, you don't have to use energy, or only the least energy.

[00:16:23] **Susan Kish:** That sounds like the ultimate sustainable architecture.

[00:16:26] **Mulan Sun:** Yes. I think. You are sitting once in our tea house, and I believe your five senses sight, hear, smell, taste, and touch will be 100% reactivated in the tea house.

[00:16:41] **Susan Kish:** When you are in Switzerland and you're trying to bring together the cultures of the far east, what is your greatest challenge in bringing those two worlds together?

[00:16:54] **Mulan Sun:** I think. There are things in the world that have meaning as long as they're put into action, done. And there are also things that are not just paid into a moment of action. It's value and meaning comes from doing it well and doing it into the extremely well. So I think the ETH is where makes us intellectual scientist, et cetera. But how to make knowledge into wisdom is our life topic.

[00:17:27] **Susan Kish:** And that sounds like a universal question.

[00:17:29] **Mulan Sun:** Very much.

[00:17:30] **Susan Kish:** Well, I'm going to ask just in summary, how would you describe that ETH has influenced your life and your career?

[00:17:42] **Mulan Sun:** I think ETH shaped me a lot. I finished my personal evolution at ETH. I can say biologically and also spiritually I was totally different person before entering ETH.

[00:17:59] **Susan Kish:** And does ETH still play a role in your life today?

[00:18:03] **Mulan Sun:** Yes, very much. For example, I have some moment that if I have a difficulty in life or have a question, I want to stand again on the rooftop of the ETH School of Architecture, maybe you know this place, because I always found my beginner's heart there. And I think the beginner's heart is the best teacher for me to lead my life.

[00:18:32] **Susan Kish:** That is a lovely phrase, the beginner's heart. What does that mean for you? What does that look like?

[00:18:38] **Mulan Sun:** Beginner's heart, I think is to look back and find the origin.

[00:18:42] **Susan Kish:** Look back and find the origin. And I guess it also requires you to clear your mind to be a fresh beginner.

[00:18:51] **Mulan Sun:** Yes.

[00:18:52] **Susan Kish:** Wonderful. That's a lovely expression.

[00:18:53] **Mulan Sun:** And also like kind of purify myself.

[00:18:56] **Susan Kish:** Mm-hmm. I can see that and it's also a lovely expression in a world where being a beginner is sometimes seen as a weakness and you're putting it as a source of strength.

[00:19:10] **Mulan Sun:** Yes. I, I don't think our life is like we learn from one to hundred. I think I learn from one to 10 and go back to one and to 10 again. Like a circle. All these circles will shape a line from one to 100.

[00:19:27] **Susan Kish:** I love that. I love that expression and extreme image. So you now live in Zurich, and I have to ask you, what is your favorite place in Zurich?

[00:19:41] **Mulan Sun:** I have one I will share. Okay, great. My favorite place is Museum Rietberg.

[00:19:49] **Susan Kish:** Oh, I should have known that.

[00:19:51] **Mulan Sun:** And the park and...

[00:19:53] **Susan Kish:** And it is a beautiful museum.

[00:19:54] **Mulan Sun:** I can find a piece of my hometown there because of the great exhibition of Asian art.

[00:20:00] **Susan Kish:** Oh, fabulous. And did you always know you wanted to be an architect? Was it what you wanted to be when you grew up?

[00:20:09] **Mulan Sun:** No, not from the beginning. I think as I was a teenager, I wanted to become a science fiction writer. Sometime in my life, my parents told me a family story and in 1976, my family experienced a big earthquake. And many relatives passed away because of the collapse of the house, and also our pets. We have had many pets. Dog, cat, bird, turtle. When I firstly heard about this family tragedy, my wish was to quickly grow up and build the strongest house in the world to protect people and animals.

[00:20:54] **Susan Kish:** From another earthquake.

[00:20:56] **Mulan Sun:** In case there is earthquake.

[00:20:58] **Susan Kish:** Well, recent events in the horrible earthquakes in Turkey and Syria make that even more relevant and even more important. Do you have a specific memory from your years in Höggerberg that you'd like to share a day or an event or a specific class or a lecture?

[00:21:19] **Mulan Sun:** I have so many beautiful moments at ETH, but the most important moment didn't happen on the Höggerberg. It was the moment I first met my husband.

[00:21:34] **Susan Kish:** Okay, that's an important one.



[00:21:36] **Mulan Sun:** Who was also an architecture student at ETH at that time. We set face to face on the same train from Zurich to the ETH studio in Basel. And this moment means of course a lot to me, although I didn't know it at that time.

[00:21:51] **Susan Kish:** Very, very cool. That's a lovely story. And finally, What is it that you are learning about right now? What is it you're taking a beginner frame of mind around right now?

[00:22:05] **Mulan Sun:** You know, my son is 12 years old now. And I'm very much curious about his future and how humans and nature could coexist in this 21st century. We often say that the architecture and construction industry is barometer of the climate change, but I have the feeling that this barometer is too slow by now. We should take immediate action to reduce land, fuels and the destruction of air, water, and natural habitats. So this is not to say that we don't need architecture anymore, but to completely rethink what kind of architecture is needed.

[00:22:52] **Susan Kish:** Great way to summarize. Thank you. And Mulan, thank you so much for your time. It's been a wonderful conversation. Really appreciate it.

[00:23:01] **Mulan Sun:** Thank you so much for inviting me. And my pleasure. Thank you.

[00:23:08] **Susan Kish:** I'm Susan Kish, host of the We Are ETH series, telling the story of the alumni and friends of the ETH Zurich, the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich. ETH regularly ranks amongst the top universities in the world with cutting edge research science and people: the people who were there, the people who are there, and the people who will be there. Please subscribe to this podcast and join us wherever you listen and give us a good rating on Spotify or Apple if you enjoy today's conversation. Finally, I'd like to thank our producers at ETH Circle and Ellie Media and also to thank you, our listeners for joining us.