

# HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS

— A Guide to the Earthen Buildings

By He Baoguo

Translated by Karen Gernant and Chen Zeping  
photographs by Qu Liming



Haichao Photography Art Publishing House



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# HOME

## — A Dream through the Centuries

In the billowing, wind-blown dust, a clan heading south rushes along the road... The mountain paths are bumpy and brambles are everywhere. Laboring hard to move ahead, the horse-drawn carts make dry, struggling sounds, mingled with the sounds of the soles of many feet trampling the earth.

Immersing ourselves in thick volumes of history, we can dimly hear these sounds from the recesses of the ages...

These were the ancestors of the Hakka people. During the turmoil of the Yongjia period [304–312 A.D.], the wartime ravages of the late Tang dynasty, and the time when Jin soldiers invaded China during the Song dynasty, again and again the ancient Hakka people—in grief and despair—bade farewell to their homes and moved south.

Before departing, they shed tears before the graves of their ancestors. They collected their ancestors' bones—stained with the yellow earth—and placed them in earthen jars that would constantly remain with them. The people of the entire clan, including the elderly and the children—taking their clothing

and valuables, their pots and pans and dishes and basins, as well as their chickens, dogs, pigs, and sheep—were filled with grief at their departure and confusion about their flight to the south. Yet, they still took determined steps as they walked out of their villages...

Heading south, heading south: their objective was always the south. On the way, they dined against the wind-blown dust and camped in the open. They crossed the Yellow River. They crossed the Yangzi. From the war-torn north, they headed for the relatively peaceful south. The farther south they went, the higher and steeper the mountains were. In all directions, the hundreds of miles of mountain ranges were an unending stretch of gray. Now and then, bandits and wild animals attacked. In the midst of the mountains there was also malaria that laid low many sturdy people. This clan had left its native place and walked for months and years. The clothes they wore, once decent, had long since become impossibly tattered. Their faces were covered with the dust of the south. They felt exhausted.



They longed for a settled life, but where was their destination?

Where was their new home? Ah, the people who had left their native place: their hearts were bleeding, their hearts were trembling, their hearts were shouting out.

At last, among the high mountains of southwestern Fujian, they saw a wide basin in a valley. It faced a small, murmuring stream and a small area of level land, surrounded by forests. That was a vast wasteland. The mountains ringing this area were like a barrier that kept the armed disaster and turbulence of the north hundreds of miles away. This strange land lay quietly in the depths of the mountains, apparently waiting all along for the arrival of these pioneers. Finally, they were here! While they wiped the sweat from their faces, they couldn't hold back the tears that poured out. So many years of wandering, so many years of longing: now at last, they had found a place where they could anchor.

They cleared the weeds and shrubs, and leveled the land. Then they constructed their earthen houses with clods of earth. This was the first time these migratory people had found a place to settle down. In the depths of the mountains, smoke rose continually from the kitchen chimneys...

From then on, in the mountains of southwestern

Fujian, there has been a new people.

They are the Hakka.

As newcomers, the Hakka rushed into this rough and desolate, yet magical, land. Day by day, they grew and developed in the midst of constant confrontation, attrition, and assimilation with the local people. They worked hard and prospered. When the sun gradually rose over the mountains in the east, these industrious Hakka people were already sweating on the hillside land. Only when the moon quietly showed its face on the horizon did they pick up their hoes and end work for the day.

The old persons, missing their old homes back in the north, passed away. Loudly crying newborns came to this new home far from the ancestral home in the Central Plains. The sun rose and the sun set; the years rolled on, and the Hakka people lived and worked here in peace and contentment. The population grew. There were flowers in the spring and fruit in the fall. Produce was abundant, and the people lived in plenty. The clan elders began considering how to build a home that would allow the clan members to live even more closely together. It should embody the glory of the clan which was once a prominent one in the Central Plains, and represent the spirit of the entire present clan. How could they build a new home like this?

The first earthen dwelling was built in the valley...

And then, large numbers of earthen dwellings sprang up like mushrooms after a rain...

In pursuit of the large courtyard style of house that flourished among their great ancestors in former days, they constructed the earthen buildings with local materials. Red soil was mixed with strips of bamboo, sand and stone, a watery glutinous rice paste, brown sugar, and egg whites, and rammed into place. The Hakka people's intelligence and wisdom, tradition and culture, energy and beliefs were also rammed into these buildings.

The earthen buildings are the Hakka people's affectionate look back from the high mountains and dense forests of southwestern Fujian to their old home in the Central Plains.

The earthen buildings are the Hakka people's warm embrace of the land where they were dwelling.

The earthen buildings are the Hakka people's home, entrusted with all of their glory and dreams.

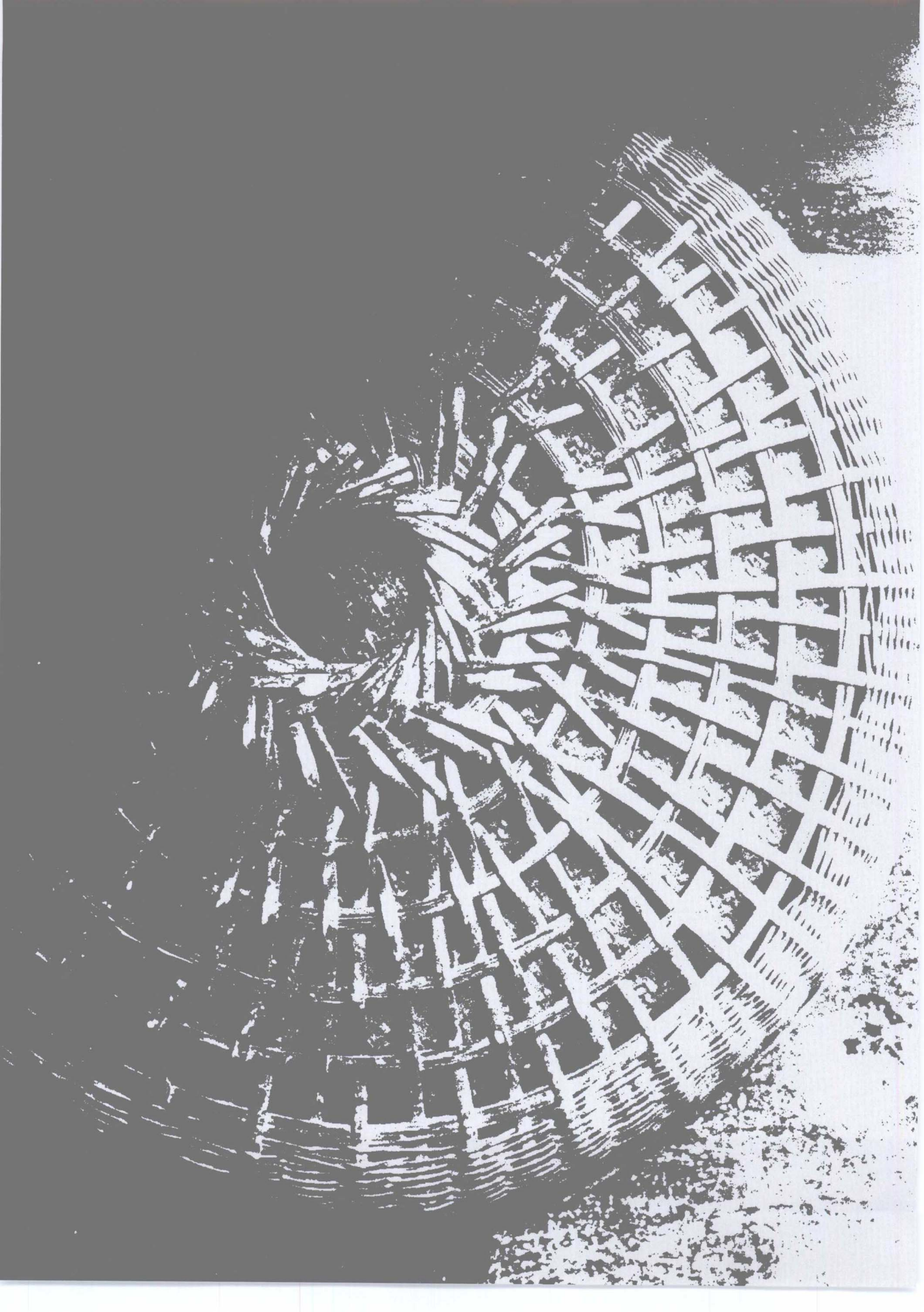
The earthen buildings are a rare flower of the Hakka people's culture, weathering the rain and opening in loneliness amid the mountains.

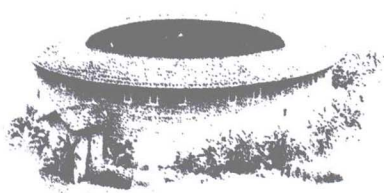
I saw the earthen buildings for the first time in the winter of 1989. There are no words to express my inner amazement and thrill. That expanse of vigor, that primitive and crude, yet refined, shape,

with traces of the past imprinted everywhere: all at once, I stopped in my tracks. I couldn't say a word for a long time. Afterwards, whether others took me there or I took others there, whenever I saw the earthen buildings, I felt my heart overflow with the same wonder and excitement.

The earthen dwellings that were unknown for so many years are now well-known in distant places. One after the other, Hua'an's Eryi building, Yongding's Zhencheng, Kuiju, and Chengqi buildings, Nanjing's group of Tianluokeng buildings and Hegui building, Pinghe's Shengwu building, and others have been named by the State Council to be preserved as key national cultural treasures. In 2001, the State Council gave formal approval to the southwestern Fujian earthen buildings to apply to UNESCO to be listed as a "world cultural heritage" site. When United Nations officials and experts from various countries arrived at the site, they were full of praise and extolled the earthen buildings as "a unique architectural style in mountainous regions the world over." They agreed that the earthen buildings met the requirements to be declared a "world heritage" site. In 2007, the earthen buildings became the only Chinese site formally in line for world cultural heritage status in 2008.











▲ Zhencheng building

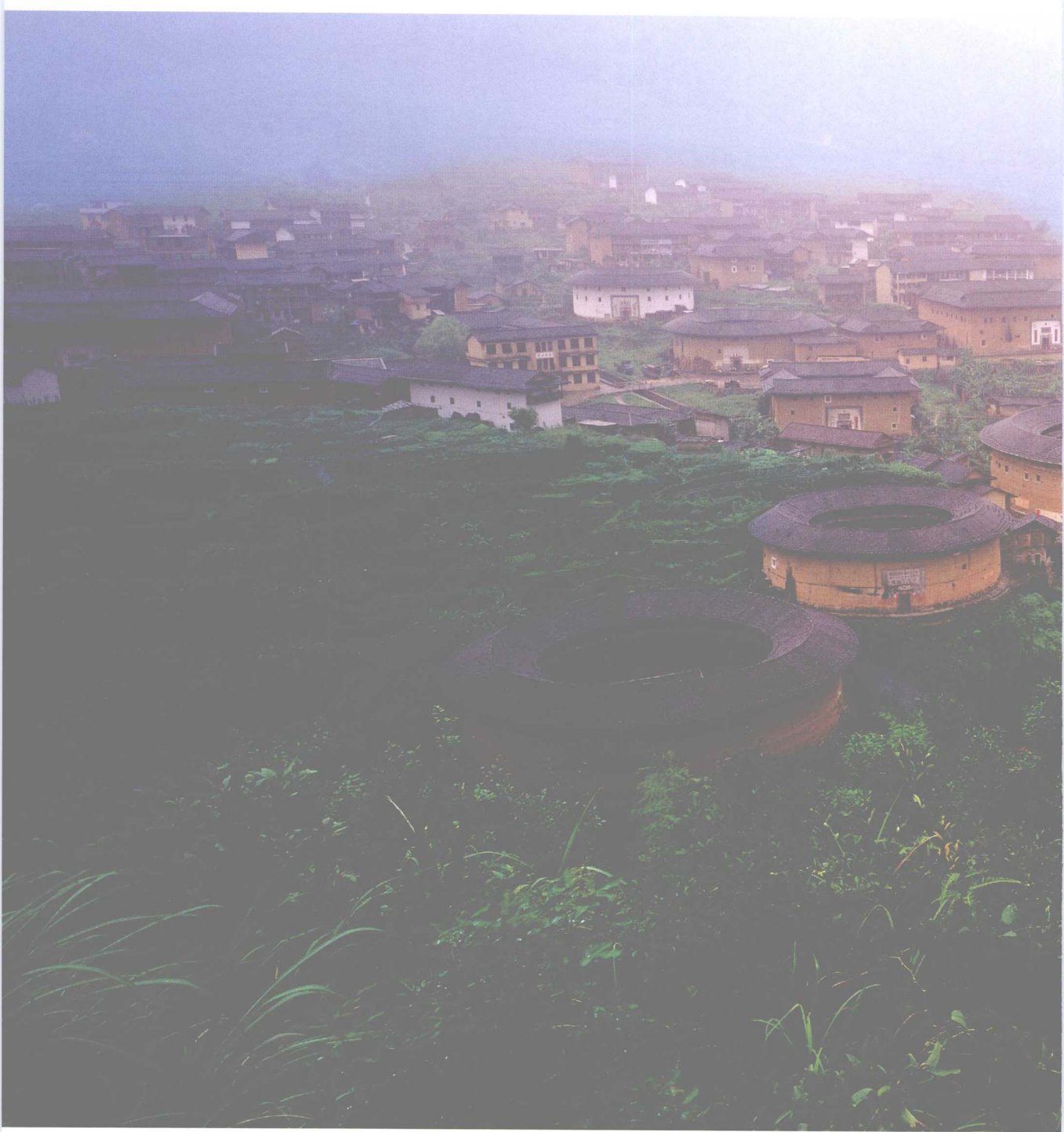


▲ Tianluokeng complex









▲ Chuxi complex





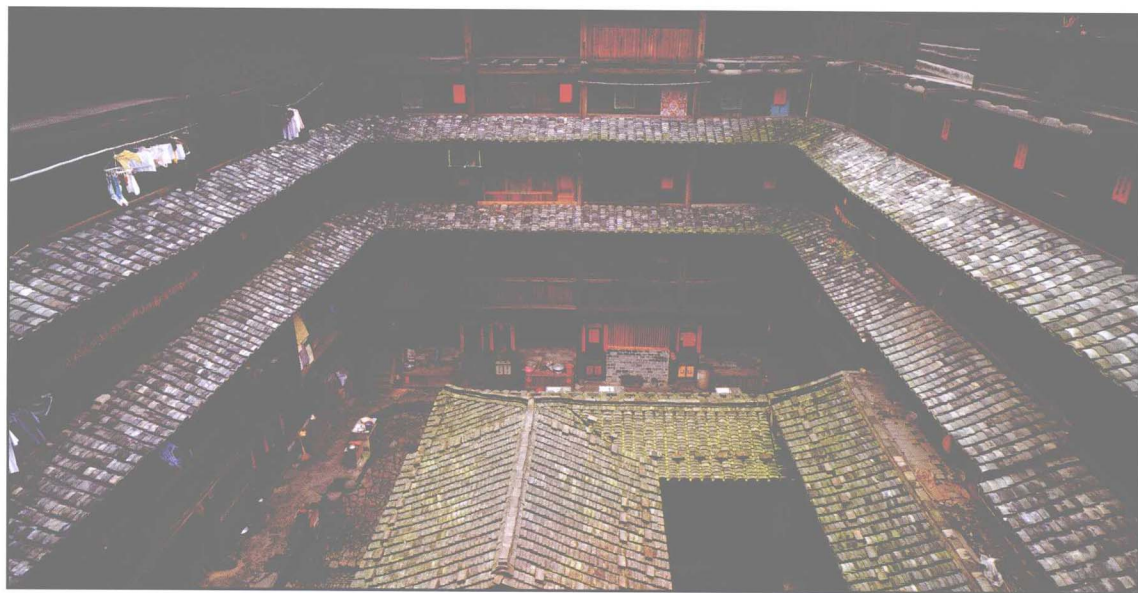


▲ Hekeng complex









▲ Hegui building

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