Hakka earth houses,
Nanjing County, Fujian Province
Tanghe Old Town is a typical ancient rural riverside community in Chongqing Municipality whose ancient charms still survive. Along the Yangtze River and several other rivers in this region, many towns and villages sprang up on the hilly, foggy banks due to the busy water transportation and the trading activities during imperial times. The construction of the Three Gorges Dam that began in 1994 inundated many rural communities. More than 200,000 residents of Wanzhou, for example, were relocated, and numerous old buildings and historic dwellings were demolished to make way for the dam.

Although new buildings are continually being added on the edges of old towns in this thriving area, a few settlements still boast of the area’s traditional half-timbered stilts-style hanging houses [diaojiaolou]. In addition, Hui-style [Huipai] architecture, famous for its exquisite design, was introduced to Tanghe from the lower reaches of the Yangtze. A few fine examples await visitors in this old town as silent witnesses to its past affluence. Hui merchants dominated commerce for many centuries, and traces
of their influence remain all over the country. The horseback-shaped side walls, which function as firewalls, are a common feature in Hui-style architecture.

In spite of its distance from the booming coastal cities, Chongqing has emerged as one of China’s most rapidly changing metropolitan areas. The territory of this directly governed municipality is about the size of Austria. However, the so-called world’s largest city actually consists of a great number of rural communities. The hot, muggy Chongqing summer has earned the area a reputation as one of China’s three greatest furnaces. Lichen clings to every inch of the stone-paved alleys, a hint of mildewed smell pervades every house, and both men and women, standing or sitting, all wait expectantly for the next feeble breeze from outside. After sunset, the alleys of Tanghe Old Town are plunged into darkness, dominated by the chirping of cicadas. Only one or two grocery stores lit with fluorescent lamps stay open. Among the half-timbered houses, a building with Western details like a verandah with a row of arched pillars and stucco-covered walls seems out of place.
In Tanghe, the main Temple, Wangye Miao, is dedicated to the Qin governor, Li Bing, who built the famous Dujiangyan Irrigation System during the Warring States Period (406-221 BCE). Because this great hydraulic engineering project effectively ended the recurring floods in Sichuan Province, Li Bing came to be revered as a popular deity in this area after he passed away. This temple was built in an ideal location, convenient for traders arriving in Tanghe via both the river and the roads. Its two entrances, one on the main street of Tanghe and the other on the riverfront near a wharf, welcomed hundreds of thousands of travelers coming to pay their respects and pray for a safe journey before venturing forth again.

The theater stage inside the temple reaches a peak of animation every summer on Li Bing’s birthday, when there is a great celebration, along with a performance and a feast. The porcelain bowls stored near the steps are prepared for the feast. Paper money is produced in local workshops beforehand. When winter reaches its peak in the twelfth month of the lunar calendar, two rectangular stone blocks in front of the temple serve to support an eleven-meter-long wooden beam with 74 lanterns.
Pianyan Old Town is another settlement in Chongqing Municipality that arose on the busy water-transportation route during the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911). Narrow riverside alleys with houses on one side are a distinctive feature of old towns in this region. This design shows how local people adapted the settlement plan to the natural environment while maximizing the available land for housing. On the busier main street, the changes and influences of urbanization are becoming visible. Most old houses were adorned with tasteless modern decorations during their last renovation. Currently, the government of Chongqing is trying to speed up its urbanization process. Residents are encouraged to give up their land, i.e., the usufruct, in exchange for an urbanite identity. This strategy is visible not only in propaganda slogans and posters, but also in the construction of factories and standardized residential housing in the vicinity of Pianyan Old Town. Residents are promised a better future in exchange for cooperating in the urbanization process, while their current lifestyle during this transition period is a mixture of tradition and modern, albeit modest, consumerism.