

GENTHE'S
PHOTOGRAPHS
OF
SAN FRANCISCO'S
OLD CHINATOWN

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1984

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
Arnold Genthe
SELECTION & TEXT BY
John Kuo Wei Tchen

JKSS

DOVER PUBLICATIONS, INC.
New York

To the memory of
Victoria Chen Haider
and to Syed Haider
and Sean Chen Haider.

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INTRODUCTION

TANGRENBU—THE STREET LIFE OF SAN FRANCISCO'S CHINATOWN, 1895–1906

In the sultry late spring of 1895, a young German doctor of philosophy by the name of Arnold Genthe sailed into New York harbor on the liner S.S. *Normannia*. Although he was arriving in the middle of a great migration of impoverished eastern and southern Europeans, Genthe was not coming to the United States as an immigrant. While the steerage below was packed with the desperate poor of many nationalities, Genthe was comfortably traveling first-class with the Baron von Schroeder and family. The Baron had met Genthe in Hamburg and needed a tutor for his son Heini. Having completed his doctoral work at the University of Jena, Genthe wanted to avoid being drafted into Kaiser Wilhelm's Prussian army and had agreed to work with the young von Schroeder for two years in the Baroness's home city, San Francisco.¹

Genthe was beguiled by San Francisco. His poetic description of the city, recorded in his 1936 autobiography *As I Remember*, illustrated how deeply entranced he was:

As soon as I had unpacked I went for a long walk, up hill and down and up again, until the whole glamorous panorama was spread out before me. The approach through vestibule of cliff and mountainside; the golden stretch of the dunes; the Bay, misted by the silver fog, or captured by the softly incandescent blue of a clear sky; the full-rigged barkentines and the many little ships, always coming and going, their sails belling in the stiff breeze; the long curve of the waterfront with its rows of liners and sailing vessels from all ports of the world, tied up at their berths or lying at anchorage in the stream; the spicy tang of the sea and of cargoes piled high on the quays; Fisherman's Wharf and its rainbow fleet; the deep-throated songs of the Italian fishermen as they mended their nets; Telegraph Hill, where the fishermen's shacks clung like swallows' nests to the sides of the cliff—against the background of the variant sky they created a mural of such beauty that during the fifteen years I was there my eyes never tired of it.²

The German guidebook to the United States that Genthe brought had a sentence about San Francisco that intrigued him: "It is not advisable to visit the Chinese quarter unless one is accompanied by a guide."³ This Chinese quarter, or Tangrenbu (Tong Yen Fau; "Port of the People of Tang [i.e. Chinese]"), was the home base of tens of thousands of Bay-area Chinese. However, to non-Chinese it was known as the mysterious, exotic, and sometimes dangerous Chinatown.⁴ Predictably, Genthe headed for this section of the city the first chance he could. In Tangrenbu, Genthe found a living culture totally foreign to his experience. The colors, the smells, the language made him feel compelled to write to his family. Searching for illustrations to accompany his letters, he

could only find "crudely colored postal cards," none of which satisfied him. He attempted to sketch residents and soon found that "as I got out my sketchbook the men, women and children scampered in a panic into doorways or down into cellars."⁵ He then chose to try his hand at the relatively novel medium of amateur photography.

Building upon these rather innocent beginnings, Genthe returned time and again to Chinatown, taking over 200 photographs on glass negatives. These marvelous photographs of San Francisco's Tangrenbu launched him on a long, productive career as a highly acclaimed photographic artist; and at the same time they preserved rare, priceless glimpses of the rich street life of old Chinatown as it was before being leveled by the disastrous earthquake and fire of 1906.

San Francisco's Tangrenbu

The 1895 Tangrenbu that Arnold Genthe ventured into was hardly the simple "Canton of the West" he perceived it as. It was the spiritual, if not actual, home of tens of thousands of Chinese who, because of a tidal wave of racist hostility, were forced to live in a segregated section of the city. Chinatown had been shaped by the swirling cross-currents of an epic three-way struggle between industrial capitalists who sought to remake the West as they saw fit, Chinese merchants and workers who sought work and survival, and an often racist, yet class-conscious, white working class driven by anger and fear for their livelihood. To truly understand the story that Genthe's photographs tell, it is necessary to comprehend these forces that molded early California history.

Chinese had been reported living in Yerba Buena, a sleepy Mexican trading village, as early as 1838, a full ten years before gold was spotted at Sutter's Mill nearby.⁶ Within a year, the "manifest destiny" fervor of United States ruling interests had wrested vast tracts out of Mexico's northern territories. In 1849, Yerba Buena became San Francisco, and a year later California became the thirty-first state admitted into the Union. James O'Meara, an early San Francisco settler, noted that the pioneer Chinese tended to be merchants and traders. "Most of the Chinese who came here were men of means enough to pay their own way and here they mainly embarked in merchantiles or trading pursuits. In 1849 . . . no Chinaman was seen as a common laborer. . . ." ⁷ These early Chinese had come primarily from the three wealthy commercial and agricultural districts of Nanhai (Namhoi), Panyu (Punyu), and Shunde (Shuntak), known

as the Three Districts, or Sanyi (Saam Yap), which surrounded the major southern port city of Canton. Merchants from Sanyi often dealt with Chinese agents for Western colonial companies, and therefore had access to travel on American clipper ships. Merchants and traders from Guangdong and Fujian, the two provinces flanking Canton harbor, could be found in ports throughout the Pacific rim. In San Francisco, the earliest Chinese stores were located on Sacramento Street between Kearney (now Kearny) Street and Dupont Street (now Grant Avenue). Sacramento Street was called Tangrenjie (Tong Yen Gaai) or the "Street of the Chinese People." As the San Francisco economy boomed with hopeful gold seekers, the city experienced continual labor shortages throughout the 1850s and 1860s. It was cheaper for male miners who refused to wash their own clothes, for example, either to send their dirty laundry on a clipper ship to Hong Kong or Honolulu to be washed or to simply throw it away, than to pay the rates to have their clothes done locally. The pioneer entrepreneurs and industrialists of the region needed workers to lay roadways, reclaim swampland, work company-owned mines, make boots and shoes, and perform hundreds of other wage-paid tasks. The white men who flooded the Pacific coast were generally obsessed with making a fortune and returning to their homes back east. Native Americans, derogatorily called "Diggers" by whites, would not cooperate. Nor would the "greaser" Mexicans or other Hispanic Americans who invested their ambitions in gold mining. American clipper ships, which at that time were the world's quickest mode of transportation, offered the most realistic solution to the labor shortage. To the west, across the Pacific, lay China, and Chinese "coolie" laborers had already been profitably used on British colonial plantations in South America and the West Indies. Chinese workers were seen as the solution, and the San Francisco Chinese merchants became the key to bringing them over.

In the mid-1800s, China was in chaos, and its social fabric was unraveling. The repressive Qing Dynasty rule of Manchu foreigners was seriously weakened by the disastrous opium trade forced upon the nation by the British Empire. Western imperial powers forced an "open door" trading policy with the beleaguered country and accelerated the draining of the government's silver coffers. The Taiping Rebellion erupted from 1850 to 1864, and left a wide swath of destruction and death in southern China. Banditry was rampant; the more ruthless landlords exacted large tithes from tenant farmers and evicted them when they couldn't pay. Many of these landless peasants migrated to the growing, Western-dominated urban centers of Canton, Amoy, Macao, and Hong Kong to look for work and escape. These desperate poor formed the ranks of laborers whom Westerners have called "coolies," which in Chinese ("kuli" in the Mandarin dialect) signifies "bitter strength" (and derives from the Anglicization of the Tamil term for "hiring").

The British not only wanted Chinese markets in which to sell their surplus cotton goods and profitable opium, they needed laborers to take the place of black plantation slaves nominally freed by the Emancipation Act of 1833 in the West Indies, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and Canada. Chinese laborers were also recruited for plantations in Peru, Cuba, and the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii). In a span of 30 years, hundreds of thousands of Chinese laborers were tricked and lured onto British,

American, and other Western ships for the long journey across the Pacific Ocean. Conditions on these frigates were often comparable to, and sometimes worse than, those of the African slave trade with North America. The mortality rate was as high as 40 percent on one ship to Peru. These conditions led to frequent riots, murders, and in several cases the seizing of the ship.⁸

Gentler techniques of persuasion were used to attract Chinese to the United States. Many Guangdong residents had already heard the news of the gold rush. San Francisco, in fact, was called in Cantonese Gam Saan, or "Golden Mountains." American clipper-ship companies were eager to carry human cargo because it was more profitable than goods. They contracted Chinese brokers to lure Chinese as passengers to the United States with enticing handbills conjuring up glittering images that would satisfy a poor person's fantasies. One particularly sensational, but nonetheless typical, handbill circulated in April 1870 stated:

All Chinamen make much money in New Orleans, if they work. Chinamen have become richer than mandarins there. Pay, first year, \$300, but afterwards make more than double. One can do as he likes in that country. Nobody better nor get more pay than does he. Nice rice, vegetables, and wheat, all very cheap. Three years there will make poor workmen very rich, and he can come home at any time. On the ships that go there passengers will find nice rooms and very fine food. They can play all sorts of games and have no work. Everything nice to make man happy. It is nice country. Better than this. No sickness there and no danger of death. Come! go at once. You cannot afford to wait. Don't heed wife's counsel or the threats of enemies. Be Chinamen, but go.⁹

In the late 1840s and 50s a number of Chinese workers were contracted for a specified number of years, in exchange for passage to Gam Saan; however, these contracts were difficult to enforce. One Edward Lucatt stated: "The fifteen coolies I brought from China, and who were under bond for two years with the party who engaged them, were no sooner ashore than they resisted their contract, and each turned his separate way. Nor would the authorities interfere. . . ."¹⁰ Most Chinese workers came on a credit-ticket basis in which a Chinese merchant in Hong Kong or Canton lent them passage fare, around \$40–50. Upon arriving in the United States the connecting merchants would help find workers jobs and collect the interest and principal from monies earned. The San Francisco Chinese merchant then stood to make double profits by either filling the contract-labor needs of American companies or employing the workers themselves. When contracted by American firms, part of the arrangement was that the labor crews would buy their supplies exclusively from that merchant. The merchant would also hire Chinese foremen to supervise the workers, thus solving the communication problems between the white bosses and the Chinese workers. In 1852 alone, over 20,000 Chinese were reported to have passed through the San Francisco custom-house shed.¹¹ In contrast to the Sanyi merchants, most of these immigrants came from the neighboring, but much poorer, Four Districts, or Siyi (Sei Yap), of Xinhui (Sanwui), Taishan (Toishan), Kaiping (Hoiping), and Enping (Yanping). And as was true with white fortune hunters, few women were among these workers.

Soon stores spread down Dupont Street, spilling onto both sides of Jackson between Kearney and Stockton. In

1856, *The Oriental*, the first San Francisco Chinese-language paper, published a directory listing 33 general merchandise stores, 15 Chinese herb stores, five doctors, five restaurants, five butchers, three tailors, three boarding houses, three wood yards, three bakers, two silversmiths, one wood engraver, one curio carver, one broker for American merchants, and a Chinese interpreter.¹² The concentration of stores in this convenient downtown wharf-side area made it ideal for Chinese workers arriving in the city. However, most Chinese did not live in this area, nor were Chinese businesses restricted to these streets. Fully 80 percent of the Chinese in California in the 1850s and 60s were distributed throughout the mining areas. The *Oriental* directory also listed a candle factory on Brennan Street and Third, Ning Yang* Co. on Broadway, Young Wo* Co. on the slopes of Telegraph Hill, Yan Wo* Co. in Happy Valley, and a Chinese fishing village on Rincon Point.¹³

Chinese miners soon discovered that the mines were not the key to the prosperity they dreamed of. As early as 1849, 60 Chinese working for a British mining company at China Camp, Tuolumne county, were driven off their claim by a party of white miners.¹⁴ A pattern soon developed in which many white Protestant miners declared that these deposits were their exclusive domain and chased away all other people. Chinese were thus forced to mine claims that whites had already abandoned. Although not all white miners were so racist and xenophobic, they all gained from reduced competition with other miners. The independent miners were greatly threatened by companies hiring groups of workers to mine the claims for them.

The conflict between Chinese miners working for companies and independent white miners became especially acute when surface deposits were largely exhausted by the 1870s. Expensive equipment and intensive labor were now required to extract the more elusive gold deposits, putting individual prospectors at a great disadvantage. Although the majority of Chinese miners were independents, they soon became identified with these hated companies, and were driven out of many mining areas. Notices were often posted warning Chinese to leave the area. One such flyer in Mariposa proclaimed: "Notice is hereby given to all Chinese on the Agua Fria and its tributaries to leave within 10 days from this date, and any failure to comply shall be subjected to 38 lashes and moved by force of arms."¹⁵ Attacks against Chinese became frequent, and Chinese were stripped of legal recourse. In 1854, Chief Justice Murray of the California Supreme Court delivered the opinion that the 1850 state law which said, "No Indian or Negro shall be allowed to testify as a witness in any action in which a white person is a party," should be extended to "Chinese and all other people not white."¹⁶

One of the common excuses for restricting the rights of Chinese in America was the contention that they made their money in the United States but sent it back to China, therefore draining the region of reinvestment funds. Ironically, aside from the question of how much money was sent back to workers' families in Southern China, the discriminatory Foreign Miners' Tax, of which Chinese were the primary contributors, accounted for at least half of California's entire state revenues from 1850 to 1870.¹⁷

With the general decline of gold mining in the 1860s, the building of railroads quickly occupied the foreground of industrial capitalist interests. A transcontinental link

from the West to the East and points in-between meant the possible development of the region's agricultural and manufacturing industries. Gabriel Kolko, the noted American historian, states: "From the end of the Civil War until the beginning of the First World War, the railroad was a central, if not the major, element in the political, economic, and social development of the United States. . . . Until the rise of big business in steel, agricultural machinery, and oil, the epic villains in American history in the period from 1870 to 1900 were, John D. Rockefeller excepted, railroad men."¹⁸

The federal government and Eastern banks underwrote the massive capital necessary for the construction costs of the Central Pacific Railroad. This highly lucrative franchise was organized by the soon to be notorious "Big Four" railroad barons of the West: Mark Hopkins, Collis P. Huntington, Charles Crocker, and Leland Stanford. Initially, poor Irish immigrants were hired to start railroad construction beginning from Sacramento; however, as the tracks ascended the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, many workers refused to spend days carving a few feet of granite from a mountainside. In 1865, 50 Chinese workers were hired by Charles Crocker on an experimental basis. Pleased with the results, and desperate for laborers regardless of color, Crocker recruited several thousand Chinese workers within six months. Three years later a total of 8,000 to 10,000, many of whom were former miners, were hired to blast through and over the treacherous mountain range. In the severe winter of 1866, Chinese crews worked and lived underneath the snow. Flash avalanches of snow frequently buried workers. One American reporter witnessed a huge snowslide descending upon two workers. "Seeing it approach, they stepped behind a tall rock, but it buried them 50 feet deep. In spring their bodies were found standing upright, with shovels in their hands."¹⁹ An 1870 newspaper account noted the shipment of 20,000 pounds of bones, representing some 1200 individual railroad workers, being sent back to China for proper burial.²⁰

On June 24, 1867, thousands of Chinese railroad laborers laid down their tools and went on strike demanding better pay and an eight-hour day, stating, "Eight hours a day good for white men, all the same good for Chinamen." Although the strike was lost, the Central Pacific management took the work stoppage quite seriously and wired to New York asking about the feasibility of bringing west some 10,000 black workers.²¹ After the completion of the transcontinental link at Promontory Point, Utah, Chinese railroad workers were employed throughout the North American West, from Texas to Canada, building regional and local lines.

While many Chinese miners found employment on the railroads, others chose to establish fishing operations, familiar to them from what was a common occupation in Guangdong Province, China. Shrimp camps dotted San Francisco Bay from Point San Pedro to Point San Mateo. The shrimp were netted, boiled, and dried primarily for export to Japan, the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii), and China. In 1880, approximately 1,000,000 pounds of dried shrimp were shipped across the Pacific. Chinese fishermen were barred from the San Francisco market, which was dominated by hostile Italian immigrants; however, they did supply San Diego and several other coastal areas with fresh fish. The fish that did not sell were salted and dried. Abalone was also harvested; although Americans

did not eat the mollusk, they fancied the shells and bought them from Chinese vendors for jewelry and decorations. Chinese also fished for sharks, caught crabs, and gathered seaweed for food and to make agar-agar. Through the 1880s, the Chinese were excluded from salmon fishing, even though they composed a sizeable proportion of the seasonal labor force in salmon canning, an important national industry emerging in the Pacific Northwest and Alaska.²²

During this time, other Chinese supplied the labor-intensive work force critical to the building up of local industry and commerce, such as constructing wagon roads and stone bridges and fences; building levees for swampland reclamation; digging irrigation canals and ditches; filling San Francisco Bay with landfill; and even excavating the caverns of the Napa and Sonoma valleys for wineries. Improved local roads, reclaimed land, irrigation canals, and interstate rail links combined to make the development of a profitable agricultural economy possible.

In the 1850s, still other Chinese miners followed the occupational shift of Hispanics, who were also evicted from the mines. Both groups, one after the other, took up small-scale potato farming and truck gardening. Chinese truck gardens started out as small one-person operations and soon grew in popularity and size. These independent farmers came to supply San Francisco, among other cities and towns, with approximately one-fifth of its fresh vegetables through the 1880s. A network of vegetable peddlers brought these perishables from house to house in neighborhoods throughout the city. Some Chinese cultivated small fields of strawberries and other fruits. Most Chinese farmers occupied land for short terms as sharecroppers. In exchange for raising the crops, tending orchards, and taking care of the properties, the sharecroppers kept two-fifths to one-half of the harvest.

Chinese were but a small minority of California farmers. However, the impact of Chinese agricultural workers was felt not on the small independent plots but on the large agribusinesses of the San Joaquin and Sacramento Valleys, which dominated California agricultural production. Chinese, along with Irish, Germans, and American Indians, formed the ranks of California's farm workers. Unlike the other groups of workers, Chinese were generally not hired full-time, but were brought in only when needed, hence earning the dubious distinction of becoming the region's first migrant farmworkers. They picked grapes, made wine, cultivated and harvested orchard fruits, picked cotton and hops, tended livestock, planted and harvested wheat, and performed countless other farm-related tasks. Carey McWilliams, prominent California labor historian, has even asserted that "in many particulars the Chinese actually taught their overlords how to plant, cultivate, and harvest garden crops."²³

Chinese labor contractors performed the indispensable service of providing labor as needed, at a fixed price, to the state's agricultural businessmen. This ready supply of labor reduced the need for these large farms to maintain a regular force of full-time workers. As these large farms prospered, small independent family farmers came to resent the increasing power that the large cash crops and railroad freight rates had over the market prices. And, as with the mining industry, Chinese laborers came to be identified with the large agribusinesses as the source of

woe for the small white farmer. One such farmer put it the following way:

If those men had not monopolized the growth of currants in large quantities by the aid of Chinese labor, even with the Chinese here and they holding their lands, those currants would be grown by men who would use their own children, their girls and boys, in picking of these currants. . . .²⁴

By the mid-1870s a rural anti-Chinese movement gained strength, and farm producers reluctantly began to replace Chinese with often inexperienced white urban workers. Despite the sometimes fierce agitation, Chinese managed to hang on to their positions as lowly migrant workers, jobs that few Anglo-American workers have been willing to take to this day.

In San Francisco, Sacramento, and other growing urban areas, light manufacturing began to develop. Woolen mills required large capital investments, therefore limiting the industry to large firms and an available force of cooperative laborers willing to subject themselves to factory discipline. During the early to mid-1860s two large San Francisco factories were able to gain Civil War supply contracts for blankets and clothing. However, with the ending of the war in 1865 the two plants ran at only 50 percent of capacity. This recession brought about layoffs. Racist white workers blamed the unemployment and wage reductions upon the 400 to 500 Chinese workers. As with other California industries, hierarchies of pay within the woolen mills developed, reflecting the sexual and racial attitudes of the times. Although Chinese composed three-quarters of the entire woolen labor force, they were paid at the lowest rates. Chinese were forced to work the labor-intensive, less skilled jobs and were paid from \$.95 to \$1.50 per day; white women, who were often hired to replace Chinese, received \$1.25 to \$1.50 per day; whereas white males, who generally had supervisory positions, were paid a uniform salary of \$2.50.²⁵ Factory bosses soon discovered that the industry could not be exclusively Chinese, that it was important to mix Chinese with white workers so as to maintain supervisory control. Robert Peckham, the president of the San Jose Woolen Mills, commended Chinese workers for learning their jobs quickly and being very "industrious," but complained that these employees could be a little "crotchety." "They have the power of combining. If you do not happen to get along with them, and have a difficulty with one, the whole lot will stand up for each other, and as a general thing go together."²⁶

Parallel patterns existed in other growing California manufacturing industries. Chinese workers were pitted against white women and sometimes children in the lower-paying jobs, while white men held skilled or supervisory positions commanding a higher wage, which was often higher than the national average. The prevailing anti-Chinese feeling among whites prevented effective job-action protests. Since upward advancement was limited, the Chinese quite sensibly gravitated toward establishing their own manufacturing businesses in areas that required low initial capital investment. The areas that proved to be the most popular and economically viable were the needle trades, shoe and boot making, and cigar making. In these areas, Chinese could set up their own small-scale factories and escape discriminatory treatment at the workplace.

In all three light industries Chinese workers organized labor guilds that resembled American craft unions. This gave these workers a greater bargaining leverage with Chinese bosses as opposed to white overseers. Yet despite the autonomy gained by Chinese workers and bosses in these industries, they would soon lose their competitive edge to the increasingly technological and powerful businesses that were mass-producing the same goods in the East. Chinese could easily move into these areas of industry precisely because the predominant national trend was away from small sweatshop operations toward concentrated mass-production factories that greatly lowered the costs of items produced relative to labor time invested.²⁷

The completion of the nationwide rail system sparked an explosion of industrial development across the entire nation. Western industries now competed with the East for markets, and the tremendous tide of poor European immigrants entering through Castle Garden in New York City now had means to travel westward in search of a livelihood. The labor shortages that had characterized the 1850s and 1860s, when Chinese workers had entered developing mainstream industries, now gave way to surpluses of white immigrant workers willing to take on jobs that U.S.-born whites had previously shunned. The 1870 California census indicated that the Chinese formed only one-twelfth of the state's population; however, it has been estimated that Chinese workers made up as much as one out of every four California workers.²⁸ In the ensuing decades of white migration to California this relatively high ratio of Chinese workers was quickly reduced. The increasingly integrated national capitalist economy reeled from periodic depressions in the 1870s and again in the 1890s. Western railroads, coupled with increased economic concentration in the form of land monopolization and factory industrialization, so totally transformed the social landscape that many residents and recent migrants were left confused and angered. For the great majority of people, expectations of plentiful job opportunities, through which hard-working Horatio Algers could pull themselves up by their bootstraps and become successful, proved illusory at best. Frustrated expectation bred great social unrest. Masses of unemployed, militant trade unions, and antimonopoly political rallies punctuated these periods of economic downturn. Although the much-hated "monopolists" were a main target of organizational agitation, the Chinese were increasingly often made the scapegoats for social problems.]

In July 1877, crowds of mainly unemployed whites gathered in sandlot rallies throughout California. The militant Irish-led state Workingmen's Party initiated many of the sandlotters' demands. Combined with the regional branches of the Grangers, an organization that represented small family farms across the nation, the Party argued for an eight-hour day, the nationalization of the railroads controlled by the "Big Four," the closing off of property-tax loopholes for the wealthy, the cutting of city bureaucrats' salaries down to the same level as those of skilled labor, and additional class-conscious demands. Their first slogan was "Down with the Bloated Monopolists!" On one of the July evenings an angry crowd with torches in hand climbed up to Charles Crocker's Nob Hill mansion and threatened to burn it down. At the same time, many of the same sandlot leaders railed against the

Chinese. White Protestant "manifest destiny" arrogance here translated into a nativist attack on Chinese. "Anti-Coolie" clubs proliferated in working-class San Francisco neighborhoods. Their demand was, "The Chinese Must Go!" Denis Kearney, the fiery orator of the Workingmen's Party, was quoted by local newspapers as saying: "Judge Lynch is the only judge we want." "Bring guns to the sandlots and form military companies; blow up the Pacific Mail docks [the place where Chinese immigrants landed, owned by the 'Big Four']." "The monopolists who make their money by employing cheap labor better watch out! they have built themselves fine residences on Nob Hill and erected flagstuffs upon their roofs—let them take care that they have not erected their own gallows." "When the Chinese question is settled, we can discuss whether it would be better to hang, shoot, or cut the capitalists to pieces."²⁹

Violence mounted against the Chinese. On July 23, bands of young men swept through 20 to 30 Chinese wash houses. On the following evening, they committed random murders of Chinese, set fires, fought with police. And on the third night, they set fire to a lumberyard bordering on the Pacific Mail Steamship docks, and fought with firemen trying to put out the blaze! Although anti-Chinese agitation was not new, the sentiment and scapegoating was now incorporated into the web of local, regional, and state politics. Both the local and state Republican and Democratic parties adopted virulently anti-Chinese platforms throughout the 1870s and 1880s. Opportunistic politicians soon found that vehement anti-Chinese and antimonopoly rhetoric won votes. Many regional politicians were so elected. Countless discriminatory laws were passed. Chinese children, for example, were denied access to public schools, and since Chinese could not legally become naturalized citizens they were not allowed the rights of American citizens. In 1870 a penalty of not less than \$1,000 was to be levied against any "Asiatic" brought into the state without proof of "good character." Six years later the law was declared unconstitutional. In 1874, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors passed ordinances requiring that those laundries not employing vehicles, which meant Chinese businesses, had to pay a quarterly license fee of \$15, whereas the more prosperous, generally white-owned businesses, which owned one or more vehicles, had to pay only \$2 per vehicle per quarter. Later that same year the ordinance was declared void by the County Court. Whether these laws were eventually overruled or not, these harassing regulations had the cumulative effect of provoking the Chinese to withdraw whatever trust they had had in the American legal and legislative systems.

Pro-Chinese forces, which supported the rights of Chinese to work and live in the West, tended to represent either regional big businesses, which depended on Chinese laborers; traders, who depended on Asia's millions of potential consumers; or Christian missionaries, who sought good relations with China and its possible millions of converts. Before the 1876 State Senate Committee, commissioned to investigate the "Chinese Question," and before the 1877 U.S. Congressional Joint Special Committee, a corps of local and regional businessmen testified to the critical contributions Chinese labor had made to the state. Many argued that their toil actually raised the social position of white labor. Charles

Crocker, one of the "Big Four" rail barons, flatly stated, "I think that their presence here affords to white men a more elevated class of labor. As I said before, if you should drive these 75,000 Chinamen off you would take 75,000 white men from an elevated class of work and put them down to doing a low class of labor that the Chinamen are now doing, and instead of elevating you would degrade white labor to that extent."³⁰ Christian missionaries, who expressed far deeper understanding of and sympathy for the Chinese than most Americans, supported the immigration of Chinese to the United States with the primary goal of converting them to Christianity. Their support, although often truly beneficial to the Chinese, betrayed a condescending paternalism that seemed to apologize for Western imperial domination of China. The Reverend Otis Gibson, a staunch and outspoken supporter of the Chinese, conveyed a fundamental contempt for Chinese culture in his Congressional testimony: "Their civilization is lower than the Christian civilization of America. The religion of the educated may be formulated as a blind fatality; the religion of the masses a heartless, superstitious idolatry."³¹

The anti-Chinese political movement was not restricted to local socio-economic issues; it encompassed a moral world view of right and wrong, good and evil. The issue was intricately entwined with the perceived divine right of America, as a "white" nation, to enlighten and dominate North America and beyond. The United States was commonly personified by Columbia, a lily-white woman robed in white, a symbol of purity and civilization better known today in the form of the Statue of Liberty. China, however, was most often presented as a hoary, ancient, moribund, and pagan country overflowing with look-alike people. Countless political cartoons printed in the American popular press depicted Chinese as devilish, winged, bat-like creatures; hordes of grasshoppers ravaging wheat fields and attacking Uncle Sam; or subhuman-looking workers with octopus-like arms monopolizing jobs while idle white boys loitered around.

There were countless other graphics decrying the "yellow peril." Penny-press pamphlets and books flooded the popular market warning of the impending doom. One typical pamphlet, printed in San Francisco by H. J. West in 1871, was titled "The Chinese Invasion: They are Coming, 900,000 More. The Twenty-Three Years' Invasion of The Chinese In California And The Establishment of a Heathen Despotism in San Francisco. Nations of the Earth Take Warning!" Another, published in Boston by Walter J. Raymond in 1886, was titled "Horrors of the Mongolian Settlement, San Francisco, California. Enslaved And Degraded Race of Paupers, Opium-Eaters And Lepers." A San Francisco doctor published, in the city's Biennial State Board of Health Report of 1871, an article entitled "The Chinese and the Social Evil Question." He stated with full authority that the Chinese were "inferior in organic structure, in vital force, and in constitutional conditions of full development."³² Other local physicians testified that Chinese were, as a race, physiologically different from whites in that their nerve endings were further away from the surface of the skin and they were therefore less sensitive to pain. This meant that Chinese workers could labor for longer hours in terrible conditions and not complain. Much of this anti-Chinese xenophobia dovetailed with crude social Darwinism and human eugenics movements that asserted the evolutionary and inbred superi-

ority of white races over all nonwhite peoples. It was generally accepted by white Christians that interracial sexual relations would dilute the purity of races. Anti-miscegenation laws that already applied to blacks and Native American Indians were extended to include Chinese in over 30 states; California did not repeal its anti-miscegenation law until 1948. These movements were historic forerunners of the fascist and Ku Klux Klan movements of recent American history.

The anti-Chinese movement successfully equated Chinese with the devil and monopoly trusts on a nationwide level. In 1887, a white miner in Lake County, Colorado, when asked what rank and file labor "wanted," responded: "Laws should be passed compelling equal pay to each sex for equal work; making all manual labor no more than eight hours a day so workers can share in the gains and honors of advancing civilization; prohibiting any more Chinese coming to this country on account of physiological, labor, sanitary, and other considerations, as the country would be happier without Chinamen and trusts." What is so significant about this statement is not what the miner said, which was fairly typical of many anti-Chinese workers, but the fact that there were no Chinese in Lake County five years before or after he made the statement. Even by those without direct contact with Chinese, the belief that they were no good for the United States was widely accepted.³³ During times of great socio-economic dislocation the Chinese were characterized in such a way that average, mainstream white Americans perceived them as legitimate targets for the deep-seated frustrations of farmers and workers across the country. In 1882, the United States Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, prohibiting Chinese workers (though not merchants, students, or diplomats) from entering the United States. Chinese workers thus earned the dubious distinction of being the first national group prohibited from immigrating to the United States. The act was amended in 1884; in 1888 it was renewed as the more restrictive Scott Act, which extended the proscription to all Chinese women, with the exception of merchant's wives. The Scott Act was extended another ten years in 1892, and in 1902 it was extended indefinitely. The passage of the law betrayed a national consensus that the United States was to be a white nation. Even at the height of Chinese immigration in the 1870s, the Chinese represented no more than 4.4 percent of all immigrants, in contrast to the whopping 94 percent who were European. At the height of "yellow peril" xenophobia in the 1880s through the 1890s, the Chinese made up only 0.4–1.2 percent of the immigrant population, whereas Europeans composed 95–97 percent.³⁴

The Chinese were subject to random and organized violence of increasing intensity during the 1870s and 1880s. The most fervent anti-Chinese agitators not only wanted the Chinese restricted—they wanted them expelled from the country. In 1885 and 1886, the white residents of Seattle and Tacoma, Washington, evicted all the cities' Chinese residents, putting them on a barge to San Francisco with warnings not to return. Chinese farmworkers were violently driven out of the fertile Sacramento and San Joaquin valleys. In 1880, Denver riots left one Chinese dead and \$20,000 worth of property damage. A riot in Los Angeles' Chinese quarter in 1871 left 15 Chinese hung from balconies and two Chinese shot dead. The single most brutal anti-Chinese riot occurred in Rock

Springs, Wyoming, in 1885, where angry white coal miners, working for the Union Pacific, rampaged through Chinese miners' shacks, killing 28 and wounding 15. Federal troops were called in to quell the rioting. No indictments were made. The U.S. Congress later paid an indemnity of \$147,000 to the Chinese for property losses sustained. Even in Juneau, Alaska, Chinese working for the Alaska Mill and Mining Company were forced to leave in two schooners. Trade unions organized regional boycotts of Chinese-made goods and of companies that employed Chinese. This effectively curbed the participation of Chinese workers in mainstream industries. The cigar industry set a prime example. In 1874, white cigar makers adopted white labels to be put on individual cigars to indicate they, as white union men, had produced the cigars. The label showed a dragon on one side and the union mark on the other, with the words "White Labor, White Labor." Stores that sold only their cigars were awarded a certificate that read:

Protect Home Industry. To All Whom It May Concern: This is to certify that the holder of this certificate has pledged himself to the Trades Union Mutual Alliance, neither to buy nor sell CHINESE MADE CIGARS, either wholesale or retail, and that he further pledges himself to assist in the fostering of Home Industry by the patronage of PACIFIC COAST LABEL CIGARS of which the above is a facsimile.³⁵

The practice was later adopted by the Cigar Maker's International Union in the 1875 Convention. In one racist moment, both the cigar label and the union label had been originated.

The regional and occupational routing of Chinese workers forced many to return to China. Others migrated eastward, hoping for better conditions, and many retreated to urban Chinatowns. Whereas San Francisco's Tangrenbu was originally a refueling station for Chinese scattered throughout the region, it became more and more a segregated ghetto that kept the Chinese in one area, and whites out. These events form the backdrop of the Tangrenbu of the 1890s, the segregated world into which a starry-eyed Arnold Genthe stepped in 1895. It is this history that had been etched into the faces and memories of the subjects of Genthe's camera.

Arnold Genthe

Arnold Genthe was born to a highly educated, well-to-do Berlin family in 1869. Hermann Genthe, his father, was a professor of Latin and Greek at several "gymnasiums" which prepared upper-class German youth for college studies. Amid times of growing Prussian bureaucracy and militarism the family soon moved to the free and modern city of Hamburg, where Hermann Genthe founded and was president of the Wilhelm Gymnasium. Genthe was proud to note that his family had produced a long line of noted and accomplished scholars, architects, and teachers. The family library contained more than 200 books authored by its various members. His paternal grandfather alone was responsible for 30 volumes on linguistics and literature. One especially revered relative of young Genthe, Adolf Menzel, was a pillar of the German painting establishment. Genthe harbored a deep passion to be a painter. Menzel, however, politely suggested: "You have some talent, but considering the finances of your family, I feel it would be advisable for you to follow in the footsteps

of your father and grandfathers. You will paint, of course, but not for fame or profit."³⁶ With that sobering advice, at 19 Arnold entered the University of Jena, where he majored in classical philology. As a student he compiled a collection of German slang, edited previously unpublished correspondence between Goethe and Hegel, fought a duel, and wrote a doctoral thesis in Latin. Genthe was also literate in Greek, French, Anglo-Saxon, Hebrew, and English.

Genthe's lettered, polished background made him at home with San Francisco's emerging social elite. The Baroness von Schroeder was the daughter of railroad magnate and banker Mervyn Donohue. Genthe lived with the family, moving with them when they left their rented apartment on Van Ness Avenue and Sutter to stay in the posh Hotel San Raphael, a resort hotel that the Baron owned, and moving with them again to one of the several von Schroeder ranchos in San Luis Obispo County, not far from San Francisco. One of the ranchos, the Nacimiento, bred cattle and stretched for 50,000 acres from hills to valleys to mountains. It was in this setting that Genthe tutored young Heini von Schroeder. Their shared love for horses took them on long rides through this magnificent countryside. When Genthe had free time he would travel to San Francisco and wander through its streets and clubs.

By the late nineteenth century, San Francisco had smoothed out its rough frontier-boomtown edges and emerged as the premier West Coast seaport metropolis. The entire Western region of the United States was entering an era of great industrialization and large-scale agricultural development. Between 1870 and 1900, the population of San Francisco leaped from 137,000 to over 400,000. The investments in building the Union Pacific railroad, the discovery of gold in the Comstock Lode, Nevada, and the clothing manufacturing boom spawned by the Civil War created a nouveau-riche society primarily based in San Francisco. Upon Nob Hill lived the "Big Four" railroad barons and the "Bonanza Kings" of the Comstock gold. Jim Flood was so flush with his new-found wealth that he built a \$30,000 brass fence around his Nob Hill brownstone mansion. It was the sole task of one house servant to keep the fence polished.³⁷ From their mansions and castles the Huntingtons, the Crockers, the Floods, the Townes, and the Stanfords controlled the region. Their presence and money fostered an extravagant upper-class subculture in letters and the arts.

The Bohemian Club was at the center of this elite subculture, and Genthe was one of its privileged members. "A Club like the Bohemian could not have developed anywhere else," Genthe wrote in his autobiography. "It started from small beginnings in 1872 when San Francisco was still an outpost, removed by time and distance from the artistic advantages of the larger and older cities of the American East. A group of men of education and travel met to discuss the possibility of creating these benefits for themselves, and having a good time of it as well." "With its atmosphere of cordiality it became the rendezvous of wits, bon vivants and celebrities—writers, painters, sculptors, musicians, men of the theater, and those who occupied high places in government and finance."³⁸ Here Genthe came to know such local and national luminaries as Jack London, Will and Wallace Irwin, Mary Austin, Ambrose Bierce, Xavier Martinez, Sinclair Lewis, Frank Norris, and Charles Warren Stoddard

Genthe developed his skills as a photographer within this supportive cultural climate. Desiring to use more sophisticated darkroom equipment, he joined the California Camera Club. There he began to experiment with enlarging and cropping his Chinatown prints, some of which appeared at the club's annual exhibitions. As early as 1897, his photographs also began to appear in *The Wave*, a small but important illustrated weekly featuring the arts, literature, and society. *The Wave* was one of the early United States weeklies that published photographs. No doubt, the favorable comment that Genthe began to receive gave him the confidence to "venture into a more exacting phase, one that had been tempting me for some time," portrait photography.³⁹

A bachelor all his life, Arnold Genthe had a lifelong fascination with beautiful women, and he was constantly in their company. This was a trait that Dorothea Lange, who worked as an assistant to Genthe in New York City, was to observe decades later: "Yes, he was a real roué, a real roué."⁴⁰ One morning in San Raphael, he was enraptured by "a goddess swinging a tennis racket." "Her hair was a cloud of flame. Her skin was like a rose petal. With head erect she moved her perfectly molded figure with a free and easy grace." "Everywhere one went one saw these fine-featured, valiant young women, with their extraordinary coloring and their radiant spirit." Yet, Genthe moaned, "Theirs surely was a beauty to be recorded. But when one saw photographs of them the radiance and the spirit were missing."⁴¹ In most of the portraits taken at this time the sitters were immobilized in front of painted backdrops. "There must be some way," Genthe thought, "of taking their pictures so that they would be more than a mere surface record and would have more relation to life and to art than the stiffly posed photographs that gave the effect of masks behind which the soul of the subject was lost."⁴²

By 1897, Genthe had completed his tutorial responsibilities, and Heini von Schroeder was prepared to take his examinations for entrance into a gymnasium in Germany. Rejecting teaching offers from several German universities, Genthe decided to become a full-time portrait photographer. He found a two-story studio on Sutter Street and here he developed a distinctive, unstilted portrait style for his upper-class customers. A portrait of Mrs. W. H. Crocker, the wife of the powerful banker, with her three children earned Genthe renown among San Francisco's elite. Word of Genthe's novel photographic techniques quickly spread through blue-book circles. "With so many women of means and position using their prestige in my behalf, it was not surprising that my photographs became the fashion. Before a year had passed, I had acquired a large clientele. Often people had to wait outside in carriages, or sit on the stairs, since I had no reception room."⁴³ Much of his popularity was due to his ability to adjust lighting and suggest poses that favorably portrayed even "plain" women. In a few years, he enjoyed a thriving, lucrative business.

The year 1901 marked Genthe's emergence as an aesthetic innovator within the photographic world. With the publication of two articles, one in *Overland Monthly* and one in *Camera Craft*, he explained the phototechnique and articulated the philosophical principles of the "Genthe style." In "Rebellion in Photography" he included 19 of his most prized portraits and asserted that a group of emerging young "rebel" photographers, "himself in-

cluded, had created the way to obtain photographs of truly artistic merit which abided by the aesthetic laws laid down by painters and sculptors through the ages. The "cherished traditions of the old time photographer were ruthlessly discarded, with the result that there are now quite a number of serious workers, who make pictures for money (and they charge rather high prices) that not only please the artists, even those who for years blindly maintained that a photograph could never be a work of art, but also the intelligent public, that is sensitive to subtleties and originality of treatment."⁴⁴

Although Genthe wrote as if he were a detached observer, he clearly was referring to his own work. He had finally achieved his childhood desire to become a painter. But instead of brush and paints, his medium was camera and film. He saw himself as a pioneer in a new form of artistic portraiture. He was on the threshold of a long and accomplished career, and by 1906 he had stopped taking photographs of Chinatown, concentrating his efforts on Genthe-style portraits, for which he would eventually win national acclaim.

Arnold Genthe and Tangrenbu

In the shadow of Nob Hill society lay Tangrenbu, ten crowded blocks inhabited by San Francisco's Chinese—a region that Arnold Genthe exotically referred to as the "Canton of the West."⁴⁵ Genthe bought a small, black, rectangular "detective" camera, equipped with a fast Zeiss lens, to take pictures there. "For my first experiment I could scarcely have chosen a more difficult subject. The alleys and courtyards were so narrow that the light found its way through them for only an hour or two at midday. In order to get any pictures at all I had to hide in doorways or peer out from an angle of a building at some street corner. But I went bravely ahead."⁴⁶

In a small closet darkroom on the top floor of the von Schroeders' house, Genthe developed his first glass negatives. Encouraged by his initial results, he frequented the Chinese quarter, especially during Chinese New Year and special holidays. "Many days I stood for hours at a corner or sat in some wretched courtyard, immobile and apparently disinterested, as I waited, eager and alert, for the sun to filter through the shadows or for some picturesque group of characters to appear—a smoker to squat with his pipe, or a group of children in holiday attire."⁴⁷

Standing at six foot two, with bushy eyebrows and a wild mane of hair, Genthe was an imposing presence everywhere he went. His lurking around doorways and alleys must have appeared especially peculiar and suspect to Tangrenbu residents. In his autobiography, Genthe explained that he had to develop this "candid camera" approach because "I had learned that the inhabitants of Chinatown had a deep-seated superstition about having their pictures taken. To them the camera was a 'black devil box' in which all the evils of the earth were bottled up, ready to pounce upon them. Not only did the grown people run from it, but the older boys and girls had been trained to gather up their little sisters and brothers at the sight of one and to run into cellars or up the stairways."⁴⁸

This quaint "black devil box" statement has been widely accepted by subsequent American exhibitors and photohistorians.⁴⁹ John Thomson, a British photographer traveling in China from 1862 to 1872, had observed: "I . . . frequently enjoyed the reputation of being a dangerous

geomancer, and my camera was held to be a dark mysterious instrument, which, combined with my naturally, or supernaturally, intensified eyesight gave me power to see through rocks and mountains, to pierce the very souls of the natives, and to produce miraculous pictures by some black art. . . ."⁵⁰ Similar claims were made by Western photographers about Native American Indians, who were said to fear that their likenesses would be stolen by "shadow catchers." This type of belief can probably be found wherever Western industrial cultures have come into contact with less technologically developed cultures.

(These comments make marvelous anecdotes. The historical evidence, however, tends to contradict them, at least in Genthe's case. By the 1890s, most, if not all, of the Chinese in the United States had already come into contact with cameras and photographs. Western-frontier photographers captured many Chinese looking directly into the lens. Many early Chinese workers in the United States had carte-de-visite and cabinet portraits taken to send back to their families and friends in China.) Passport-type photographs were also used for the identification papers of Chinese reentering San Francisco after a trip to China. Photographs had become so much an integral part of everyday life in California that it is difficult to believe that the Chinese and Chinatown were totally cut off from and oblivious to them as Genthe would have us believe. Even in imperial China, Western photographers, such as John Thomson, had become commonplace in the major cities and in a number of cases had taught the trade to Chinese, who were practicing commercially in Hong Kong as early as the 1860s. The Chinese residents of Tangrenbu were hardly the pagan, unsophisticated people Genthe described them as. However, some residents indisputably hid from Genthe's camera, and the explanation lies not with a "backward," childlike thinking, but with their keen sense of survival. Having experienced American anti-Chinese hostility in virtually all areas of everyday life, the Chinese came to realize that the best way to survive was to avoid unnecessary contact with unknown whites. Children and adults ran from Genthe because they simply did not trust this intruder and were not sure what he was up to. Was he an immigration agent? Would they be deported? Would they get in trouble? Besides these basic considerations, Tangrenbu residents must have also resented outsiders coming in and treating them as curiosities. Genthe describes one of his photographic "adventures" into the quarter, illustrating some of the antipathy many residents must have felt:

Only once in my many ramblings was I in danger. An English photographer whom I had met said he would like to take some night pictures of the "Devil's Kitchen" [an area where Chinese vagrants and poorer workers gathered]. Had I been alone I would have had no fear, but going there in this instance involved a responsibility, and I asked the Chief to detail a detective to accompany us. We managed to get in without attracting attention as it was pitch dark in the court. But when the flashlight [i.e., flash powder] went off like a pistol shot, on the balconies and rushing down the stairways came a shouting, threatening mob. Several shots were fired. "You'd better run for your lives," said the detective, taking us by the arm. Needless to say we beat a hasty retreat.⁵¹

It is also possible that initially Chinese did not mind outside photographers coming in. A. C. Vroman, frontier photographer of the American Southwest, noted that in

the 1850s and 1860s local tribes were tremendously cooperative with photographers in general, despite any reservations they may have had about how the sun could be used to create these uncanny likenesses. However, as more photographers invaded their lands and relations with whites grew uneasy, native people became more suspect and hostile. In the 1870s and 1880s, tourists would come barging in, touching sacred objects, disrupting private ritual dances, and in general treating residents with disrespect. Considering the history of the relations of Chinese with white Californians, it is likely that a similar pattern developed.⁵²

Once Genthe became a regular sight on the streets of the community, individual responses to his presence must have changed and relaxed. However, it is difficult to gauge the degree of comfort and trust his subjects felt from looking at the photographs. Most of Genthe's Chinatown photographs were "candid camera" shots, where the subjects were, at the moment the lens was opened, unaware of the photographer's presence. In his autobiography, Genthe reflected, "Even in the early days of slow lenses and slow plates, when it was much more difficult to catch a person unawares, on account of the necessarily longer exposures, I managed successfully."⁵³

On the surface, photographs appear to the viewer as objective visual documents authentically reproducing any given scene. The presence of the photographer seems to be that of an invisible, and passive, bystander. Yet the ultimate content of the photograph is, in reality, intimately determined by the relationship the photographer has with his or her subjects. The two photographs shown in Plates 1 and 10 were taken in close sequence. The normal activity shown in the first scene of the man selling animal remnants (the one that was printed in *Old Chinatown*; see Plate 1) is rudely interrupted in the second photograph (see Plate 10). The people shown have come to realize that this outsider is taking unsolicited photographs of them and they are giving Genthe a few choice words of advice. Genthe was obviously not welcome here. The response that he received here indicates that he was definitely limited in the shots he could take. He either had to catch people totally off guard in public spaces or had to foster enough trust in his subjects for them to let him into their private spaces.

Just how well did Genthe know the community? Undoubtedly Genthe was familiar with Tangrenbu and had gotten to know some of its residents. The individuals in a number of his best portraits display an open willingness to pose or look his camera straight in the lens. (The portraits in Plates 20, 48, and 52 are good examples.) Contrary to the prevailing tendency to represent Chinese as gross and mysterious caricatures, these sensitive portraits demonstrate Genthe's ability to portray Chinese as individuals whom one could meet and get to know. In *As I Remember*, Genthe devotes several paragraphs to describing two of the people he got acquainted with. One man, possibly pictured in Plate 74, was an "old friend." He was "a miserable old skeleton who had been smoking opium for many years" and lived with a cat in some basement dive.⁵⁴ Another acquaintance was San Lung*, a fortune-teller who always sat outside on the corner of Stockton and Clay Streets waiting to catch tourists. "He, too, was parched and cadaverous, but he had a merry twinkle in his eye and an ever-present grin in his toothless mouth. His was a wise humor, and he brought it fre-

quently to bear upon his prophesies when he wanted to give them a personal touch."⁵⁵ In these same pages, Genthe tells of his Chinatown haunts, including the above-mentioned "Devil's Kitchen," the Chinese theater, pawnshops in which he would buy porcelains and jades, temples, and fancy restaurants. On occasion "big merchants" would invite him to lavish banquets.⁵⁶ Genthe was also friends with Donaldina Cameron, head of the Chinese Presbyterian Mission at 920 Sacramento Street.

Genthe's knowledge of Chinatown was certainly greater than that of most non-Chinese San Franciscans. He did not, however, exhibit a greater knowledge than certain regular outside visitors to the community. These "slummers" were generally young, middle-class whites who spent their idle hours hanging out in Chinatown. They would get a bite to eat, show their friends some of the "quaint" sights, shop in curio bazaars, and possibly smoke some opium. Chinatown to them was a place in which to be distracted and entertained. The old opium smoker with a feline sidekick was known to many tourists who paid for guided tours through the community. In his 1933 reminiscence of San Francisco, Charles Dobie, who spent some of his youth roaming the streets of Tangrenbu, described what appears to be the same man:

We always entered the Palace Hotel in the hope that we could attach ourselves to a party of tourists threading their way to the lodgings of the old man who smoked opium. How old he was no one could have said, but he looked incredibly ancient. His face was like wrinkled parchment, his body a mere dried husk that gave no contours to his sagging clothes. He was toothless, as may be imagined and he possessed two things—a faithful cat, and a mysterious slab of onyx set in an ebony frame supposed to exert a charm on all who left money for the purpose. His mind was clear enough to promote the sale of these charms and once this matter was settled, he would stretch out in his bunk and treat his visitors to an exhibition of opium smoking.⁵⁷

This man made his living from his contact with white tourists; it is, therefore, not surprising that Genthe came to know him. San Lung, the fortune-teller, was also a common fixture of the tourist circuit. Many old San Francisco postcards show either him or his colleagues sitting at a folding table outside on the sidewalk. The traditional Chinese use of divination was part of the ritual and practice of Chinese temples, which were called "joss houses" by Americans, and was performed by respected temple priests. Whether San Lung was an authentic priest serving community residents or not, his street-corner stand came to be an expected and scheduled "sight" in organized tourist visits. The other places that Genthe frequented were also common attractions for outsiders. Guidebooks recommending the "sights" of the city often spoke of the Chinese theaters, the "joss houses," and, for the more adventurous, a look at the "Devil's Kitchen."

Genthe was not likely to have been considered an insider with a deep understanding of the ways of the community, and his writings do not demonstrate a genuine friendship with residents. In point of fact, several of his photographs are incorrectly labeled. The photograph of the men selling animal remnants from a wagon was published and exhibited as "The Fish Monger" and "The Fish Peddler." It is possible that Genthe deliberately mislabeled this photograph for fear of offending his upper-crust patrons. However, the peddler selling chickens, shown in Plate 58, was called "The Vegetable Peddler."

And other titles, most notably "The Street of the Slave Girls" (Plate 80), "Reading the Tong Proclamation" (Plate 53), and "A Slave Girl in Holiday Attire" (Plate 13), had more to do with stereotypical misunderstanding of what was going on in Chinatown than with what was actually on the negatives. Will Irwin, the author of the text accompanying Genthe's photographs in *Pictures of Old Chinatown*, wrote of Chinatown from this very same limited and distorting point of view. In the text Chinatown is described as an exotic, foreign community, populated with colorful characters and adorable children amid curious sights. The 47 pages of descriptions offer little genuine insight into the situation or history of the residents of Tangrenbu.

A fuller, more fruitful understanding of Arnold Genthe and his relationship with Tangrenbu can be gained from the careful examination of the photographs themselves. Genthe rarely if ever printed his photographs full-frame. In order to achieve what he felt was a more pleasing "artistic" composition, in most of his Chinatown prints he used but small portions of his three-by-four and four-by-five glass negatives. The photographs published in *Pictures of Old Chinatown* (1908) and *Old Chinatown* (1913) were often printed several different ways as exhibition prints. The present volume contains 130 of the over 200 known photographs in existence (in either prints or negatives). Many of these photographs have never been published, or never shown full-frame. Whenever possible the photographs reproduced here have been printed full-frame from the original glass negatives or lantern slides (often showing the white crop marks Genthe used to delimit the "desirable" areas). For those pictures for which negatives have not survived, copies have been made directly from existing prints.

A thorough inspection of these prints leads to a number of interesting and very revealing discoveries regarding the image of Chinatown Genthe wanted to convey. Even a quick and superficial inventory of his negatives and prints indicates some immediately noticeable biases running through his work. Of the 159 photographs I have examined, 100, or two-thirds, show children as either principal or essential figures in the compositions; and 74, almost one-half, show Chinese, primarily children, in holiday dress. To the casual observer, there may appear nothing unusual in these proportions. Tangrenbu, however, was primarily a male bachelor society that included only a small minority of merchants' families. Children, therefore, were few and far between. But it is obvious that children were a favorite subject with Genthe. It is quite possible that he found them to be far more cooperative and uninhibited before the camera than adults. It is also highly likely that his patrons especially favored these shots.

In addition to their overwhelming focus on children, nearly half of all Genthe's Chinatown photographs were of individuals in ornate holiday dress, which gives the impression that this dress was commonly worn on an everyday basis. In reality there were only a few holidays during the Chinese lunar calendar that warranted such festive clothing. Most of the dress was probably worn during Chinese New Year's week, occurring in late January, February, or early March. The preponderance of holiday shots indicates that Genthe tended to take his photographs on special occasions in the community. He seems to have preferred extraordinary to everyday scenes. Whatever the explanation for these skewed proportions, it must be kept

in mind that what is shown in the photographs is only a very selective view of the community. The "Street of the Gamblers" photograph conveys, far more accurately than most of these pictures, the actual feeling and typical appearance of everyday life in the community.

In discussing his photographic philosophy, Genthe argued strongly against the prevalent practice of freely retouching photographs. In his 1901 article "Rebellion in Photography," he stated:

The aim of the retouch ought to be, besides removing flaws in the film, simply to modify what the lens and plate have exaggerated; wrinkles that appear too prominent, freckles, which our eye does not see as dark spots, etc. But the removing of characteristic lines, the "modeling" of the face with the retouching pencil, is something a photographer with any artistic conscience will not do.⁵⁸

This attitude did not carry over, evidently, to a number of his Chinatown photographs. A photograph of Genthe with camera in hand is shown here (see Plates 2 and 3) first as it was retouched and then in its original, unretouched form. Suddenly, as if by magic, a bearded Caucasian man appears peering over Genthe's arm. The retouched version was printed darker so that the work of the touch-up crayon was not as evident. In *Old Chinatown*, the same picture appears with all figures cropped out, except that of the young Chinese boy. Not much can be surmised from this example alone except that for some reason Genthe wanted the bearded man out of the composition.



Fig. 1. "The Toy Peddler."

Genthe's intention becomes clearer, however, when we look at a number of other photographs that he also touched up or carefully cropped. At least two versions of "The Toy Peddler" exist. In *Old Chinatown* (see Figure 1) the peddler is shown passing in front of an outdoor concession stand with candies and assorted packages. The

sign on the stand is written in Chinese.⁵⁹ In the print made directly from the original glass negative (see Plate 64), the very same scene is shown with one significant alteration (the minor differences are due to lack of cropping). The Chinese sign, with writing in Chinese characters, is now blank. Upon closer inspection, one can discern words that have been scratched out; they are not Chinese, however. The sign, actually written in plain English, reads: "Chinese Candies 5 Cts. Per Bag" (see Fig. 2). The Chinese words that appear in the published version are fake and are but a fragment of a sentence that has nothing to do with the candy stand. Genthe went through a great deal of trouble to give his patrons the impression that this stand was more foreign and "Chinese" than in fact it was. The sign was intended not so much for the Chinese, who knew what all the assorted goodies were, as for non-Chinese tourists, who must have constantly asked the stand keeper, "What is that?" and "How much is it?"



Fig. 2. Enlargement of sign in Plate 64.

Whereas this is by far the most blatant and dramatic instance of tampering, in many other photographs arms and legs have been etched out, telephone and electrical wires blocked out, and, in several cases, full figures of white people made to disappear. Genthe also tended to print and publish his most purely "Chinese" photographs, those which did not show Caucasians intermingling with Chinese in the streets. After looking at his Chinatown books and exhibition prints, the viewer gets the distinct impression that Tangrenbu was indeed an exotic, picturesque "Canton of the West," a totally Chinese city within San Francisco. The truth of the matter is that this ideal, "pure" Chinese quarter never existed, except in the imagination of its non-Chinese nonresidents. On the face of the matter, Genthe seems to have violated his own photographic principles. In all likelihood he truly held to his professed standards in most of his later career. However, his earlier, more experimental photographs, including many of his Chinatown shots, were probably created with another motivation even stronger than those implied in his openly stated philosophical convictions.

It is tempting to place Genthe's Chinatown photographs in the tradition of social documentary photographers like Jacob Riis or Lewis Hine. The Chinatown photographs appear to be comparable to Riis's photographs of tenement ghettos of the Lower East Side, or Hine's coal-miner and child-labor series; however, important distinctions and qualifications need to be made. Both Riis and Hine were committed to using their photographs as tools for alerting the public to grave social problems. Although they had different political orientations, both were die-

hard social activists constantly seeking to document poor and working people's lives and living conditions. And Hine, even more than Riis, made direct and honest portraits of his subjects in their social setting, revealing a deep empathy with and respect for them. His Ellis Island series, which included many portraits of arriving immigrants, was certainly often "beautiful" when judged only by aesthetic standards, but, more significantly, constituted a powerful "human document" about the plight of European immigrants coming to America. Hine established an American social-photographic standard later maintained by Works Progress Administration (WPA) and Farm Security Administration (FSA) photographers and by those associated with the New York-based Photo League. Genthe, on the other hand, was hardly a socially concerned photographer. Although his Chinatown photographs are the best visual documentary records of the subject in that period, his intention was not to use his photographs to educate the public about Tangrenbu. If it had been, they could have shown far more breadth and depth in subject matter and not be so skewed toward children and exoticism. His photographs were created to be hung in the homes of upper-middle- and upper-class friends and patrons.

In 1936 Genthe, reflecting on early years in San Francisco, wrote:

My inmost desire to be an artist had never really left me. My friends among the artists had been generous in their praise of my drawings and watercolors, which I knew, however, to be mediocre, and had no hope that the slight talent they showed might lead to anything worth while. In the camera I saw a new and exciting art medium—one by which I could interpret life after my own manner in terms of light and shade.⁶⁰

During his Chinatown period, Genthe sought to express and work out his long-standing artistic vision through his new-found pictorial medium. He did not so much view the Chinatown photographs as visual documents faithfully describing the life of the quarter as he used the subject matter as a vehicle for his personal artistry and as a means of earning a living. Unlike Riis and Hine, Genthe was not a social documentarian, even in his Chinatown photographs; he was simply an artistic photographer interested primarily in expressing his personal vision.

Genthe should more appropriately be compared to Edward Curtis, whose 20-volume *The North American Indian* (1900–30) is the most significant single body of visual information about the "Indian." In Christopher Lyman's revealing study *The Vanishing Race and Other Illusions: Photographs of Indians by Edward S. Curtis*, we learn that many of Curtis' concerns ran parallel to Genthe's. Both photographers have been seen as ethnographers documenting vanishing "racial" communities, and both photographers assumed highly aesthetic attitudes towards the portrayal of their subjects. Curtis actively manipulated his images. He not only carefully cropped and retouched, but even went further than Genthe by paying Native Americans to stage scenes and pose in anachronistic costumes he assembled. Despite the deliberate manipulation, both photographers conveyed the impression to their largely middle-class white public that they were privy to the true inside view. Genthe was very much aware of Curtis' images and lauded them in a 1901 article: "E. S. Curtis' Indian studies occupy quite

a place by themselves. They are of immense ethnological value as an excellent record of a dying race, and most of them are really picturesque, showing good composition and interesting light effects."⁶¹ Not at all coincidentally, both photographers emerged during the rise of tourism in American popular culture.

White genocidal policies had already greatly reduced Native American populations and pushed them into isolated reservations. White tourists equipped with cameras were now the "invaders," and the Indians now depended on tourism for their livelihood. Curtis tried to capture a pretourist, prereservation image in his photographs, attempting to recreate his vision of authentic vanishing American Indian communities. Theodore Roosevelt was among Curtis' staunchest supporters. J. Pierpont Morgan loaned him the funds to undertake a 20-volume series which would sell for \$3000 a set.

In an effort analogous to Curtis', Genthe tried to portray a mythical, purely Chinese "Canton of the West." When the Chinese had been pushed into ghettos, the tourist trade was one means by which they were able to make a living. After the 1906 earthquake and fire and the 1911 establishment of the Republic of China, the old Chinatown disappeared forever. And photographs of Genthe's version of old Chinatown became nostalgia, marketable to upper-crust San Franciscans. The wealthy could now own an original print of an "authentic," irretrievable past. In addition, Genthe's photographs—along with chop suey—made Chinatown more accessible to curious non-Chinese tourists.

Arnold Genthe sought and found a certain poetic beauty in the streets of Chinatown. He enjoyed taking magnificent individual portraits like "The Pekin Two Knife Man" (Plate 9), "The Shoe Maker" (Plate 48), and "The Fish Dealer's Daughter" (Plate 20). He made the people in these portraits seem so real that the photographic images seem prepared to answer our questions about the lives of their subjects. He also preferred dramatic compositions like "Doorways in Dim Shadows" (Plate 82), "The Street of the Gamblers" (Plates 47 and 72), and "The Opium Fiend" (Plate 74). In these he conveys a sense of isolation, rootlessness, and idleness. And he ultimately focused his attention on children and their raw, positive energy in photographs like "Boys Playing Shuttlecock" (Plate 113), "The Cellar Door" (Plate 67), and "The Pigtail Parade" (Plate 116). He obviously loved the children of Chinatown, and shared a deep faith with Tangrenbu's elder residents that the future was bright as long as these children were around.

Whatever motivations ultimately lay behind Genthe's photographing of this community, his negatives and prints are fabulously rich with the visual details of the everyday street life of old Chinatown. The honesty and directness of his best images take us beyond even Genthe's own limited knowledge of Tangrenbu to gain glimpses into the radiant soul of its residents.

Today, with 80 years of hindsight, we can use these dazzling aesthetic documents to illuminate a neglected area of American history. Genthe's photographs are invaluable because they tell us of a San Francisco Chinatown long gone and of a certain phase in American photography and its role in American culture. Ultimately, Genthe's original artistic vision embodied in these photographs is not as important as how we reinterpret these images



PLATE 2. Arnold Genthe with camera in Chinatown (retouched version, used in part in *Old Chinatown*, 1913). (Genthe's title: "An Unsuspecting Victim.") See Introduction, p. 14.



PLATE 3. Arnold Genthe with camera in Chinatown (original, unretouched version).

today. If we understand them as more than simply nostalgia, then perhaps we can better understand our lives in the historic present.

Notes

¹Facts about the ocean liner *Genthe* traveled on are from a copy of the passenger manifest of the S.S. *Normannia* (14 June 1895), in the possession of Cynthia Jaffee McCabe, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, The Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. The story of *Genthe's* dodging the draft was told to me, in a private interview, by Mrs. R. E. *Genthe*, the wife of Arnold *Genthe's* nephew.

²Arnold *Genthe*, *As I Remember*, 1936, pp. 31–32.

³*Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁴The syllables of *Tangrenbu* are: "Tang," referring to the Tang Dynasty, "ren," meaning people, and "bu," meaning port or city. Altogether the word means "Chinese city." The Chinese in California also referred to San Francisco, where the largest of the early California Chinese settlements was located, as "Dai Fau" (Cantonese), or "the large city." The people of northern China, and now of China in general (except for minorities), call themselves the Han after that dynasty (roughly 200 B.C. to A.D. 200); those of southern China, integrated into the nation as a whole at a later period, identified with the Tang Dynasty (roughly A.D. 600 to 900).

⁵*Genthe*, *As I Remember*, p. 33.

⁶Thomas Chinn, H. Mark Lai, and Philip P. Choy, eds., *A History of the Chinese in California: A Syllabus*, 1969, p. 10.

⁷James O'Meara, "The Chinese in Early Days," *Overland Monthly*, May 1884, p. 477.

⁸Persia C. Campbell, *Chinese Coolie Emigration to Countries Within the British Empire*, 1923, p. 97; Watt Stewart, *Chinese Bondage in Peru*, 1951, pp. 55–76.

⁹Russell Conwell, *Why and How*, 1870, pp. 155–56.

¹⁰Cited by Chinn, *op. cit.*, p. 15, from Edward Lucatt, *Rovings in the Pacific from 1837*, vol. 2 (1851), p. 363.

¹¹Mary Roberts Coolidge, *Chinese Immigration*, 1909, p. 498.

¹²Chinn, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁴Ping Chiu, *Chinese Labor in California, 1850–1880*, 1963, p. 12.

¹⁵Charles Caldwell Dobie, *San Francisco's Chinatown*, 1936, p. 51.

¹⁶Paul Jacobs, Saul Landau, and Eve Pell, *To Serve the Devil*, *Colonials and Sojourners*, vol. 2, 1971, pp. 129–32.

¹⁷Him Mark Lai and Philip Choy, *Outline History of the Chinese in America*, 1972, p. 50.

¹⁸Gabriel Kolko, *Railroads and Regulations 1877–1916*, 1965, p. 1.

¹⁹Cited by Milton Meltzer, *The Chinese Americans*, 1980, pp. 14–15.

²⁰Lai, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

²¹Chiu, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

²²Lai, *op. cit.*, pp. 72–76.

²³Carey McWilliams, *Factories in the Field*, 1971, p. 71.

²⁴Chiu, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

²⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 89, 93.

²⁶Report of the Joint Special Committee to Investigate Chinese Immigration (44th Congress, 22nd Session, 1876–1877, Senate Report 689), p. 554.

²⁷Chiu, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

²⁸Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy*, 1971, p. 7.

²⁹Miriam Allen de Ford, *They Were San Franciscans*, 1941, pp. 195–96.

³⁰Report of the Joint Special Committee, *op. cit.*, p. 668.

³¹Reverend Otis Gibson, *The Chinese in America*, 1877, p. 400.

³²Cited in Joan B. Trauner, "The Chinese as Medical Scapegoats in San Francisco 1870–1905," *California History Magazine*, Spring 1978, p. 72.

³³Herbert Hill, "Anti-Oriental Agitation and the Rise of Working-

Class Racism," *Trans-Action Magazine*, January–February 1973, p. 45.

³⁴Coolidge, *op. cit.*, p. 504.

Chinese in the United States 1850–1910 (Coolidge, p. 501; and U.S. Census Reports)

Year	Estimated Chinese in U.S.	Estimated Chinese in Cal.
1852		25,000
1860	34,933	34,933
1870	63,199	49,277
1880	105,465	75,132
1890	107,488	72,472
1900	89,863	45,753
1910	71,531	36,248

Total U.S. Immigration 1861–1905 (Coolidge, p. 504)

Year	Total	% Chinese	% European & British No. Amer.
1861–70	2,377,279	2.7	95.8
1871–80	2,812,191	4.4	94
1881–90	5,246,613	1.2	97.5
1891–1900	3,687,564	0.4	96.6
1901–05	3,833,076	0.3	95.2

³⁵Hill, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

³⁶*Genthe*, *As I Remember*, p. 10.

³⁷Amelia Ransome Neville, *The Fantastic City*, 1932, p. 178.

³⁸*Genthe*, *As I Remember*, p. 59.

³⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 40–41.

⁴⁰Dorothea Lange, *The Making of a Documentary Photographer*, 1968, p. 28.

⁴¹*Genthe*, *As I Remember*, p. 41.

⁴²*Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁴³*Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁴⁴Arnold *Genthe*, "Rebellion in Photography," *Overland Monthly* 43, no. 2 (August 1901): 96.

⁴⁵*Genthe*, *As I Remember*, p. 35.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*

⁴⁷*Ibid.*

⁴⁸*Ibid.*

⁴⁹*Genthe*, *As I Remember*, pp. 34–35.

⁵⁰For two examples, see Peter Pollack, *The Pictorial History of Photography*, 1969, p. 312; and Jerry Patterson, "A Review of His Life and Work," in *Arnold Genthe 1869–1942* (exhibition catalogue, 1975), by the Staten Island Institute of Arts and Sciences, 1975, p. 2.

⁵¹Thomson, *China and Its People in Early Photographs* (Dover reprint, 24393–1, of *Illustrations of China and Its People*), introduction (no page number).

⁵²*Genthe*, *As I Remember*, p. 38.

⁵³William Webb and Robert A. Weinstein, *Dwellers at the Source: Southwestern Indian Photographs of A. C. Vroman, 1895–1904*, 1973, pp. 10–14.

⁵⁴*Genthe*, *As I Remember*, pp. 35–36.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 38–39.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁵⁸Dobie, *op. cit.*, p. 220.

⁵⁹*Genthe*, "Rebellion in Photography," p. 99.

⁶⁰Arnold *Genthe*, *Old Chinatown*, 1913, p. 199.

⁶¹*Genthe*, *As I Remember*, p. 43.

⁶²Christopher M. Lyman, *The Vanishing Race and Other Illusions: Photographs of Indians by Edward S. Curtis*, 1982, p. 53.