



PICTURING CHINATOWN

*Art and Orientalism
in San Francisco*

Anthony W. Lee



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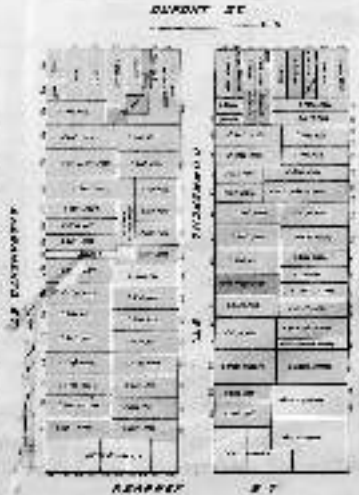
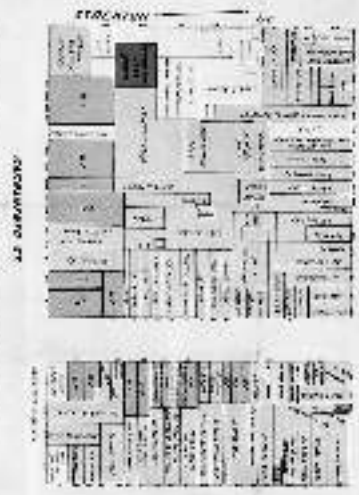
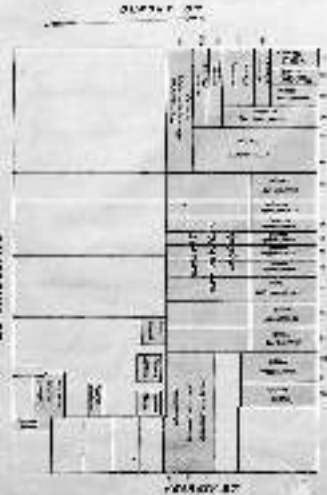
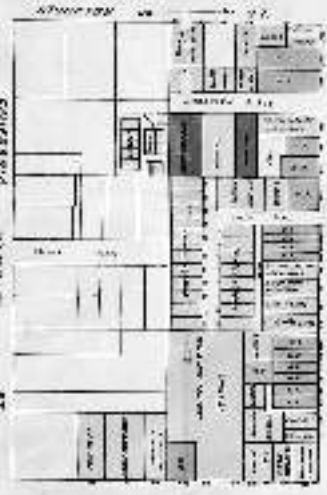
PICTURING CHINATOWN

**Official Map
of Chinatown
San Francisco**

Handwritten notes:
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 to the best of my
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 belief. It is not
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 purpose other than
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 it was prepared.
 I am not responsible
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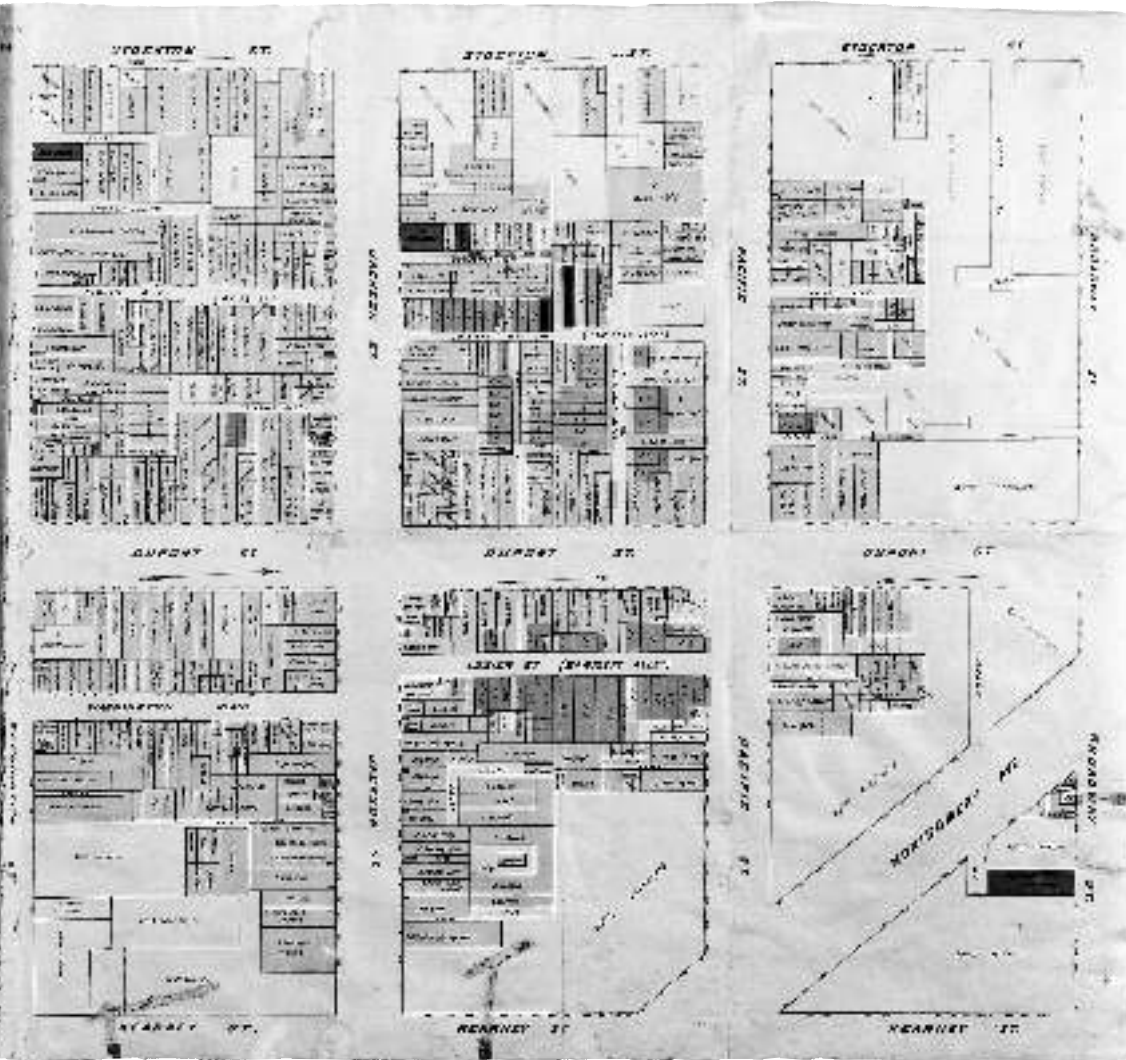
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Anthony W. Lee



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CONTENTS

	List of Illustrations	vii
	Acknowledgments	xiii
	Introduction	i
One	THE PLACE OF CHINATOWN	9
Two	PICTURESQUE CHINATOWN	59
Three	PHOTOGRAPHY ON THE STREETS	101
Four	PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE BOOKS	149
Five	REVOLUTIONARY ARTISTS	201
Six	THE FORBIDDEN CITY	237
	Postscript	287
	Notes	291
	Works Cited	325
	Index	337

ILLUSTRATIONS

PLATES *following page 224*

- 1 Theodore Wores, *New Year's Day in San Francisco Chinatown*, n.d.
- 2 Wores, *Chinese Fishmonger*, 1881
- 3 Wores, *Chinese Restaurant*, 1884
- 4 Edwin Deakin, *Study in Chinatown, San Francisco*, 1886
- 5 Laura Adams Armer, *The Old Regime*, ca. 1908
- 6 Yun Gee, *Portrait of Otis Oldfield*, 1927
- 7 Gee, *The Flute Player*, 1928
- 8 Gee, *San Francisco Chinatown*, 1927

FIGURES

- Official map of Chinatown in San Francisco, 1885 *frontispiece*
- I.1 Dorothea Lange, *White Angel Breadline, San Francisco*, 1933 2
 - I.2 Lange, *San Francisco Chinatown*, 1924 4
 - I.3 Unknown photographer, *Chinese Children, Holiday Attire*,
ca. 1900–1910 5
 - I.4 Dorothea Lange, *San Francisco Chinatown*, 1924 6
 - I.1 Samuel Francis Marryat, *San Francisco*, 1851 13
 - I.2 Unknown photographer, *View of San Francisco* (plate 4 of 6), 1853 15
 - I.3 George Fardon, *View down Sacramento Street*, 1856 16
 - I.4 Fardon, *View of the City from Stockton Street*, 1856 21
 - I.5 William Shew, untitled (portrait of a man), n.d. 22
 - I.6 George Fardon, *Fort Vigilance*, 1856 28
 - I.7 Unknown photographer, untitled (portrait of a man), n.d. 30
 - I.8 Lai Yong, untitled (portrait of a man), n.d. 31

-
- 1.9 Lawrence and Houseworth, *View among the Chinese on Sacramento St.*,
n.d. 34
- 1.10 Carleton Watkins, *Casa Grande, Arizona*, 1880 35
- 1.11 Herman Schoene, untitled (Chinatown buildings), n.d. 35
- 1.12 Carleton Watkins, *Chinese Quarter, Dupont and Sacramento Streets*,
n.d. 37
- 1.13 Isaiah West Taber, *Chinatown, S.F., Cal., Miss Cable's Class of Chinese Girls*,
n.d. 40
- 1.14 Taber, *Taber, Photographic Artist*, n.d. 43
- 1.15 Taber, *Street Scene, Chinatown, S.F., Cal.*, n.d. 44
- 1.16 Taber, *Chinese Tenement House*, n.d. 44
- 1.17 Studio of Isaiah West Taber, untitled (Taber in Chinatown), n.d. 45
- 1.18 Isaiah West Taber, *Clay Street Hill, Chinatown, San Francisco*, n.d. 47
- 1.19 Taber, *Dupont Street, Chinatown, San Francisco*, n.d. 48
- 1.20 Taber, *Chinese Butcher and Grocery Shop, Chinatown, S.F.*, n.d. 49
- 1.21 Taber, *Chinese Opium Den*, ca. 1886 51
- 1.22 Taber, *Shop in Chinatown, S.F., Cal.*, n.d. 52
- 1.23 Taber, *Chinese Butcher and Grocery Shop, Chinatown, S.F.*, n.d. 53
- 1.24 Taber, *Chinese Butcher and Grocery Shop, Chinatown, S.F.*, n.d. 53
- 1.25 Taber, *Chinese Butcher and Grocery Shop, Chinatown, S.F.*, n.d. 54
- 1.26 Taber, *Provision Market in Alley in Chinatown, San Francisco*, n.d. 55
- 2.1 Ernest Peixotto, untitled (from *Ten Drawings in Chinatown*), 1896 62
- 2.2 Paul Frenzeny, *A Holiday in Chinatown, San Francisco*, 1880 70
- 2.3 Joseph Becker, *A Street Scene in the Chinese Quarter of San Francisco*,
1875 71
- 2.4 T. de Thul, *The Massacre of the Chinese at Rock Springs, Wyoming*,
1885 76
- 2.5 George Keller, *The Coming Man*, 1881 76
- 2.6 Frank A. Namkivel, *The Ultimate Cause*, 1900 77
- 2.7 Theodore Wores, *In a Corner of My Studio*, ca. 1876–84 82
- 2.8 Edwin Deakin, *Studio of S. M. Brookes, San Francisco, Cal.*, ca. 1884 84
- 2.9 Deakin, *Chinatown, San Francisco*, 1885 89
- 2.10 Deakin, untitled (intersection in Chinatown), 1886 90
- 2.11 Deakin, *St. Louis Alley, Chinatown, S.F., New Year's Day*, 1886 92
- 2.12 Deakin, *New Year's Day in Chinatown, San Francisco*, 1886 93

- 2.13 Unknown photographer, untitled (Chinese parade), n.d. 98
- 3.1 Arnold Genthe, *Self-Portrait with Camera in Chinatown*, ca. 1898 102
- 3.2 Genthe, *No Likee*, ca. 1898 102
- 3.3 Charles Weidner, *The Cobbler*, 1900 107
- 3.4 Weidner, *Hitting the Pipe*, 1900 108
- 3.5 Hortense Shulze, untitled (Chinese children), ca. 1899 109
- 3.6 Unknown photographer (8000 Photographer), untitled (man in doorway),
n.d. 110
- 3.7 8000 Photographer, untitled (man in doorway), n.d. 110
- 3.8 8000 Photographer, untitled (man in doorway), n.d. 111
- 3.9 8000 Photographer, untitled (fishmonger), n.d. 111
- 3.10 8000 Photographer, untitled (sleeping man), n.d. 112
- 3.11 8000 Photographer, untitled (man standing), n.d. 112
- 3.12 8000 Photographer, untitled (butcher's shop), n.d. 113
- 3.13 Arnold Genthe, *Street of the Gamblers*, ca. 1898 119
- 3.14 Oscar Maurer, untitled (Chinatown street), 1898 120
- 3.15 Arnold Genthe, *A Slave Girl in Holiday Attire*, ca. 1898 128
- 3.16 Genthe, *A Slave Girl in Holiday Attire* (cropped), 1913
(orig. ca. 1898) 128
- 3.17 Genthe, *Children of High Class*, ca. 1898 130
- 3.18 Genthe, *The Alley*, ca. 1898 131
- 3.19 Laura Adams Armer, *Chinatown, San Francisco*, ca. 1911 134
- 3.20 Armer, untitled (men reading wall posters), ca. 1900 135
- 3.21 Armer, untitled (Chinatown street), ca. 1900 135
- 3.22 Armer, *Chinatown*, ca. 1900 135
- 3.23 D. H. Wulzen, *Corner of Dupont Street*, 1900 137
- 3.24 Wulzen, *Chinatown, Chinese Cobbler*, 1900 137
- 3.25 Wulzen, *Fortune Teller*, 1901 138
- 3.26 Wulzen, *Umbrella Repairman*, 1901 138
- 3.27 Wulzen, *Fish Market, Three Clerks*, 1901 139
- 3.28 Wulzen, *Fish Market, Two Men*, 1901 140
- 3.29 Arnold Genthe, *Fish Alley*, ca. 1898 141
- 3.30 D. H. Wulzen, *Fish Market, Two Men without Pigtales (Highbinders)*, 1901 142
- 3.31 Wulzen, *Fish Market, Three Men*, 1901 143
- 3.32 8000 Photographer, untitled (sidewalk stall), n.d. 146

-
- 4.1 Arnold Genthe, *Chinese Cook Grinning*, ca. 1898 158
- 4.2 Genthe, *A Prosperous Assemblage*, ca. 1898 158
- 4.3 Genthe, *Devil's Kitchen by Night*, ca. 1898 159
- 4.4 Genthe, *Rescued Slave Girls*, 1913 (orig. ca. 1898) 160
- 4.5 Louis Stellman, untitled (Chinatown speaker), ca. 1911 163
- 4.6 San Francisco police file photographs, 1910 164
- 4.7 Maynard Dixon, cover for *Sunset Magazine*, 1906 166
- 4.8 Louis Stellman, untitled (American and Chinese flags), ca. 1912 166
- 4.9 Stellman, untitled (outside *Young China's* offices), ca. 1912 167
- 4.10 Stellman, untitled (revolutionary telegraph operator), ca. 1911 168
- 4.11 Stellman, untitled (parade for the Republic of China), ca. 1911 168
- 4.12 Stellman, *A Parade Honoring the Republic of China*, ca. 1912 169
- 4.13 Unknown photographer, *Panama Pacific International Exposition*, 1915 169
- 4.14 Louis Stellman, untitled (Chinatown shop interior), ca. 1912 172
- 4.15 Stellman, untitled (roof storage), ca. 1912 173
- 4.16 Arnold Genthe, untitled (children and storeowner), ca. 1898 176
- 4.17 Genthe, *An Unsuspecting Victim*, ca. 1898 178
- 4.18 Genthe, page from *Old Chinatown: A Book of Pictures by Arnold Genthe*, 1913
(orig. ca. 1898) 179
- 4.19 Genthe, page from *Old Chinatown: A Book of Pictures by Arnold Genthe*, 1913
(orig. ca. 1898) 180
- 4.20 Louis Stellman, untitled (men reading wall posters), ca. 1913–15 183
- 4.21 Stellman, *For children the Sun Min season*, ca. 1908 183
- 4.22 Stellman, untitled (Chinatown alley), ca. 1908 184
- 4.23 P. Douglas Anderson, *A Corner in Chinatown, S.E.*, ca. 1915 185
- 4.24 Louis Stellman, untitled (shopkeeper), ca. 1910 186
- 4.25 Stellman, collage of Chinatown photographs, ca. 1913 189
- 4.26 Stellman, *Spofford Alley, Decorated for Moon Festival*, 1908 191
- 4.27 Stellman, untitled (street scene), ca. 1908 192
- 4.28 Stellman, *This crowd is reading an announcement of truce between the Hop Sing and
Bing Kung tongs*, 1908 193
- 4.29 Stellman, *Spofford Alley, Stronghold of the Revolutionists*, ca. 1913–15 194
- 4.30 Laura Adams Armer, *Chinatown, San Francisco*, ca. 1908 195
- 4.31 Louis Stellman, untitled (street corner), ca. 1913–15 196
- 4.32 Stellman, untitled (street corner), ca. 1913–15 197

5.1	Unknown photographer, <i>Chinese Revolutionary Artists' Club</i> , ca. 1927	202
5.2	Yun Gee, <i>Man in Red Chair</i> , 1926	202
5.3	Gee, <i>Steps</i> , 1926	203
5.4	Gee, <i>Man Writing</i> , 1927	204
5.5	Unknown artist, untitled (seated woman), ca. 1926	205
5.6	Yun Gee, <i>The Chinese Lion Is Aroused</i> , 1931	212
5.7	Unknown photographer, untitled (public burning of opium), ca. 1921	215
5.8	Yun Gee, <i>Head of Woman with Necklace</i> , 1926	219
5.9	Gee, <i>Landscape with Telephone Poles</i> , 1926	220
5.10	Gee, <i>The Blue Yun</i> , 1929	224
5.11	Unknown photographer, untitled (Chinatown studio portrait), ca. 1925	226
5.12	Yun Gee, <i>San Francisco Street Scene with Construction Workers</i> , 1926	228
5.13	Unknown photographer, <i>Yun Gee</i> , ca. 1927	229
5.14	Yun Gee, <i>Chinese Man in Hat</i> , 1928	231
5.15	Gee, <i>Houses on a Hill</i> , 1926	232
5.16	Unknown photographer, <i>Yun Gee</i> , ca. 1927	234
6.1	Unknown photographer, brochure cover for Forbidden City, n.d.	238
6.2	Unknown photographer, <i>Exotic Splendor, Forbidden City Interior</i> , n.d.	241
6.3	Unknown photographer, <i>Forbidden City Dressing Room</i> , n.d.	242
6.4	Unknown photographer, <i>The Kiss</i> , n.d.	243
6.5	Unknown photographer, <i>Tai Sings</i> , n.d.	244
6.6	Unknown photographer, <i>Larry Ching and Patron</i> , n.d.	245
6.7	Unknown photographer, <i>Charlie Low and Forbidden City Chorus Line</i> , n.d.	246
6.8	Unknown photographer, <i>Larry Ching and Charlie Low</i> , n.d.	246
6.9	Bruno Studios, <i>Paul Wing and Dorothy Toy</i> , n.d.	248
6.10	Unknown photographer, <i>Forbidden City Chorus Line</i> , n.d.	248
6.11	Hansel Mieth, <i>Chinese Six Companies, Stockton Street</i> , 1936	252
6.12	Mieth, <i>Chinese Man, San Francisco</i> , 1936	257
6.13	Mieth, <i>Sweat Shop, San Francisco Chinatown</i> , 1936	258
6.14	Mieth, <i>Chinatown, San Francisco</i> , 1936	258
6.15	José Moya del Piño, <i>Chinese Mother and Child</i> , 1933	259
6.16	Hansel Mieth, untitled (child eating), n.d.	260
6.17	Dorothea Lange, <i>School in Chinatown</i> , 1945	261

-
- 6.18 John Gutmann, *The Hand of Authority*, 1934 264
- 6.19 Gutmann, *Chinese Boy Looking at Display of Warplane Models*,
1938 266
- 6.20 Gutmann, *The Artist Lives Dangerously*, 1938 266
- 6.21 Gutmann, *Chinatown Boys Looking at Military Charts*, 1937 267
- 6.22 Hansel Mieth, *General Fang Chen Wu*, 1936 267
- 6.23 Mieth, *General Fang Chen Wu Is Speaking against Chang Kai-
shek*, 1936 268
- 6.24 Unknown photographer, *Forbidden Acres*, n.d. 270
- 6.25 Unknown photographer, *Charlie Low*, n.d. 271
- 6.26 Unknown photographer, *Charlie Low and the Forbidden City Chorus Line*,
n.d. 271
- 6.27 Unknown photographer, *Charlie Low as Grand Marshal*, n.d. 272
- 6.28 Unknown photographer, *Charlie Low and Forbidden City Dancers*,
n.d. 272
- 6.29 Unknown photographer, *'Tis a Great Day for the Irish*, n.d. 273
- 6.30 Unknown photographer, *Miss Chinatown*, n.d. 274
- 6.31 Unknown photographer, *Diane Shinn at Forbidden City*, n.d. 274
- 6.32 Unknown photographer, *Jack Mei Ling and Jade Ling*, n.d. 279
- 6.33 Romaine Studios, *Jade Ling*, n.d. 280
- 6.34 Unknown photographer, *Jack Mei Ling*, n.d. 281
- 6.35 Page from Forbidden City brochure, n.d. 282
- 6.36 Brochure cover for Andy Wong's Shangri-La, 1942 284

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INTRODUCTION

In her famous account of her conversion to documentary photography, Dorothea Lange remembered observing the depressing life on the streets from her studio window and suddenly feeling the need to take the camera off its tripod and down to the scene below. It happened one day in San Francisco in 1933:

I remember well standing at that one window and just watching the flow of life. Up from the waterfront it came to that particular corner, that junction of many different things. There was the financial district to the left, Chinatown straight ahead, and the Barbary Coast and the Italian town. The unemployed would drift up there, would stop, and I could just see they did not know where next. . . . The studio room was one flight up and I looked down as long as I could and then one day I said to myself, "I'd better make this happen," and that started me. I made a print and put it on the wall to see what reaction I would get, and I remember well the customary, common reaction was, "Yes, but what are you going to do with it?" I hadn't the slightest idea. . . . Things are very often apt to be regarded as a vehicle for making a name for yourself. But the way it happened with me, I was compelled to photograph as a direct response to what was around me.¹

The picture she shot and put on her wall, *White Angel Breadline, San Francisco* (fig. I.1), is now equally famous. She had wandered down to the waterfront and stood behind the mass of unemployed men who "did not know where next," and she captured something of the aimlessness she saw in them, in the sea of hats and the line of broad, flat shoulders. Although she professed that the picture was not an attempt to make her reputation, in fact it quickly did just that. In most accounts of her life and work, *White Angel Breadline, San Francisco* is a dramatic turning point: it changed Lange from an un-



I.1 Dorothea Lange, *White Angel Breadline*, San Francisco, 1933.
The Dorothea Lange Collection, Oakland Museum of
California, City of Oakland, Gift of Paul S. Taylor.

known society portraitist with a modest but busy studio on Montgomery Street into a recognized, celebrated photographer who devoted her work to liberal-reformist political and social programs.

As I say, this account of origins is famous, but it comes at a cost. It erases important biographical and social-historical detail. There is, for example, no mention of Lange's teacher, Arnold Genthe, from whom she had learned not only society portraiture but also much of what she knew about street photography. Three decades earlier, Genthe had walked the very same streets in San Francisco and turned his camera onto its flowing life. Lange had only recently helped reprint Genthe's street work from the original glass plates (and may even have accompanied him on his own return trip to San Francisco's streets in the late 1920s). Nor did Lange mention perhaps the most recognized precursor to a socially minded photography, Jacob Riis, whose work she surely knew. Riis's famous *How the Other Half Lives* (1890) had been a national best-seller, and Riis himself, until his death in 1914, had gone on speaking tours with his lantern slides of the New York poor in an effort to bring attention to their plight. A whole tradition of documentary-style photography had issued from him, developing in several permutations throughout the Progressive Era in work as varied as Lewis Hine's *Pittsburgh Survey* and Robert W. De Forest and Lawrence Veiller's *Tenement House Problem* (1903).² Lange, however, felt the street corner and its sad life rush in on her sensibilities all at once, and she was compelled to respond. There was no time to ruminate on a tradition of urban photography that might have informed her about what and how to photograph, or to think that photography, especially of a documentary sort, might have a set of conventions. What mattered most to her was the directness of her work, prompted by the appearance of the drifting unemployed. "I'm not aware photographically of having been influenced by anyone," she later told an interviewer.³

While there is no acknowledgment of photographic precedent, there is also no acknowledgment of a larger context in which to judge the Depression's worst effects. For if Lange was interested in the unemployed men who came to that street corner, she omitted, or was relatively unaware of, the people already living there in poverty. She certainly knew that they existed, as an earlier picture, *San Francisco Chinatown* (fig. I.2), taken from her studio window, suggests. In the street below, Chinese children, led by an elegantly dressed woman, march straight ahead toward their home in the heart of Chinatown. The streets are empty except for the woman and her charges—no cars on the road, no suggestion of unemployed men, no sense of alienation or aimlessness. By 1924, when the picture was taken, the Chinese American working classes had been feeling the sting of intense economic and political discrimination for nearly



I.2 Dorothea Lange, *San Francisco Chinatown*, 1924. The Dorothea Lange Collection, Oakland Museum of California, City of Oakland, Gift of Paul S. Taylor.

forty years. That year, the passage of yet another immigration act legally halted any further immigration and naturalization of the Chinese, in effect condemning Chinatown's existing working classes to slow suffocation. But Chinatown's inhabitants did not at first inspire a sense of social commitment in Lange. From the window above, the population in the streets below was merely a diversion from, or perhaps a complement to, her portrait work. She was especially interested in the children on whom so many painters and photographers had concentrated, transforming them into a veritable industry of genre scenes (fig. I.3). She occasionally spotted them on roofs and balconies opposite the studio and pointed the camera their way (fig. I.4). But she did not think that Chinatown had other subjects worth venturing out to capture. Only



I.3 Unknown photographer, *Chinese Children, Holiday Attire*, ca. 1900–1910. Courtesy of the Oakland Museum of California.

when the white working classes began to surge up from the stilled waterfront to crowd what was in fact the eastern edge of Chinatown did Lange feel the depth of economic and social deprivation behind the rows of drying laundry.

The narrative of Lange's turn to documentary work thus describes not only her conversion but also its historicity, in which the people of Chinatown did not at first signify. Furthermore, it suggests that the two omissions in her account—of photographic precedents and Chinatown's inhabitants—might actually be related. For in refusing to acknowledge that urban street pictures had their own photographic, even aesthetic conventions, Lange tacitly left the people of Chinatown virtually invisible except in highly conventionalized forms. It was initially difficult for her to think about



I.4 Dorothea Lange, *San Francisco Chinatown*, 1924. The Dorothea Lange Collection, Oakland Museum of California, City of Oakland, Gift of Paul S. Taylor.

the Chinese *outside* the aestheticized structure by which they had previously been pictured. Even in 1933 Chinatown was usually a setting for the dramas of someone else's life. It gained human significance when others—notably the white working classes, on the one hand, and photographers and painters, on the other—came to it in an attempt to find direction.

The role of San Francisco's Chinatown in the imaginations of photographers and painters had been nearly a century in the making, and Lange was only the latest of its

visitors who brought with them social and aesthetic assumptions about the place and its people. This book follows the course of that history of imaginings, from the quarter's beginnings around 1850 to a century later, around 1950, when the existing harsh immigration and exclusion laws were being repealed and Chinatown's population was slowly obtaining something verging on recognition of a legitimate place in the social order. The chapters are best described as a series of case studies, each devoted to the works of particular artists who, it seems to me, best exemplify the issues at stake in representing Chinatown: Chinese competition in the labor market, for example, or the strange "bachelor societies" that offered to other San Franciscans an entirely different sense of how men formed a community, or the development of tourism as the quarter's major industry. The artists are equally varied: some born and raised in San Francisco, others sojourners like the early Chinese themselves. Some are relatively familiar to any casual observer of California art: Genthe, the early survey photographer Carleton Watkins, the Bohemian Club painter Theodore Wores, and so on. Others are today more obscure: the journalist and photographer Louis Stellman, the late-nineteenth-century painter Edwin Deakin, the early studio photographer Isaiah West Taber, and others.

As this brief rundown of names suggests, most of the artists were not Chinese or Chinese Americans. With few (but important) exceptions—the radical painter Yun Gee and his Chinese Revolutionary Artists' Club, or the performers at the Forbidden City—this book has precious little to say about the representations of Chinatown by its actual inhabitants. My main concern is to describe how these paintings and photographs attempted to produce a suitable image of Chinatown and its population for those who lived elsewhere. What counted as "suitable" depended on the historical meanings attributed to racial and cultural difference. And so my tasks also include establishing more precisely what those meanings were, deciding how they were in dialogue with important political and social developments both inside and outside Chinatown, and suggesting how the paintings and photographs inflected and were in turn inflected by them.

"Desire" and "difference" are the two organizing motifs in the case studies. The words usually have somewhat muddled senses: for desire, the palpable, often intense longing or craving (sometimes invidious) for a person, place, or thing; for difference, the means and markers to distinguish those people, places, or things. The two words depend on each other for their force and meaning. Where they take on more precision is in their historical manifestations—how they were articulated, how they drove the

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