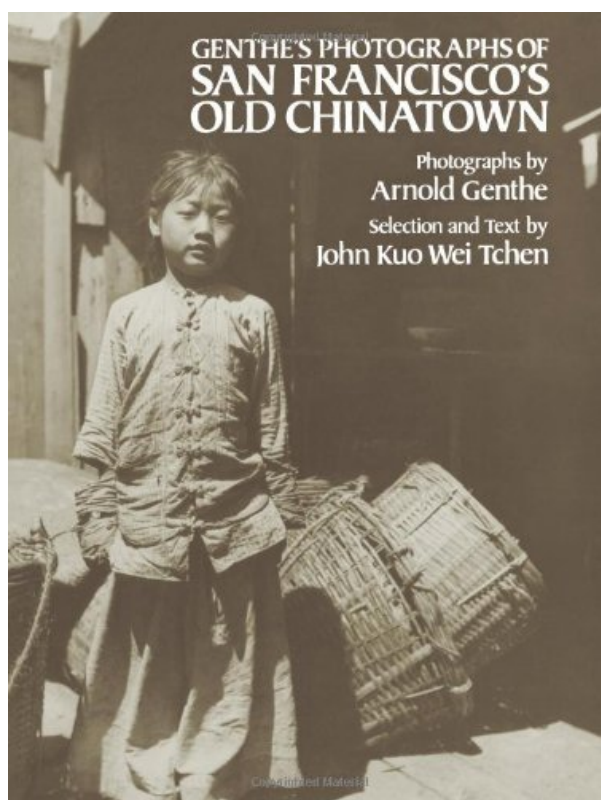
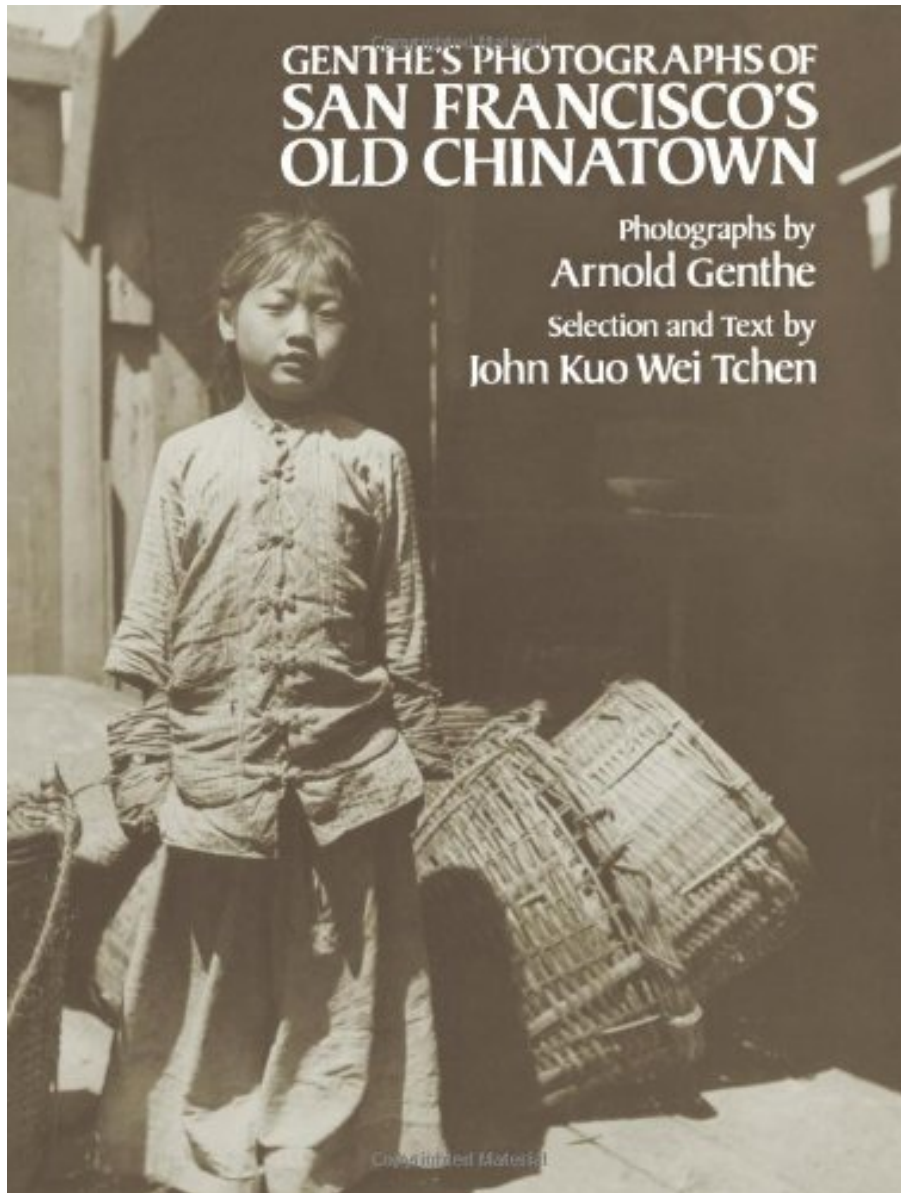


# **GENTHE'S PHOTOGRAPHS OF SAN FRANCISCO'S OLD CHINATOWN BY JOHN KUO WEI TCHEN**



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## **About the Author**

John Kuo Wei Tchen, author of "Genthe's Photographs of San Francisco's Old Chinatown" (1984), is cofounder and historian of the New York Chinatown History Project.

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# GENTHE'S PHOTOGRAPHS OF SAN FRANCISCO'S OLD CHINATOWN BY JOHN KUO WEI TCHEN PDF

In 1895, a cultured, well-educated young German named Arnold Genthe arrived in San Francisco as a tutor to the son of an aristocratic family. Almost immediately, Genthe was attracted by Chinatown, or "Tangrenbu" — a teeming ten-block area of crowded buildings, narrow streets, and exotic sights and sounds in the shadow of Nob Hill.

Fascinated by a living culture totally foreign to his experience, Genthe began to photograph Tangrenbu and its inhabitants. Today, these photographs (over 200 are known to exist) are the best visual documentary record of Chinatown at the turn of the century, offering priceless glimpses of the rich street life of the district before it was leveled by the great earthquake and fire of 1906.

Rediscover the lost world of old Chinatown in serene and enduring images of cobbled streets and bustling shops, street vendors and merchants, fish and vegetable markets, Devil's Kitchen, the Street of the Gamblers, Portsmouth Square and more. But most of all, enjoy distinctive candid portraits of the people of old Chinatown: a pipe-bowl member, a paper gatherer, itinerant peddlers, toy merchants, boys playing shuttlecock, a fortune-teller, a sword dancer, women and children in ornate holiday finery, an aged opium smoker and many other unaffected and revealing images.

Rich in detail and atmosphere, the photographs are complemented by historian John Tchen's informative and well-researched text, which outlines the turbulent history of Chinese-Americans in California, dispels numerous myths about Chinatown and its residents, and illuminates the role of Genthe's photographs in capturing the subtle flavor and texture of everyday life in the district before 1906.

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## Most helpful customer reviews

56 of 57 people found the following review helpful.

This is an excellent book

By Wayne Collier

Arnold Genthe was a German doctor of philosophy who arrived in San Francisco in 1895. He was fascinated

by the Chinese and used his skill as an amateur photographer to take over 200 photos of Chinatown's "Tangrenbu" section. These are valuable photographs as they depict Chinatown as it existed before the 1906 earthquake. Tangrenbu was the home of thousands of Chinese who were forced to live in this area due to de facto segregation and deep seated prejudice by San Franciscans. The Chinese were clannish and left few written records of their lives. The 1906 disaster destroyed whatever documents which may have existed so Genthe's pictures assume an importance beyond the mere fact of depicting persons and scenes.

Chinese had been living in San Francisco as early as 1838, a full ten years before gold was discovered at Sutter's Mill. Between 1838 and 1849, Chinese were men of means, generally merchants, and few in number. As San Francisco boomed with gold seekers, the city experienced a continuing shortage of workers who were needed to lay roadways, reclaim swampy land, make boots and shoes, and to perform hundreds of other tasks. Native Americans wouldn't cooperate and Mexican-Americans were investing their time in gold mining.

The solution was Chinese laborers as they had been used profitably on British colonial plantations in South America and the West Indies. Chinese merchants were employed as middlemen in the process of supplying the laborers. In a span of 30 years, hundreds of thousands of Chinese were lured onto British, American, and other western ships for the long trip across the Pacific Ocean. Conditions on these ships were often worse than on those of the African slave trade. The mortality rate ranged as high as 40%.

During the 1850s and 1860s, 80% of the Chinese in California were spread throughout the mining areas. They were principally used in large company owned mines and had little hope of holding personal mining claims. They were disliked by most independent miners because of their race and their association with the large mining interests. The Chinese miners were also subject to the Foreign Miner's Tax. As primary contributors, they accounted for 50% of California's entire state revenues from 1850 to 1870.

After the decline of mining, the building of railroads became the focus of merchant interests. Irish immigrants were hired by the Central Pacific (CP) to start construction near Sacramento but many refused the debilitating work of carving a few feet of granite daily from the Sierra Nevada mountain range. In 1865, the CP hired 50 Chinese laborers on a trial basis and told them to carve a road through the mountains.

Pleased with the results, 10,000 Chinese were hired within 3 years and drove roadbeds through and over the mountain ranges. In the severe winter of 1866, Chinese crews worked and lived underneath the snow. Avalanches were frequent and buried many Chinese workers. Two of them were found dead, buried under 50 feet of snow with shovels in their hands. An 1870 news article reported the shipment of 10 tons of bones, representing 1200 Chinese railroad workers being sent to China for burial. Chinese were into other areas of work including sewing, shoe shops, etc. By 1870, they formed one-fourth of the state's employed but only one-twelfth of its population.

Discriminatory laws were passed against the Chinese including exclusion acts, Chinese children were denied access to public schools and their parents were not allowed the rights granted to U. S. citizens. Tangrenbu or "Little China" ceased to exist after the 1906 earthquake. This proved fortuitous as all immigration records were destroyed making it impossible to determine which Chinese were in the United States illegally. For these newly created citizens, America now became a home instead of a prison.

This book contains 130 of the 200 Tangrenbu photographs in existence. Many of them have never been shown and a viewing makes it clear Genthe was enchanted with the innocence of children. He tended to take photos of special occasions in Chinatown, thus the ornate costuming in many of the prints. While Genthe did retouch some photos and erase objects from others, this does not detract from his body of work despite some fault finding by John Wei Tchen.

Genthe's photos are rich with the visual details of a bustling street life and of the affection shown by the Chinese for their families. This book provides a glimpse into a time and place long past and focuses a reader's attention on the plight of a unique people. After destruction of Old Chinatown, the Chinese embraced the 20th century. Occidental ways, dress, and customs transformed Little China from a forbidden section into a San Francisco tourist attraction.

This book lacks an index and one is sorely needed. Wei Tchen's extensive text adds enjoyment to the

photographs as he illuminates each picture with revealing and fascinating comments. He has supplied chapter notes and these are very informative. The bibliography is limited and focuses on Genthe's volume of work and 19th century photography.

This books does an excellent job of stressing the importance of the Chinese people to the present day eminence of California and to the western states of America.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful.

Shared History

By David Marxer

I must admit since my wife and I both have extended families living in Chinatown with which we stay on our many visits (staying in a hotel is a sin!) I have soft spot for these simple, occasionally crude, but powerful photographs. Seeing how our ancestors daily lived and knowing the racism and hatred they endured makes our problems seem trivial. To walk through the streets and alleys now, with these photographs forever in mind, grants us access to a vanished way of life.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

Glad to find copy of a very well-received publication

By Gimmy Park Li

Would recommend book as an historic photographic detail of San Francisco Chinatown BEFORE the April 17, 1906 Earthquake and Fire.

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