

PHOTOGRAPHY ON THE STREETS

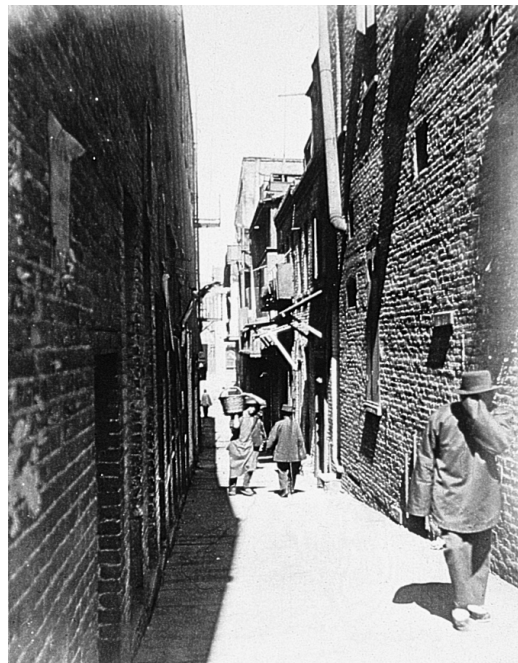
STANDING TALL ON SIDEWALK corners or near the entrances to Chinatown's buildings, the photographer Arnold Genthe waited for an opportune moment to take pictures (fig. 3.1). The process required, he admitted, "truly Christian patience"; for by the 1890s when Genthe took to the streets, the Chinese were not nearly as compliant to the photographer's wishes as they had been when Isaiah West Taber first visited. "Even the children are taught to run away from the black box," he observed,¹ though his own photograph would suggest quite the opposite. As pictured, the Chinese neither run nor hide but amble along the street as though Genthe were no threat at all. They are in fact more attentive to him, as he fumbles with his camera, than he is to them. But in general, they did not happily pose (fig. 3.2), still less patiently rearrange themselves into various configurations, as the butcher and grocers had once done for Taber. That moment of mutual effort and spontaneous trust between Chinese sitter and non-Chinese photographer had clearly passed. Kearney's anti-Chinese speeches on the sandlots, the series of anti-Chinese ordinances in the late 1870s, the attempts to burn down Chinatown in 1877, the legal and illegal efforts to enact the exclusion laws in the 1880s—including the 1882 Exclusion Act and Congress's 1888 amendment to abrogate the rights of Chinese laborers who had lived in San Francisco prior to the Exclusion Act's passage—all these had their effect on the tenor of daily relations between Chinese and non-Chinese.² If Genthe's photograph unintentionally suggests a buffer zone around the photographer and his companion—a physical distance carefully observed by the Chinese—then it is emblematic of the new state of relations.

But in truth, Genthe did not want the kind of choreographed pose that Taber often sought. His advice to those who wished to photograph Chinatown was predicated on a belief that the posed picture was a dreadful remnant of the commercial studio

- 3.1 Arnold Genthe, *Self-Portrait with Camera in Chinatown*, ca. 1898. Division of Prints and Photographs, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.



- 3.2 Arnold Genthe, *No Likee*, ca. 1898. Division of Prints and Photographs, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.



and did not begin to capture the “souls” of the Chinese. The canned poses are “commonplace, lifeless . . . [and together share] the same crudeness, the same falseness of values.”³ Instead, the visitor to Chinatown must photograph the Chinese without their knowledge; like a patient hunter, you must be prepared to “wait at a street corner for hours before you see a picture worth while taking.” Keep the camera primed to shoot, and “when the good moment has arrived, be ready and act quickly.” Most of all, “try and hide your satisfaction at having made a good photo without [the Chinese] knowing it. Do not poke your camera triumphantly into the faces of your unsuspecting victims,” for that would make future endeavors impossible.⁴ Instead, celebrate the successful hunt in pleasurable silence, and allow the work in the darkroom to be the exultant moment. To achieve these ends—masking the purposeful effort on the street, exposing the glass plates in stealth, and retrieving images for secret joy in the darkroom—Genthe advised new techniques for the avid cameraman. Learn how to take pictures without looking through the finder, he suggested, and even hide the camera in some other kind of box, if necessary. “It requires but little practice to become so familiar with the lens that one knows exactly how much one gets on the plate” without having to become a slave of the box.⁵ In the new photographic sensibility, tripods were obsolete; they not only brought too much attention to the work of picturing but also made the street seem like an extension of the inflexible studio space. The photographer must wield the camera like a limb and connect it with his eye almost symbiotically, as the photograph of Genthe tries to show. The crook of his hat and the tilt of his camera are joined in oblique rhythm. Man and camera point forward, out to the unpredictable streets and the unsuspecting subjects of their combined gaze. Nattily dressed, with starched collar, cuffed trousers, and pointed shoes, Genthe is every bit a man in his element, and his camera is no less an intimate companion on his journey than the stocky, bearded friend beside him. Unlike Taber’s camera (see fig. 1.17), Genthe’s is not a massive mechanical device to whose girth and spread he must defer, and one can imagine that the small Zeiss slips quietly into the folds of the capacious coat, enabling Genthe to stroll about the quarter without drawing undue attention to himself. “In fact,” Genthe claimed, “I think it is only the photographer who understands the art of making himself invisible who will obtain pictures in Chinatown that will have artistic value.”⁶

Genthe’s understanding of street photography had its precedents in the *flânerie* of members of the Bohemian Club, among whom he counted himself. But his insistence that the handheld camera had a specifically aesthetic potential was new: in its mobil-

ity and ease of attachment to the human body he saw “authentic” and artistic values that opposed the crudeness and falsity of the studio format. Photography was capable of being an artistic project when the camera’s mechanical immediacy converged with the photographer’s social savvy, when the little black box was a physical and psychic extension of its holder, and when pictures issued from the photographer’s careful regard of a resistant population. Moreover, because of the new camera’s powerful, even invasive, spontaneity, the photographer could ignore the conscious self-presentations of his sitters, in which the commercial portraitist traded, seeking out instead unconscious ones, on which “art” would be based.

But there were everywhere social and aesthetic slippages in such a project, especially in the photographer’s belief that his task was to represent the Chinese better than they could represent themselves. As the picture of Genthe testifies, capturing them unawares often meant playing hide-and-seek in a quarter where the tall, dapper Genthe was extremely conspicuous. It was instead the *fiction* of spontaneity and social agility that underwrote his project, though he never admitted to it. After all, most of his observations appeared in *Camera Craft*, a journal devoted to the amateur photographer who in all likelihood fumbled along Chinatown’s streets, camera more or less properly cloaked, with nothing resembling the anonymity and grace the debonair Genthe recommended.

Despite these contradictions, the new ambitions for photography seemed to make sense to the many San Franciscans who owned cameras. From the early 1890s to 1906, non-Chinese ventured into Chinatown with cameras in hand in enormous numbers; they have left us a more complete visual record of the quarter than in any other period prior to the earthquake. The enthusiastic picturing of Chinatown issued from a specific historical moment when unequal relations between Chinese and non-Chinese somehow permitted amateur photographers to believe that on those streets they could pursue a new aesthetic value for their craft. Gone was the pretense of the disinterested empirical survey; in its place was the conviction that in Chinatown photographers could explore unmediated Chinese subjectivities and their own self-conscious artistic expression, whose complexity and connections are traced by this chapter. My primary concern is to describe the historical bases of the most familiar photographic development to come out of the period, namely pictorialism. To that end, I compare what we think of as classic pictorial photography—pictures “presented in such a way as to impart to them a permanent value because of the poetic conception of the subject displayed in their rendering,” as Alfred Stieglitz famously explained⁷—with a whole

range of other pictures of Chinatown. And once again, the social needs and cultural proclivities of its visitors must be scrutinized in relation to the new political developments in Chinatown.

CALIFORNIA CLUBBERS

The California Camera Club was founded in San Francisco in April 1890. Unlike the exclusive Bohemian Club, the Camera Club was open to virtually anyone interested in photography, both the amateur and the professional. It lured many who belonged to the Bohemian Club, including Genthe when he arrived in the city in 1895, but it was decidedly craft-oriented, its social bonds built around a shared commitment to the camera's creative possibilities. By 1892 it had found a place within a wider network of photography clubs around the country, exchanging lantern slides with clubs in Baltimore, Newark, Yonkers, and Portland, for example; in one notable event, it displayed images from a club in London, reportedly to an enthusiastic crowd of 1,600.⁸ It arranged photography tours of Yosemite (by then no longer the domain of the professional cameramen Carleton Watkins and Eadweard Muybridge), established comfortable headquarters for its members, furnished lecture and demonstration rooms, built a large darkroom and a portrait studio, bought an enlarger (one important reason for Genthe's interest), subscribed to the burgeoning number of photography magazines, and in 1892 even put out its own journal, *Pacific Coast Photographer*, which had 2,000 subscribers before its first issue had been printed. The journal reported on camera and darkroom developments elsewhere, gave practical advice for working with the new papers and lenses, reprinted anecdotes from other club journals, and translated technical articles that had originally appeared in French, Spanish, and Italian. That year, the club held the first of a sporadic but long run of exhibitions.

The Camera Club was undeniably active, and its pursuits were mirrored in many cities throughout the country. The whole period is not unfairly characterized by the image of amateurs taking to the streets with cameras in tow; of darkrooms sprouting here and there in basements, attics, and garages; and of mass outings to the nearby countryside, where the "good California clubbers," as one unsympathetic observer called them, overwhelmed the landscape.⁹ The photography historian Margery Mann reports that in some towns—including Vacaville, just east of San Francisco—more than 10 percent of the *entire* population belonged to the local club.¹⁰ Whereas Taber's early picture of himself in Chinatown captured a rare sight (see fig. 1.17), Genthe's

reflected the experience of a generation of photographers who descended on the small quarter en masse.

Often, the sheer number of pictures produced by this horde of amateurs is given as a reason for the development of a separatist, more rarified photographic sensibility—Stieglitz's early pictorialism, as first evidenced in the photographs he displayed in his gallery and championed in *Camera Work*. But as Genthe's photographs and his own writings in *Camera Craft* suggest, in San Francisco the rise of photography as an art took place within the development of the more inclusive California Camera Club. To be sure, not all club members held similar attitudes about photography, nor was Genthe's sense of what constituted artistic value dominant—the club in fact supported competing ambitions for photography—but as was so often true of the art scene in the city, the developments were centralized and quickly institutionalized. The debates were undeniably heated and pointed: "There is a charge that those who are at present leading in the art movement have assumed a dictatorial position and arbitrarily determine what is or is not art photography," a member rankled, "[and] if such is the case it is most unfortunate, for we are not yet sufficiently advanced for any small coterie to set up rigid standards."¹¹ And thus it is worth considering Genthe's ideas about how to picture the Chinese and how to obtain art photography within the larger arena of argument and debate in the club so that we may understand the peculiar inflections.

One of the club's most active members, H. D'Arcy Power, summarized its dominant approach in an early essay for *Camera Craft*, the journal that soon became the most popular successor to *Pacific Coast Photographer*. "The man who chooses photography as his medium of art expression," he told members, "should seek to develop the *intrinsic* beauties of that medium and not make copies of some other."¹² Precisely what constituted photography's intrinsic beauties was not always clear, though the passionate amateur Power was sure what photography was not. The photographer should not denigrate his pictures by mimicking this watercolor style or that, should not print his negatives so as to conform to this languid charcoal style or that hard-edged drawing technique, and certainly should not fall prey to any of the passing fashions in oil painting (in 1890s San Francisco, either impressionism or tonalism). The sincere cameraman must explore the full range of lenses, play with lighting and focus, toy with papers and printing techniques—in accord, it would seem, with a modernist belief in the autonomy of the medium. But Power's claims are actually far more conservative. Club practice generally treated photography as a technical medium geared to an expanded but nonetheless empirical vision—to "likeness" as a goal, however that was construed—



3.3 Charles Weidner, *The Cobbler*, 1900. California Historical Society, San Francisco, FN-16513.

an approach that often resulted in the club's photographers exploring the camera's mechanical range but retaining the stock poses and compositions borrowed from their most important inheritance, the practices of the commercial studio.

In Charles Weidner's enormously popular *Cobbler* (fig. 3.3), for example, the studio portrait conventions are still in evidence. The flat studio backdrop has been reinterpreted as a flat doorway. The table that Bret Harte once complained of as the ubiquitous prop has been taken outdoors, now a simple wooden box, complete with small book as domestic adornment. Victorian bric-a-brac has been translated into the boots and slippers of the cobbler's trade. The heavy furniture and thick paneling of the studio decor are now the massive door jamb and metal railing of a storefront. Framed symmetrically by the vertical tracery and a series of rectangular motifs, the man is surrounded by the carefully arranged markers of the studio set that have been taken

3.4 Charles Weidner, *Hitting the Pipe*, 1900. California Historical Society, San Francisco, FN-16514.

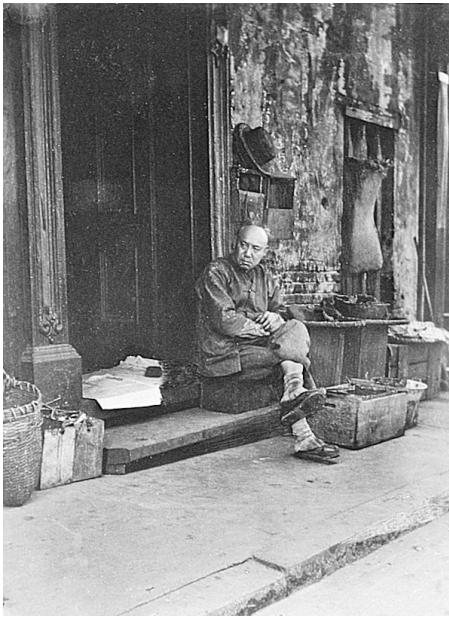


to the street and, ironically, conflated with the material conditions of the cobbler's actual practice. *The Cobbler* graced the frontispiece of *Camera Craft*'s inaugural issue, proposing to amateurs by its example a major new approach. Weidner offered copy prints on different papers with different printing techniques to club members, and the number of editions issued indicates that the membership looked carefully at the work.¹³ The visual rhetoric of *The Cobbler* was easily expanded, as in Weidner's equally popular *Hitting the Pipe* (fig. 3.4), with compositional details imported from the language of genre painting. But it also produced plodding imitations, as in a picture by Hortense Shulze (fig. 3.5) that was described by one member, without apparent irony, as the result of "infinite patience"¹⁴—a retort to Genthe's own claims.

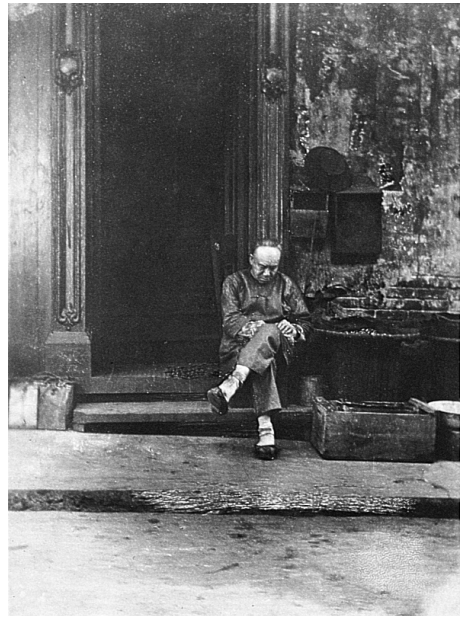


3.5 Hortense Shulze, untitled (Chinese children), ca. 1899.
California Historical Society, San Francisco, FN-25413.

While Weidner demonstrated Power's conservatism, an unknown photographer I will call the "8000 Photographer" (from the accession numbers given to his photographs at the California Historical Society) exemplified a more centrist position.¹⁵ His is a remarkable body of work, not only because of the sheer number and range of photographs of Chinatown he left but also because of his subtle, more self-conscious attitudes toward picturing the Chinese. A series of photographs (figs. 3.6 to 3.8) suggests that this photographer sometimes took Genthe's advice and hid his camera; there is no sense that his sitter was aware of the lens. Other photographs betray quite different street-level tactics (fig. 3.9), with a suggestion in the Chinese man's broad smile that the fishmonger and photographer were, if not friends, at least friendly. And still



3.6 Unknown photographer (8000 Photographer), untitled (man in doorway), n.d. California Historical Society, San Francisco, FN-08028.



3.7 8000 Photographer, untitled (man in doorway), n.d. California Historical Society, San Francisco, FN-08049.

others (figs. 3.10 and 3.11) suggest a photographer on the prowl, moving continuously up and down Chinatown's hills with a readied camera and a quick shutter. The 8000 Photographer preferred to work at a greater distance than Weidner and moved more rapidly about the quarter; unlike Shulze, he preferred oblique and asymmetrical views and avoided the formal language of portraiture; and unlike Genthe, he preferred to work alone. His pictures are more modest in content than the highly choreographed subjects in Weidner's or Shulze's work; indeed his images appear haphazardly structured, seemingly given over to chance encounters and restless strolls on the sidewalks. And though the photographs are usually organized around single working men, they neither attempt to be character studies, nor domesticate the street scene with studio handling, nor sentimentalize the men's labor, as Weidner and the bulk of Camera Club members preferred to do.

What are we to make of what was surely a peculiar photographic vision, given both the previous generation's way with the camera and Weidner's dominant example in



3.8 8000 Photographer, untitled (man in doorway), n.d. California Historical Society, San Francisco, FN-08025.

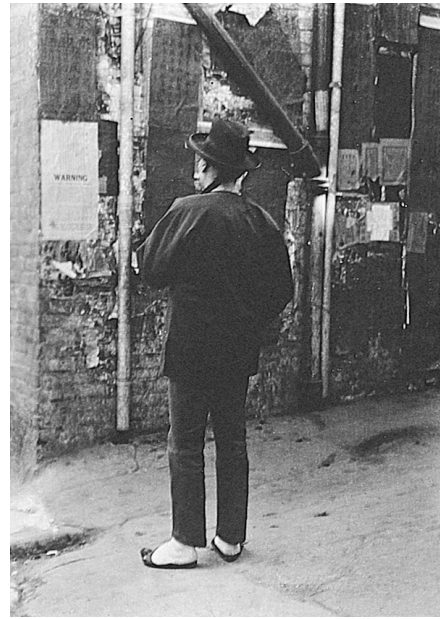


3.9 8000 Photographer, untitled (fishmonger), n.d. California Historical Society, San Francisco, FN-08026.

Camera Craft? What importance should we ascribe to it? We might see this as merely the work of an amateur who cannot follow the instructions in *Pacific Coast Photographer* and *Camera Craft*. But in fact, he demonstrates not ineptitude but independence: this photographer puts the advice about managing the lens and darkroom and the examples of composition to use in singular, often contradictory ways. He is strongly selective about his subject matter (rarely shooting women, children, or the elderly) and finds ways to register his physical proximity to the Chinese men. He carves a path through Chinatown's narrow side streets or alleys and resolutely avoids both Dupont Street and the crowds. He does not venture into the many restaurants featured in guide-books or the infamous brothels and dens seen as highlights by the slumming non-Chinese. He is not particularly interested in the holidays and festivals that so enraptured Wores, Deakin, and other members of the Bohemian Club. But whereas those painters preferred to avoid or abstract any street relations with the Chinese in their work, our photographer is not afraid of the awkward and informal moment with iso-



3.10 8000 Photographer, untitled (sleeping man), n.d. California Historical Society, San Francisco, FN-08031.



3.11 8000 Photographer, untitled (man standing), n.d. California Historical Society, San Francisco, FN-08056.

lated men and is happy to register his engagement with them. He has an eye for comic effect, often at the expense of the Chinese, but he does not shy away when confronted by Chinese self-possession, like that of the broad-smiling Chinese fishmonger. The buildings and sidewalks fill up his lens, but they produce an amazingly empty stage, in stark contrast to the precise geometric constructions of Watkins or the panoramic views of Taber. Indeed the yawning spaces around some of the men only serve to make uncertain their attachment to the complex life of the street. Compared with Weidner in *The Cobbler* (fig. 3.3), the 8000 Photographer in figure 3.10 is less concerned to organize clutter than to contrast forcefully if simply a sleeping man and goods on display. Compared with Weidner in *Hitting the Pipe* (fig. 3.4), the 8000 Photographer in figure 3.12 shows little interest in a picturesque view of dishevelment and prefers to compare boldly men and meat, human sociability at the left and the hanging produce at the right.



3.12 8000 Photographer, untitled (butcher's shop), n.d. California Historical Society, San Francisco, FN-08029.

Such pictures might tempt us to read social inflections into the comparison between men and goods and see a (social, political) symmetry being posited between the two. But there is no evidence that this photographer harbored that kind of critical sensibility. His emphasis seems rather to have been on measuring his distance, both physical and emotional, from his subjects, a theme apparently best worked out in simple, declarative contrasts between the men, their workaday surroundings, and himself. From the distant but strikingly nonpanoramic vantage offered by the photographs, we are constantly thrown back on our place of viewing and reminded of our lack of intimacy with the subjects of the camera's gaze, although (or indeed precisely because) so many of the men appear to be unaware of it. The Chinese quarter, still believed by most Camera Club members to be a miniature of China itself—in writing of Weidner's *Cobbler*, one called the photograph “one of the best Chinese character studies ever made . . . [and] intensely suggestive of the yellow kingdom”¹⁶—becomes less acces-

sible to our reach and less legible. Furthermore, the accumulation of pictures presents us with street life that exceeds the camera's ability to capture it, and we are left with small traces—a man sitting here, another standing there—that return us to a fragmented sense of life in Chinatown rather than the panoptic view favored by the early survey photographers or the self-contained portraits favored by Weidner and Shulze.

Although the 8000 Photographer may now appear reserved, self-conscious, and even metacritical in ways that he would not have claimed—a subject to which I will return at the chapter's end—he in fact represents a middle ground in the club's heated dialogue about artistic expression. The solipsism in his photographs suggests an atavistic survival of the kinds of attitudes toward, and attention paid to, the Chinese in some of Taber's best work, now offered in the much more ebullient atmosphere of the Camera Club. In such a climate their careful reserve and hesitancy have considerable rhetorical power. But while the 8000 Photographer preferred a less overtly confrontational stance against the conservative circle of the club, the same cannot be said of Genthe and his constituency. Their arguments against Power and Weidner are direct and unequivocal. As Genthe's friend and onetime studio mate Oscar Maurer announced in an essay: "Photographers themselves have been to blame because they established a standard of their own, a standard which compromised to a great extent the technique of photography with the spirit of the picture. The marvelous fidelity with which almost every subject can be reproduced by means of the lens, carried the photographic worker so far away from art that he has not learned his lesson."¹⁷ Harsh words, and the sting was felt. They set off a flurry of debate between the factions, resulting in a separate exhibition venue for photographers sympathetic to the more artistically minded Genthe and Maurer. Their goal, in opposition to that of Weidner's group, was set forth most clearly by Genthe. In his best-known essay, "Rebellion in Photography," he declared war on the lingering traces of commercial portraiture and the sham empiricism it proclaimed. That portraiture was full of fakery and misleading props: "Throne-like posing chairs, elaborately carved or made of papier-maché, wicker chairs, twisted in fanciful arabesques, broken columns, imitation rocks and marble balustrades . . . towering mountains, a library, a castle, an immense spider-web, a garden gate, the 'sad sea waves,' peaceful meadows, a staircase, the base of some massive columns, or simply dark clouds grouped around a light circular spot." Whereas Taber had once lauded such fantastic simulations, Genthe scorned them. They were emblematic of an insincerity matched only by the absurd theatrical poses forced on the sitter: "he is twisted into one of the twelve standard poses—more or less the-

atrical and grotesque—which the operator has in stock, and his head being securely fastened in a vise.” Though the resulting negative was inevitably of “poor quality,” it was printed “en bas relief” (a pointed jibe at Taber, who introduced and perfected the method) and mounted on thick cardboard “evidently to inspire confidence by the solidity of its support.” What photography needed instead was “something of the soul, the individuality of the sitter[;] . . . and furthermore the arrangement of lines and the distribution of lights and shades must be managed in such a way as to make a picture of fine artistic merit.”¹⁸

Some of Genthe’s and Maurer’s disenchantment with conventional portrait photography had a biographical basis, dating to their early experiences with the middle-class culture of “things” that commercial portraiture envisioned and celebrated. Genthe, the son of a Hamburg schoolmaster, was educated in the tradition-bound universities at Jena and Berlin.¹⁹ His early plan was to become, like his father, a teacher and scholar—in his case, a classicist and philologist. To this end he took a doctorate in philology at Jena, where he wrote on everything from a treatise on German slang to a translation of Goethe’s letters to a concordance of a tenth-century codex by Lucan. But his plans to lead a life of the mind were abruptly interrupted. In 1886, when Genthe was only seventeen, his father died; the aspiring young scholar was forced to give up a comfortable domestic habit of “fine and graceful living” for a “humble lodging . . . scantily furnished [with] a bed so short that I had to put a chair at the end.”²⁰ For nearly a decade after his father’s death, Genthe was, as one observer noted, “*declassé*, a young man of breeding, education, intelligence, and unusual good looks unexpectedly thrown back upon his personal qualities as his only capital.”²¹ Suddenly impoverished, his family took in an endless stream of boarders and he himself became a tutor for the spoiled children of the wealthy (his position when he arrived in San Francisco). The experience only hardened his disdain for the world of the “philisters,” as he called the bankers and bourgeois merchants who were landlords to the “noble body of students.”²² Genthe increasingly came to profess a belief already fostered by his upbringing: that personal value was internal, an ambiguous set of character traits most easily recognized by the refusal of crass materialism and middle-class ambition. One must instead pursue and cherish the “soul” of a man, as he claimed repeatedly. Little wonder that the overwrought Victorian details in the studio and the clutter in conventional portraiture so rankled him.

The historian Fritz Ringer calls the class of men to which Genthe belonged “mandarins,” a cultured elite whose status was based not on wealth but on education; they

formed a “new aristocracy of cultivation” whose domain was the German university.²³ The mandarins were ambivalent in their attachment to Germany’s increasingly powerful bourgeoisie, whose money and sons they needed but whose commercial values threatened (even as it structured) their own cherished sense of self. Although Maurer did not emerge from the same academic circles as Genthe, the mandarin attitudes were apparent in him as well. He was the son of German immigrants who, like the Genthes, were forced into a meager life when he was young; his early childhood was spent in the squalid tenement houses of New York City.²⁴ He arrived in San Francisco in 1886, nearly a decade before Genthe, when he was fifteen years old, and worked in a varnish and paint factory, all the while dreaming of a career in the arts. Like many other photographers of his generation, he built a darkroom in his home, took on freelance commercial assignments, and tried to obtain the same kind of corporate patronage that early photographers had used to launch their careers (taking pictures for the Southern Pacific Railroad in Mexico, for example). Although best known as one of only two West Coast photographers who in the early twentieth century belonged to Stieglitz’s Photo-Secession and showed at the 291 Gallery, he in fact had a much more substantial presence in the California Camera Club, which he joined in 1896.

Though many saw the club as a craft association, Maurer moved to transform it into a space to foster artistic and intellectual ambition. We find a distinction between artist and artisan underwriting the many directions in which he tried to push the club in its earliest years. He lobbied for an exhibition devoted exclusively to photography—the first of its kind in San Francisco—complete with the grandeur and critical attention usually reserved for salons of Bohemian Club paintings. He cajoled Robert Fletcher (the same Bohemian writer who recorded his travels with Ernest Peixotto in Chinatown) and the Mark Hopkins Institute of Art into financing a long-lived Photo Association. And he wrote articles for *Camera Craft* that were more explicitly (and to some contemporaries annoyingly) art-critical than practical. When the Camera Club finally took a more Weidner-like direction after years of internal dispute, Maurer used the sales of his pictures to escape San Francisco, making trips to Europe like an artist taking the grand tour. It is no surprise that he found a kindred spirit in Genthe. By the turn of the century, the two were renting studio space together on Sutter Street, southwest of Chinatown, and were beginning to rethink the goal of portraiture along specifically pictorialist lines.

To most observers of late-nineteenth-century photography, the pictorialist laments are familiar. The commercial photographer is unimaginative, the camera merely a me-

chanical device, the studio process an assembly line. The conventional portrait borrowed features external to the sitter to lend him or her character and social standing; its goal was to produce a compelling likeness of the sitter's face, situated, almost farcically, in a fantastic social setting. The photograph captured two intentions: that of the photographer, believing solely in his camera's relentless empiricism, and that of the sitter, believing misguidedly in the momentary power of self-representation. Pictorialism is regularly construed as an advance on these mundane studio practices, emphasizing instead the photographer's ability to impose his desires and vision on both the mechanism and the sitter. As Stieglitz wrote, pictorialism evolved out of photography's "apprenticeship" as "slave, hand-maid, or helping friend" to take "her place among her sister arts."²⁵ Pictorialists turned their backs on American studio precedents (Stieglitz famously claimed that his own work had no American forebears) and embraced the most recent painterly innovations (symbolism and impressionism) as sister arts. They equated blurred focus and darkroom manipulations with painterly facture and saw the application of pen and brush to prints as the photographic equivalent of pigment and brushwork on canvas.

Yet for all of pictorialism's professed refusal of the commercial practices of portrait photography, in San Francisco it actually found ways to rearticulate them. Rather than contest the basic intents of studio photography, Genthe's, Maurer's, and San Francisco's version of a "rebellion in photography" reconfigured them. It is striking how much the sitter's social ambitions and the camera's capacity to further them went unquestioned; how little the pictorialists, despite their mandarin origins, wished to unmask any of the sitter's or their own class pretensions; and how eager they were instead to find more "natural," more "conscientious" ways to picture a subject's "intrinsic" worth.²⁶ Rather than closely scrutinize the previous practices, they simply inverted them. Where Taber had relied on luxurious settings, Genthe sought "a simply furnished, dignified sitting room." Where Taber offered a variety of simulated backgrounds, Genthe had only "a plain light and dark ground." Where Taber used indiscriminate hard focus, Genthe got rid of "unimportant details with less sharpness." And where Taber put his sitters in formal, frontal poses, Genthe allowed them to take any stance they liked, often exposing his plates "while the sitter is talking or interested in something that is not connected with the camera."²⁷ Taber had called himself a professional photographer, but Genthe and Maurer insisted that they were amateurs—a false claim, strictly speaking, since Genthe earned most of his money from portrait photography and Maurer from commercial commissions, but the gist is clear. These various tactics in the studio and with

the camera were making photography into an artistic medium by removing the features too closely associated with commercial work. And though they developed as inversions of previous approaches to photography—and as such they reordered but did not fundamentally alter the terms of photography as a social practice—the resulting photographs were construed as belonging to the sister arts, as Stieglitz had claimed from afar, or to the same category as “a good drama, a piece of music or a well-written story; in fact, it may be perceived, on further consideration, that these principles are universal in their application,” as a *Camera Craft* member observed more locally.²⁸

The debates about the inheritance from commercial portraiture and the fundamental social bases of straight and pictorial work are integral to our narrative, for what began in portrait photography had effects elsewhere. An imaginative cameraman brought his sensibility to the streets. The unknowing sitter in the studio, whose portrait was taken without warning and whose soul was thus laid bare, became the Chinese man on the street who was the unsuspecting victim of Genthe’s hidden camera. At their first photography salon in 1901 (the same one arranged by Maurer), the pictorialists awarded Genthe grand prize not only for his collection of portraits but also for his many shots of Chinatown. As Maurer wrote, quite predictably, “Dr. Genthe’s Chinatown pictures are the result of much effort and [his] street scene [fig. 3.13] is the best picture of its class yet seen by the writer.”²⁹ Of course it was; suddenly there were competing camps of photographers whose pictures displayed more differences than similarities, more details to isolate and champion and just as many to excise and resist.

Such is the general landscape of the California Camera Club and such are the beliefs, in brief, of its most artistically minded members. What is more striking about the club is that so many of its most active members used their pictures of Chinatown to establish a dialogue with one another and to articulate their theoretical and practical differences. Maurer explained that he got started by reconfiguring a 4 × 5 camera in order to take it to the quarter in the secretive manner advocated by Genthe; he attached a “homemade drop shutter on the lens . . . [built a box for] glass plates . . . [and made] photographs of Chinatown” (fig. 3.14).³⁰ The photographers could be ironical about the sheer numbers in which they lurked about the quarter. A member claimed that at a parade in Chinatown “the snapping of camera shutters sounded like firecrackers on Fourth of July.” The sight must have bordered on the comic: the amateurs chased the dancing dragon through the streets, cornered it in an alley, and popped their shutters,



3.13 Arnold Genthe, *Street of the Gamblers*, ca. 1898. Division of Prints and Photographs, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

only to let the creature escape; they were forced to follow “the torturous peregrinations of the monster for blocks without obtaining a favorable opportunity to snap [again].”³¹ Yet they shot over a thousand plates, and at least one photo finisher ran out of supplies to develop that single day’s exposures.³² Such avid camera work puts the 8000 Photographer’s general reserve into relief, for he refused more ebullient practices. And it also provides the proper context for Genthe’s picture (see fig. 3.1) and his belief in the invisible photographer. There could be no invisibility on the streets, or only as much as one photographer might obtain when hidden in the mass of his fellow clubbers. To understand why the fiction of anonymity and invisibility still circulated, despite the considerable evidence to the contrary whenever photographers took to the streets, we must widen our own lens onto Chinatown at the turn of the century.



3.14 Oscar Maurer, untitled (Chinatown street), 1898. Oakland Museum of California, Museum Income Purchase Fund.

FIN-DE-SIÈCLE CHINATOWN

Between 1890 and 1906, Chinatown wore the effects of the 1882 legislation to exclude its inhabitants. The drop in population was dramatic. In 1890 the city counted close to 26,000 Chinese; by 1900 that count was below 14,000. In that same period, the entire population of the city grew by more than 100,000, leaving the Chinese only around 4 percent of the total, a far cry from the estimate that can be discerned in Mar-

ryat's early print (see fig. 1.1).³³ Their demographics began to change as well. Though still significant in number, Chinese male laborers became less dominant in Chinatown's overall population, since the 1882 Exclusion Act explicitly denied them entrance and made provisions instead for students, merchants, and their wives. The quarter was, if not middle-class, then at least losing some of its transient and working-class homosocial character. The crowded apartments became less so, and the residential hotels, once the province of single men, began to house more families. The proportion of Chinese living together because of immediate blood ties rather than clan, district, village, or surname ties steadily increased. By the turn of the century, entire floors in the hotels had been transformed into small family neighborhoods, with communal kitchens and baths, informal day care, and an extended system of chaperones.³⁴ With the decrease in working men, the astronomical differences in the ratio of men to women changed dramatically, from 27 to 1 in 1890 to a mere 4 to 1 in 1920. No longer could the Bohemians simply wander about the narrow buildings and up and down the flights of stairs and proclaim in good faith that the quarter was an undifferentiated mass of men in a drug-induced torpor. Genthe's photograph (see fig. 3.13) of an entirely masculine arena borrowed heavily from earlier descriptions of the crowded streets, structuring what he sought when venturing forth. One reason he went to Ross Alley, the plunging street in the photograph, was that its relative narrowness and high concentration of men milling about (it was lined with gambling houses and led to Sullivan's Alley and the brothels) gave the illusion of a quarter spilling over with idle, single men.

With their numbers and resources dwindling, some Chinese in Chinatown attempted to contest exclusion in the only way that had succeeded for other partisans: through legal and political battles at the city and state level.³⁵ The court cases represented perhaps the most direct Chinese attempts in the late nineteenth century to reverse legislation, and though most ended in failure (indeed, the state had little trouble in 1892 renewing the ten-year period for exclusion and in 1904 extending it indefinitely), they were a primary means by which the Chinese politicized their efforts in the public sphere. Organized labor had learned in the 1870s to advance class interests through legal and political machinery, and the Chinese quickly learned the lesson. Consider an argument offered in 1901 by Ho Yow, Chinese consul-general to San Francisco: "As to the Chinese working for cheaper wages than the whites, it is now generally known throughout the country that the Chinese demand higher wages than even the best of the white laboring classes." Hence, "this has very little effect on the labor market. We contend that the Chinese do a different class of work than the true

white laborers.”³⁶ Though the claim is odd and its logic unlikely to convince a skeptical legislature, Ho Yow found that it was best to view his fellow Chinese as a class of laborers in relation to the working classes *in total* and not compared to the Irish, Italians, and Mexicans, the traditional foils in various racialized arguments, separately distinguished from the Chinese. As for the claim that the Chinese tendency to send earnings to families in China only drew money away from the American market, the consul-general was equally attentive to the patterns of class consumption and the arguments about opening markets previously used by the builders of the transcontinental railroads: “by doing so [sending money overseas] their relatives and a certain class of Chinese in China become wealthy enough to consume or buy many of the luxuries and products from this country which are now beyond their knowledge and reach.”³⁷ In short, the Chinese can begin to act as a class under capitalism, the status that Denis Kearney’s Workingmen’s Party had sought for its members, including harboring an urban class’s most fervent dreams of advancing through consumption. “Money must circulate,” Ho Yow wrote, and allowing the Chinese to earn enough money to purchase commodities “as fast as you can supply them” only conformed to the logic of capital.³⁸

The Chinese emulation of working-class methods was one of the most significant features of an early shift in Chinatown to class politics, as racial claims were made in a manner conventionally linked to class debate. But we should also remain attentive to *who* advanced the claims (nearly always merchants and government officials) and what purposes those claims served not only in the political landscape at large but also in the tense local debates within Chinatown itself. The rhetorical flourish and ideological subtext of Ho Yow’s argument become most apparent when it is set against the brief description given above of Chinatown’s changing demographics. In picturing the Chinese in Chinatown as an undifferentiated class of laboring men, he skewed (or simply ignored) the actual shift in the quarter’s population, of which he was certainly aware: he had, after all, been sent to Chinatown to arbitrate between warring tongs (the often violent associations of single men who orchestrated much of the quarter’s illegal gambling and opium smuggling). The tongs fought over what little profit remained as the number of men available to patronize gambling houses and opium dens dropped. Ho Yow’s presence signaled an attempt to temper the tongs and redirect the quarter’s economy. These efforts would eventually lead to what now seems to us the “natural” condition of San Francisco’s Chinatown—a haven for tourists—a subject I will return to in chapter 4.

The significance of the consul-general's argument to our narrative is threefold. First, his article was accompanied by photographs by none other than Genthe, including the famous street scene (fig. 3.13) that was so enthusiastically praised by Maurer and salon judges. Second, it appeared in the *Overland Monthly*, the premier publication for Bohemian Club writers and artists. And third, it represented one side of a debate between the Chinese themselves about the character of Chinatown's population, in Ho Yow's eyes decidedly a laboring class rather than a radicalized constituency for a nationalist movement. The significance for Genthe and the Bohemian Club will be considered later. For now, we must view Chinatown in the context of much larger events unfolding.

One reason for the Chinese consul-general's insistence that Chinatown's population bordered on being trade unionist was that in the late 1890s two outlaw figures, Sun Yat-sen and Kang Youwei, were imagining the inhabitants as having a quite different quality. By the end of the decade, Sun, the revolutionary, and Kang, the reformist, had established bases of support in American Chinatowns from which to launch aggressive campaigns against the conservative Manchu rule in China. In 1898 the reformists staged an unsuccessful but bloody coup d'état; thousands died. It was only the latest flare-up in a half century of Guangdong-based violence against the Qing dynasty that had begun with the Taiping Rebellion, one of the bloodiest military uprisings in a century of bloody revolutions. The rebel army had surged north to Beijing, the seat of imperial rule, burning and destroying some 600 towns and cities along the way; and in the fourteen-year war that ensued, more than a million were killed.³⁹ After the defeat of the rebels in the 1850s, Qing repression—the White Terror—had been severe: mass executions in Guangdong, harsh sanctions levied on provincial ports, and the rebellion's surviving leaders driven into exile. Most fled to San Francisco and organized into quasi-political, semicriminal secret societies—the tongs—which in the three decades that followed operated as alternative fraternal organizations to the merchant-based Six Companies.

By the time of the 1898 coup d'état, when the reformers were defeated and the leaders of both the reformers and the revolutionaries were fleeing, San Francisco was a logical retreat. Disciples of Kang Youwei took refuge in Chinatown and, a few years later, so did Sun Yat-sen himself. There, they aligned themselves with Chinatown's more violent tongs, which they transformed into politicized parties and, practically

speaking, paramilitary suppliers; gained the sympathies of the quarter's most liberal newspapers; began a tour up and down the Pacific coast to raise money for a military rebellion; and eventually established the reformist Baohuanghui (Imperial Reform Party) and the radical Tongmenghui (United Covenant League),⁴⁰ both examined more fully in the next chapter. When Ho Yow entered the scene in 1901, he found a long-oppressed population in Chinatown whose energies and frustrations were suddenly being harnessed by charismatic young radicals. No wonder the Chinese consul-general went to the tongs to work his diplomacy; they represented not only the crucial social stratum on which the quarter's failing economy seemed to hinge but also the most avid recruits to two subversive, increasingly politicized war machines that were setting themselves against his own government.

Recent debates about the character of Chinatown's politics at the turn of the century center on this conflict-filled relationship between domestic priorities (the efforts to combat exclusion and its harsh effects) and nationalist issues (the debates among reformers, revolutionaries, and Qing monarchists).⁴¹ They are emblematic of a larger debate currently animating Asian American studies between scholars who emphasize the domestic and those who focus on the diasporic context of the history of the Chinese in this country. But national and international issues were often bound tightly together in a remarkable and productive way; the individual strands at that moment matter less than their binding and interdependencies. Sun Yat-sen could not have found support for his full-scale assault without attending to the local battles of San Francisco's immigrant population, and the laboring men of Chinatown could not have expected their own demands (distinct from those of the merchant and government classes) for proper and fair treatment in the workplace and in law to be heard unless they aligned themselves with a more violent international threat. Furthermore, the increasing radicalism of Chinatown's laboring population seriously affected the power balance in Chinatown itself. The merchant class's general support for the reformers rather than the revolutionaries clearly divided the loyalties of the quarter's population. It led to working-class and tong boycotts of Chinatown's stores that eventually drove several into bankruptcy. And with the failure of the 1898 coup—largely a reformist undertaking—the radicalized tongs sought to establish themselves as the legitimate voice of Chinatown's politics.⁴²

The marriage of domestic and mainland interests led to the famous 1905 Chinese boycott of American goods, the "most explosive manifestation of the new Chinese nationalism," as the historian Sucheng Chan describes it.⁴³ In that new moment of re-

solve, Chinese companies in Shanghai and Guangdong canceled orders for American goods to protest the treatment of the Chinese in America. The Qing government could not bring the companies to heel—a portent of things to come in 1911—and the Chinese in Chinatown, whose legal battles had nearly always ended in failure, found in this economic protest a new channel for their collective efforts. Those in the quarter who had often fought—the revolutionary tongs aligned with Sun Yat-sen, the reformist Baohuanghui, even the deeply conservative Chinese Christians—suddenly and briefly had a unified political consciousness. Even the conservative, normally pro-monarchist Six Companies had to take stock of Chinese working-class attitudes. Merchants whose businesses were hard hit by the exclusion laws, the boycotts, and the dwindling population broke ranks and eventually supported Sun. Their betrayal of the cause of monarchy throws into relief the urgency driving Ho Yow's arguments. His fantasy of a working class fulfilling the dream of capitalism ran up against the radicals' increasingly realistic ambitions to focus the energies of that same working class on collective political effort. In their vision of a fully autonomous China, the once separate drives to rescind exclusion and bring about a new nation-state necessarily had deep, abiding interconnections and drew energy from each other. At its center were, ironically enough, the very cobblers and fishmongers who looked so meek in pictures by Weidner, Genthe, and a whole generation of California Clubbers.

In 1897 the Bohemian Club welcomed a Qing dignitary to its twenty-fifth anniversary celebration. There are a number of accounts of that odd meeting, though none more vivid than the following: "[A] picturesque feature of the evening was the arrival, at ten o'clock, of Wu Ting Fang, the Chinese Minister Plenipotentiary and Ambassador Extraordinary, accompanied by thirteen members of his suite, all attired in rich robes. They were most cordially welcomed. . . . There was an unlooked for element of pleasure in the speech made by Minister Wu Ting Fang. He spoke entirely in English, without a trace of foreign accent, and his felicitous remarks provoked long applause."⁴⁴ There are no known photographs or paintings of this event—a strange lack, given the occasion and its participants—and one can only imagine how Wores or Deakin might have pictured the Ambassador Extraordinary and his entourage.

The event typifies the dual attention given the embattled Chinese by the Bohemians in the 1890s. While Fletcher and Peixotto could characterize their fantastic trips through Chinatown's underground as horrifyingly compelling, they could at virtually

the same moment entertain a Chinese dignitary in the elegant surroundings of the club and take pleasure in his marvelous English. They slummed with Chinese laborers and took tea with Chinese officials, and in this range of behavior, they adhered to an important distinction in the 1882 Exclusion Act between laboring and ruling (i.e., merchant and government) classes—one was to be denied and the other still embraced. The Bohemians' selective behavior had many causes—the developing liberal reformist attitudes of a Progressive generation within their ranks, their displaced anxiety at having been cornered by working-class demands, the social needs of this solipsistic community of men—but perhaps the most obvious and fundamental was the economic risk to the members should they ignore or dismiss Chinatown's merchants and China's officials. Their profitable trade agreements led them to construe a whole range of cultural and social differences, real and imagined, between the Chinese classes; and these putative differences gave the Bohemians a comparative framework to guide their views of Chinese merchants and laborers.

In the most simplistic formulations, the most laudable and ennobling Chinese characteristics—an ancient wisdom, a refined and discriminating aesthetic sense, a quick and agile philosophical mind, a devotion to intensely ritualized social graces, an ability to review behavior in (strikingly Christian) moral terms, and so on—were attributed to members of the merchant classes, while the long list of regrettable behaviors belonged solely to labor. These are long-standing features in arguments favoring control of the Chinese presence in the United States, familiar to most observers of nineteenth-century San Francisco, but they appeared most frequently after the Exclusion Act, in part to help justify the act's selectivity. The arguments were hardly more subtle than the generalizations I have listed. "A wealthy Chinaman will greet you with gracious suavity and graceful courtesy," James Buel wrote in 1882, "while the poor class acknowledge a salutation by an incomprehensible grin and frustration which betray their own acknowledged inferiority."⁴⁵ But the lamentable lower stratum should not encourage total exclusion; for, as the Bohemian William Bode argued, even if "this section [Chinatown] be as wicked and as malodorous as the reports make it to be [and] the viscious [*sic*] be as thick and the taste for the meretricious and artificial be as apparently uppermost," the quarter should be protected because of the social and moral potential of its merchant classes, "the lovers of goodness . . . the supporters and seekers for what is pure and right."⁴⁶

In that polarized world in which Chinese merchants were suave and courteous and Chinese laborers were wicked and malodorous, the views of the Bohemians became

closely aligned with the picture of the Chinese in Chinatown suggested by the Qing government. Both flattened out the complexity and ignored the agency of Chinese working men in the interests of upholding an economic and social status quo. The connections between these two ruling-class attitudes were sometimes explicit: though the Bohemians may not have recorded the grand entrance of Wu Ting Fang at the club's anniversary celebration, they certainly lent their energies to the efforts of his son-in-law, the same Ho Yow whose writings Genthe illustrated with his photographs (e.g., fig. 3.13). As pictured by Genthe, the crush of single men on Ross Alley only furthered Ho Yow's argument about Chinatown's working-class character. During Genthe's initial years in San Francisco, which corresponded roughly to the period between Wu Ting Fang's grand visit to the Bohemian Club and Ho Yow's departure from the United States five years later, the *Overland Monthly* published dozens of articles, fictional accounts, poems, and brief anecdotes corroborating and embellishing the consul-general's views of his own people.⁴⁷ With new friends in high places, Ho Yow continued to patronize the Bohemian Club, raised money for the nearly bankrupt University of the Pacific, and founded a hospital in Chinatown that he staffed with non-Chinese physicians. Despite the obvious presence of Sun and the revolutionary tongs, club members could view the consul-general as the only Chinese figure worth attending to, the only man who brought "new ideas of China and its people."⁴⁸ Genthe, like most of the Bohemians, did not dispute the claim. (Genthe's conflicted but nonetheless consistent loyalties to a stable, moneyed class and to his German mandarin sensibility found accommodation in the Bohemian Club, itself an odd mix of the aristocracies of wealth and cultivation. The early debates in the club between true and false bohemians had given way by the 1890s to a more corporate sensibility, as more and more of the club's members were social aspirants. This is not to say that the debates completely vanished; they were far too integral to the very structure and development of the club and, indeed, to San Francisco's version of bohemianism. Thus one artist member criticized an 1890s effort to write a "history" of the club by none other than the ubiquitous Robert Fletcher, dismissing the *Annals of the Bohemian Club* as "two pretentious volumes" that "reflect only faintly the color and character of the remarkable entertainments which the early members of the club enjoyed."⁴⁹ Although the image of a joyous and unadulterated bohemianism was still being cherished, by the 1890s it clearly was more nostalgic than real. Some did try to capture it, in cultural pursuits quite distinct from the club itself, and one can view the remarkable flourishing of literary magazines—the famous *Lark*, for example—and the establishment of



3.15 Arnold Genthe, *A Slave Girl in Holiday Attire*, ca. 1898. Division of Prints and Photographs, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.



3.16 Arnold Genthe, *A Slave Girl in Holiday Attire* (cropped), 1913 (orig. ca. 1898).

new art colonies in Monterey and Carmel at the turn of the century as attempts to reinvigorate a notion of Bohemia outside the club's luxurious environs. But those like Genthe who remained active members came increasingly to accept its patriarchal structure and equally patriarchal view of San Francisco.)

Genthe's photographs suggest how the political debates between the Chinese in Chinatown provided a new framework for constructing an appropriate attitude toward the place and its people. To the Bohemians who regularly dealt with the quarter—walked its streets, bought and sold its goods, traded for its imports, made photographs of it—the Chinese had offered a way to resolve the contradictions in the selectivity of the Exclusion Act. The photographer never sought out details in Chinatown that might contradict Ho Yow's worldview. To the contrary, his many pictures of lavishly dressed Chinese women (fig. 3.15) and children were almost always separated from his pic-

tures of Chinese working men, as if the two groups could not possibly be conceived together when he went in search of the “right” image. He even cropped them for publication (fig. 3.16) when reality happened to intrude.

PICTORIALISM ON THE STREETS

We face an important convergence of discourses in the development of photography as an art in San Francisco. The California Camera Club contained (articulated, promoted, institutionalized) competing arguments about the nature of photography, the crucial aspect being the acceptance, rejection, or reinterpretation of the previous generation’s studio practices. The Bohemian Club continued to justify forays into Chinatown, encouraging the purposeful loitering and looking so fundamental to *flânerie* and to the articulation of class and cultured sensibility; and the club’s more direct investment (economic, political, legislative) in the quarter gave rise to largely imaginary distinctions between the classes of Chinese, thereby creating an iconography of racial character that was reinforced by separate but compatible arguments of Qing officials. Chinatown itself was rent by weighty concerns, as proponents of domestic and nationalist politics fought over the image and for the loyalties of its dramatically changing population. Moreover, the Chinese foray into politics in San Francisco was shaped by conflicting forces, reflecting the imprint of American working-class politics, the conservative efforts of Chinese merchants and monarchists, and the revolutionary demands of Guangdong radicals. And finally, the most advanced photographers in the city wanted to transform their craft into a medium of high expression, based on a disavowal of the crass organization of modern life and material things and on a reconfiguration—an aestheticization—of conservative social arrangements. One is tempted to say that pictorialism *is* the convergence and articulation of these developments. I do not think that describing pictorialism in these terms somehow robs it of innovation or ingenuity, or reduces it to an overdetermined product of related historical forces; but it suggests that pictorialism’s characteristic formal and iconographic features, including its sometimes breathless range of subjects and variable stylistic effects, is in fact framed by factors of specific social and political origin. Both Genthe’s work and that of his immediate followers provide sufficient evidence to support this claim.

To insist, for example, that the Chinese in Chinatown possessed unconscious traits that could be readily photographed was to insist on a structure of racial character based

3.17 Arnold Genthe, *Children of High Class*, ca. 1898. Division of Prints and Photographs, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.



in every place but the bodies of the Chinese men: it derived from an aesthetic project that was mapped over the social habits of the Bohemians, the debates about portraiture in the Camera Club, the beliefs in intrinsic worth held by German mandarins, and the status of Chinese merchants and laborers as variously claimed by ministers, revolutionaries, and exclusionists. The combination goes some way toward explaining the logic of Genthe's pictorial choices and deciphering his famous but inscrutable dictum to photograph Chinese "souls." Compare his *Children of High Class* (fig. 3.17) and *The Alley* (fig. 3.18). They present nearly identical subjects—men leading children through Chinatown's streets—but differ substantially in who is pictured and where Genthe stood in the quarter to open his lens. In the first, the wealthy merchant Lew Kan walks his two sons down Sacramento Street, the sloping east-west street filled with merchants' shops that runs perpendicular to the central Dupont Street thoroughfare (Lew Kan had his own shop on the opposite side of Sacramento, off-frame).⁵⁰



3.18 Arnold Genthe, *The Alley*, ca. 1898.
Division of Prints and Photographs,
Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

In the second, an anonymous laborer escorts a young boy and girl through Ross Alley, the narrow north-south passage that the photographer had helped make infamous in his better-known *Street of the Gamblers* (see fig. 3.13); here the opposite end is pictured. Thus one photograph is structured by the meanings ascribed to the merchant class and the other by those ascribed to labor and underground Chinatown; the first by ideological and political designs associated with the conservative Six Companies, and the other by the violence and rebellion marking the tongs. And though the pictures are not simply iconographies or, even more reductively, mere illustrations of class differences, the pictorial differences are clearly inflected by competing social and political attitudes about the nature of class in Chinatown.

The photographer saw Lew Kan and his sons as best understood when completely separated from the crowd, and Genthe waited until the trio had distanced themselves from the mass of non-Chinese on Dupont before opening his lens. A Chinese laborer

carrying baskets apparently came too close for comfort (he is the silhouette behind the boy at right), and back in the darkroom, Genthe simply scratched him from the scene. More important, in picturing the merchant, Genthe registered Lew Kan's substantial size (he was over six feet tall) and the elegant outfits he provided his sons. To this end, Genthe evened the dark tones and highlighted the boys' satin clothes into bright whites, though the overhanging eaves created a more modulating light. The decorative mushroom designs on the clothes are accentuated, suggesting a holiday atmosphere, and the boys themselves exude a singular brilliance, quite in contrast to the street's duskier tones. The rhythm of lanterns and overhangs, the repetition of banisters and door jambs, the plunging lines in the pavement—all these bring Lew Kan and his sons tumbling toward us, giving their determined walk down Sacramento a compositional correlative. The sense of the photograph's being an elegant portrait of a proud father and his doted-on sons is achieved by Genthe's careful selection of complementary angles, modulation of gray tones and stunning whites, and excision of distracting details, all viewed as techniques appropriate for imagining a merchant on the streets. But in the more awkward *Alley*, the anonymous laborer and his charges step out of thick darkness into a harsh light; they are shown in the thrall of the blinding street, absorbed by its atmosphere. Unlike Lew Kan and his sons, who cut a path down the sidewalk and structure the scene around them, this trio is captured and immobilized in a rectangular framework formed by the harsh contrasts of light and dark tones and the vertical and horizontal framework of wooden post, brick siding, and cobblestone road. Their walk is frozen, ciphered, transformed into a facet of the scene rather than being an activity in itself, and Genthe was happy to keep the figures at a distance, making them and their stroll indistinct. The alley is crowded—the horse and carriage force pedestrians to the side—and the walls are littered with deteriorating paper and a mosaic of trash. The figures behind loom over the figures in the foreground, and the canopies pressing down overhead make the scene claustrophobic and even hallucinatory.

The people of Ross Alley did not always suggest these pictorial choices to Genthe, as can be seen in his *Street of the Gamblers* (see fig. 3.13). There, the scene is far less awkwardly lit, far more structured and geometrically composed. A mass of men amble up and down the narrow street; though there are many more of them than can be seen in *The Alley*, the space is more generous, the activity less convulsed, and the passage between foreground and background more smoothly imagined. Some of the men read the signs posted on the walls; others take a smoke or exchange passing glances. They are altogether substantial presences—figures who belong to this part of the quar-

ter and its daily rhythms, and are so pictured. Despite their anonymity, the men are open to the photographer's precise scrutiny; we note the figure deep in the alley who looks poker-faced straight at the lens, or the one just behind him whose face is lit and brows deeply furrowed. *Street of the Gamblers*, though invidious in overtone, is built out of a rich narrative and a complex descriptiveness taken from the discourses that gave rise to pictorialism; it *exemplified* their convergence, which gave Genthe his sense of the "right moment" to picture when it came to Chinese workers near the gambling houses and brothels. *The Alley*, in contrast, is a more ambiguous and contradictory scene whose generic title only emphasizes the difficulty that Genthe had in describing what he saw. And thus the two differ in how they do or do not conform to a structure of meaning that resolved the appearance of the Chinese on Chinatown's streets. Compared to the men in *Street of the Gamblers*, the odd trio of man and children in *The Alley* stand (physically but also metaphorically) at the alley's edge. Unlike the wealthy Lew Kan on Sacramento Street, whose status as a merchant gave him the privilege of a wife and sons (and thus the semblance of family life), they interrupt the constricted meanings ascribed to an abject Chinese working class and question the nearly unbridgeable differences imagined to exist between merchants and laborers.

Genthe's pictures spawned a number of imitators, and the photographs we regard today as typical of San Francisco pictorialism were in fact based on readings (and sometimes misreadings) of his work. Among the more successful was the work of Laura Adams Armer, best known for the children's books that she wrote and illustrated with her husband. But her early career was as a pictorial photographer, and she first won fame with images of Chinatown. In *Chinatown, San Francisco* (fig. 3.19), we see what have since become the defining features of her and San Francisco pictorialism's style—the blurry focus; the soft sepia tones; the subtle, graduated transition from light to dark; the hazy, dreamy atmosphere; the languid diffusion of daylight; the sense of physical distance from the figures; the invitation to make metaphors out of street subjects. Such a picture seems to answer Stieglitz's general plea for beautiful pictures built out of "taste and sense for composition and tone" and for works that catered not to "popular taste [but to] the cultivated and refined."⁵¹

To achieve these effects, Armer sometimes surgically removed "extraneous" content from her pictures in favor of overtly formal details, as one series clearly demonstrates. Near the corner of Dupont and Clay Streets, Armer photographed men read-

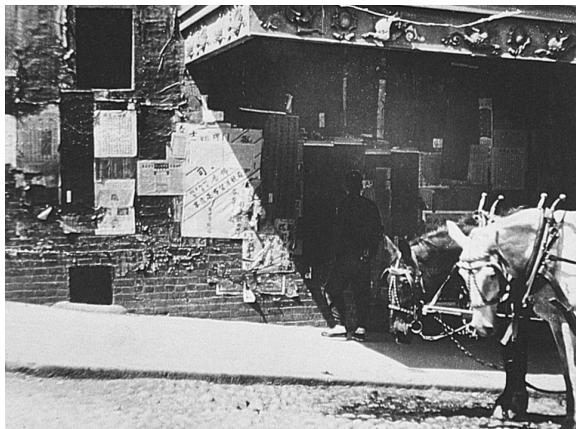
3.19 Laura Adams Armer, *Chinatown*,
San Francisco, ca. 1911. California
 Historical Society, San Francisco.



ing wall posters (fig. 3.20). Most notices were posted by the tongs and the Six Companies as (sometimes competing) public announcements; a few, like the posting around the corner of the brick building, were those of enterprising entrepreneurs inviting the quarter's visitors to taste "a romance of the underworld." The whole site lent itself to photographers wishing to observe men who congregated and stood still for long periods of time, and Armer returned repeatedly. At a later date, she made two additional images (fig. 3.21 and an enlargement, fig. 3.22) that focus our attention on a smaller portion of the original scene and shift our position downhill, away from the distracting posters and the social activity in front of them. Whereas figure 3.20 remains a disjointed, somewhat haphazard composition, given over to the men's interests on the



3.20 Laura Adams Armer, untitled
(men reading wall posters), ca.
1900. California Historical
Society, San Francisco, Herman
S. Hoyt Collection, GN-02161.



3.21 Laura Adams Armer, untitled
(Chinatown street), ca. 1900.
California Historical Society,
San Francisco, FN-23386.

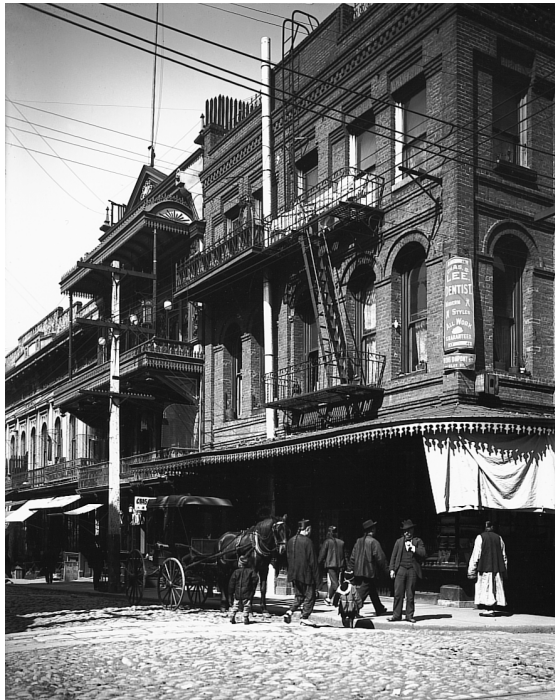


3.22 Laura Adams Armer, *Chinatown*,
ca. 1900. California Historical
Society, San Francisco, FN-26823.

street, figure 3.21 centers on a series of contrasts—note the raking light and deep shadow, the ways in which light and dark are thematized in the horses, and the play of geometric forms on the brick wall and in the overhead awning. The third picture pushes the scene even closer to us, so that we are hardly aware of our distance from across the street and the jutting expanse of the awning above; the men have virtually disappeared, with the exception of one figure's ghostly lower half. Gone is all evidence of "reading"—either the men's of the texts on the wall or our own of the men themselves—and that elimination is something of a metaphor for the excision of iconographic content from the picture. Of the three pictures, it was the last that Armer chose to manipulate carefully in the darkroom and exhibit as *Chinatown*. In the sequence of pictures, the scene becomes increasingly removed from the actual activity of the street—the social and textual meanings of the corner to the men, the public forum that it suggested, the contest of Chinese authority and class that it signaled—that had brought the men and Armer to Dupont and Clay in the first place. The beautiful picture made forms out of social life and transformed the street into a deracinated object whose surface delights.

While the Camera Club eventually took a more Weidner-like approach to photography, the example of Armer suggests that Genthe's and Maurer's attitudes had also found wide acceptance. When the two men broke from the club, they took with them a mass of sympathetic followers, though unlike Armer all did not pursue the overtly aestheticizing path. Consider the pictures of D. H. Wulzen, a friend, companion, and onetime studio mate of Genthe's. Wulzen was nothing if not a dogged recycler of previous photographic practices, and some of his photographs plainly suggest a rather programmatic attempt to work through the major examples as he inherited and understood them. *Corner of Dupont Street* (fig. 3.23) has all the markings of Watkins's early pictures (see fig. 1.12). *Chinatown, Chinese Cobbler* (fig. 3.24) is dependent on the example of Weidner's *Cobbler* (see fig. 3.3). *Fortune Teller* (fig. 3.25) and *Umbrella Repairman* (fig. 3.26) suggest that our anonymous 8000 Photographer circulated his pictures at least to Camera Club members, and that some (like Wulzen) responded in kind. *Fish Market, Three Clerks* (fig. 3.27) reaches far back to the example of Taber in its close but disarming attention to men at their trades. But these pictures are fairly atypical of Wulzen's mature work, which grapples almost exclusively with the towering examples provided by his good friend Genthe.

Like Genthe and Maurer, Wulzen had German parents; but unlike his two friends, he was actually born in San Francisco, in 1862.⁵² Wulzen spent most of his days as a



3.23 D. H. Wulzen, *Corner of Dupont Street*, 1900. San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.

3.24 D. H. Wulzen, *Chinatown, Chinese Cobbler*, 1900. San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.







- 3.25 *Opposite, above:* D. H. Wulzen, *Fortune Teller*, 1901. San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.
- 3.26 *Opposite:* D. H. Wulzen, *Umbrella Repairman*, 1901. San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.
- 3.27 *Above:* D. H. Wulzen, *Fish Market, Three Clerks*, 1901. San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.

pharmacist, beginning his practice in 1886 with a shop in what is now the Castro district of town. By the mid-1890s, through Genthe and Maurer, he had become interested in photography. He added a Kodak agency to his small store, built a backroom darkroom, bought and outfitted a 4×5 multipack plate camera, designed and hand-built an enlarger, joined the California Camera Club, and took to the streets. He made a total of fifty-five glass plate negatives of Chinatown during 1900 and 1901, the years when Genthe was completing the bulk of his own street scenes.⁵³ The timing of his first foray, in March 1900, is significant in that it coincided with a bloody confrontation between Chinese tongs, the same violent dispute that brought Ho Yow to San Francisco to work his diplomacy. The conflict drew Wulzen to the alleys and narrow side streets where the tongs held sway, rather than to the major thoroughfares where

3.28 D. H. Wulzen, *Fish Market, Two Men*, 1901. San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.



the merchants had their shops; he was especially attentive to Genthe's pictures of these spaces in the quarter more frequented by the working class. Of his fifty-five plates, more than forty were shot in the alleys, including *Fish Market, Two Men* (fig. 3.28), photographed on Washington Place. It closely resembles Genthe's picture of the same subject (fig. 3.29), differing primarily in the angle of approach and the wares (fish, not poultry) that the vendor has displayed. Wulzen even carefully registers the sloping table and the slight angles of the two washbasins beneath it, just as Genthe had done.

While Wulzen looked to his friend's work for models, he also attempted to link Genthe's imagery to what he himself sought in the alleys—that is, evidence of tong activity, however that might be construed and pictured. In *Fish Market, Two Men with-*



3.29 Arnold Genthe, *Fish Alley*, ca. 1898. Division of Prints and Photographs, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

out *Pigtails* (fig. 3.30), for example, the photographer moved to a stall only a few doors down on Washington Place. But here, rather than attend to the fishmonger and his goods, he tightened the view, cutting off most indications of the market itself and focusing on the social relationship between vendor and customer. The truncation was deliberate: he subtitled the work “Highbinders,” a reference to the most violent tong members (who were said to bind their queues “high” to thwart pursuers trying to snare them), and he seems to have attempted to capture them—imprison them—within the tight spaces of the camera’s frame as no rival tong could do on the streets. The photograph betrays his obvious pleasure in the hunt: the blurred focus that approximates the movement of shadowy figures along the narrow alley; the anonymity of the

3.30 D. H. Wulzen, *Fish Market, Two Men without Pigtales (Highbinders)*, 1901.
San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.



men and their covert existence; the indecipherable gestures that ask, beckon, to be read. Wulzen was not averse to playing the role of sensationalist and addressing in his pictures the contemporary fascination with the quarter. But there is no evidence that either of the men was a highbinder—in fact, they appear far too tame: one wears the apron of a butcher, ties his queue high to keep it from the meats, and attends to his store and its customers no differently than the subject in Wulzen's first *Fish Market* (see fig. 3.28) or the working men in his many other pictures of the same alleys (fig. 3.31).

In such a picture as the fantastic *Fish Market, Two Men without Pigtales*, our received notions of pictorialism hardly seem to obtain. Wulzen put to use the details associated with formal innovation in photography in more contradictory ways. For example, he set the stealth picture in dialogue with the lurid journalism covering the tong wars, instead of entering the debates about the sister arts and the grand exhibition



3.31 D. H. Wulzen, *Fish Market, Three Men*, 1901. San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.

spaces for camera work as Maurer and more famously Stieglitz advocated. But Wulzen's picture *is* entirely in keeping with the San Francisco notion of pictorialism developed in this chapter. Following Genthe's advice to the amateurs on the streets, it works out the pictorial possibilities of race and class as discourses of difference, as the bases on which to imagine an artistic project founded on both social agility and mechanical spontaneity. Internalizing arguments by Ho Yow and the Bohemian Club, it trades on the limited characteristics said to belong to Chinese laborers and the range of meanings that could be ascribed to their everyday presence in the streets. Like Armer's work, it prefers to crop the details of a complex Chinese social life to achieve a pictorial effect of flattening surface consistency. Like the merchant Six Companies, Wulzen presents the Chinese laborers as a collective of men whose homosocial world is not only inscrutable but now dangerous.

To end this chapter, I return to the ambivalent work of our anonymous Camera Club member whom I have called the 8000 Photographer. I argued above that his project constituted a middle ground in the club's sectarian debates, that its reserve and hesitancy countered the simulated studio efforts of the conservative Weidner circle, that its careful registration of street relations countered the intense subjectivity advocated by the pictorialists, and that its self-consciousness suggested a solipsism of an entirely different order than that of the *flânerie*-minded Bohemians. The text that best captures the 8000 Photographer's attitudes belongs to Roland Barthes, who writes: "Today there are doubtless a thousand things to learn about the Orient, an enormous labor of *knowledge* is and will be necessary[;] . . . but it is also necessary that, leaving aside vast regions of darkness . . . a slender thread of light search out not other symbols but the very fissure of the symbolic. . . . This situation is the very one in which a certain disturbance of the person occurs, a subversion of earlier readings . . . without the object's ever ceasing to be significant, desirable."⁵⁴ Without claiming too much for our unknown photographer, I believe that his photographs match what we prize in Barthes's best late writing, in that they enact the same deeply self-conscious self-absorption before the object of one's fantasy. They return the viewer to him- or herself and acknowledge the solipsism of representation. While Power and Weidner were confident—arrogantly so, at times—in the camera's mechanical capacity to provide knowledge of its subjects, and the pictorialists were equally presumptuous in foisting a class-based subjectivity onto their Chinese subjects, the 8000 Photographer is more hesitant, but no less dedicated to his efforts on the streets. He takes to a more knowing extreme the simple and simple-minded proposition offered in *Camera Craft*: "Learn to rely on yourself. Abstain from trusting to some one else to help you get clear of your difficulty at the time. Do not allow yourself to become contracted and dry, remembering that to . . . gain individuality you must work for it."⁵⁵

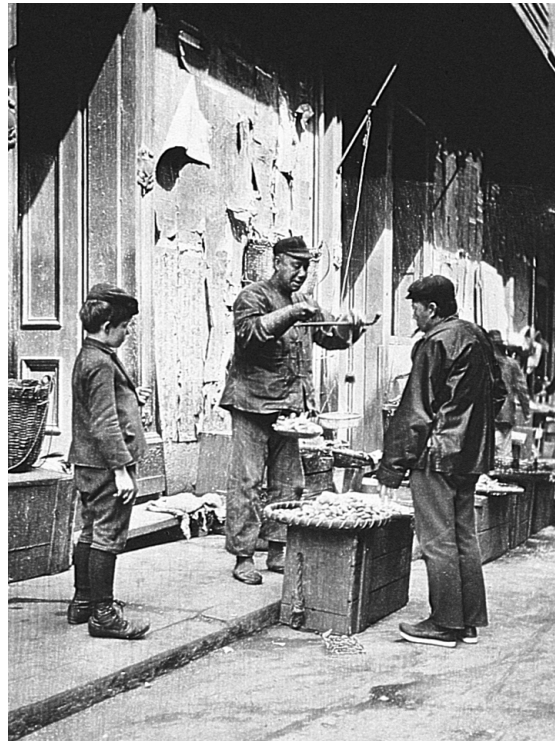
Why does it matter that we register and describe the 8000 Photographer's project in these ways? Why should we continue to ascribe importance to it when it seems so fragile and when it virtually disappeared in the subsequent debate between straight and pictorial photographers? One reason, as it affects the argument in this book, is that it combines and subverts the assumptions of portrait and pictorial work so dominant in turn-of-the-century San Francisco. It works through simple negation or inversion, the basis of Genthe's project, but also combines effects drawn from a range of sources. Consider once again the sequence of photographs of a lone Chinese la-

borer on the streets (figs. 3.6 to 3.8). After our careful review of the works of his contemporaries, the 8000 Photographer's remarkable achievement—his pictures' fraught ambivalence—is even plainer. Should we view the man with typical disdain, or wonder at our own voyeurism? Should we attribute to him the vices normally accorded to the working class, or should we recognize our inability to characterize him accurately? How might we resolve his self-possession under the terms available to San Franciscans? How might we interpret his closed gestures, his hunched form and crossed arms and legs? What should we make of his relationship to the discarded basket and basin, his relationship to labor? There are no certain answers to any of these questions, though there were many pat answers available. It is testimony to the 8000 Photographer's insight and savvy that he refused to picture in a manner that could have invoked them.

To maintain their indeterminacy, the pictures explicitly summon and then refuse the photographic examples circulating among Camera Club members. The spare background and flat backdrop have the look of Shulze's portraiture (see fig. 3.5); but unlike Shulze, this photographer denies portraiture's formal nature. The sequence of shots suggests Armer's methods (see figs. 3.20 to 3.22); but unlike Armer, this photographer keeps his focus on the single figure and the insights that repetition, not erasure, might yield. Furthermore, whereas Armer disjoins the sequence of her shots in an effort to discover the single, worthy, modernist picture, our photographer seeks continuity in his pictures and insists on a relation between them. The quick cadence of shots and the suggestion of the amateur's determined movement uphill recall Genthe's strategies (see figs. 3.13 and 3.17); but unlike Genthe, the 8000 Photographer prefers the quiet street and thus the unavoidable acknowledgment of his own presence, his tacit visibility, despite or indeed because of the Chinese man's refusal to recognize it. He worked by mixing portions of dominant photographic examples and allowing the resulting entanglement to negate and cancel the logic of each constituent part. Thus Shulze's portraiture is countered by Genthe's street savvy; Armer's penchant for surgical removal and formal abstraction is altered by Shulze's careful framing; Genthe's social agility and spontaneity are undermined by Weidner's studio conventions. The pictorialist's love of darkroom manipulation (notice the scratchings on the sidewalk ledge in all three pictures of the sequence) is put to trivial ends. Indeed, this photographer occupies a middle ground in the club's debates in more complex senses of that term.

These photographs both exalt and abuse their models. Unlike the pictorialist who inverted conventional portraiture's manners while preserving their fundamental so-

3.32 8000 Photographer, untitled (sidewalk stall), n.d. California Historical Society, San Francisco, FN-08022.



cial bases, the 8000 Photographer hybridized his models and produced new combinations and startling instabilities. The pictures make it possible to interrogate and even erase the models that constitute them.⁵⁶ They are perhaps less concerned with picturing the Chinese and more interested in scrutinizing the huge number of representations of the Chinese by the mass of club photographers. I would like to believe that this critical consciousness resulted in part from the energy and efforts of Chinese laborers attempting to repeal exclusion and supporting revolutionary politics: the masses of Chinese in Chinatown simply contradicted the claims made about them. But without knowing more about our photographer, we can do no more than speculate and wonder at his intentions.

I conclude, then, with a final photograph by him (fig. 3.32) and more speculation, more wishful desire on my part. The environs are familiar: the street is actually a narrow alley where peddlers had their sidewalk stalls; the neighborhood is assuredly not

the more elegant southern part of Chinatown where the merchant class kept their stores but the northern part where the tongs held sway; the subject is as old as any in representations of the quarter, a man selling goods to a customer. Yet something is different: a non-Chinese boy is present, observing the men and their transaction. We cannot tell what, precisely, draws him to the scene, but the whole image is organized around the central activity of balancing the scales, that concentrated effort to find a temporary point of stability between two opposing forces. If this were a Dutch painting from the age of Vermeer, we might construe all sorts of meanings in that subject—the balance of men’s souls, the apocalyptic judgment of good and evil, the relations between men thematized as a relation between goods, and so on. But instead it is a photograph depicting an everyday occurrence in Chinatown at the turn of the century. Any effort to allegorize the scene runs up against the quotidian nature of the subject, and the photographer seems to have invoked an ancient iconographic tradition only to impoverish it or to suggest its inadequacy to represent the activity on these streets. The boy himself fulfills a pictorial convention as old as photography itself, the stand-in for the photographer’s eye. He both witnesses the scene and directs our view; he is both part of and outside the central event. He serves as contrast (in age, in race, in clothes, in social status) to the men and insists on their difference from the mass of San Franciscans; but he is also marked by difference from them, an intruder in a world that belongs to the Chinese. The photographer could rehearse the efforts to picture these men in the usual ways, but there was always a remainder. The men resisted all attempts to order them, no matter the orthodoxy of conventions brought to bear in arranging and deciphering them. They had their own desires.