



# **New York before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture, 1776-1882**

*John Kuo Wei Tchen*

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From George Washington's desire (in the heat of the Revolutionary War) for a proper set of Chinese porcelains for afternoon tea, to the lives of Chinese-Irish couples in the 1830s, to the commercial success of Chang and Eng (the "Siamese Twins"), to rising fears of "heathen Chinees," *New York before Chinatown* offers a provocative look at the role Chinese people, things, and ideas played in the fashioning of American culture and politics.

Piecing together various historical fragments and anecdotes from the years before Chinatown emerged in the late 1870s, historian John Kuo Wei Tchen redraws Manhattan's historical landscape and broadens our understanding of the role of port cultures in the making of American identities. Tchen tells his story in three parts. In the first, he explores America's fascination with Asia as a source of luxury items, cultural taste, and lucrative trade. In the second, he explains how Chinese, European-Americans in Yellowface, and various caricatures became objects of curiosity in the expansive commercial marketplace. In the third part, Tchen focuses on how Americans' attitude toward the Chinese changed from fascination to demonization, leading to the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Acts beginning in 1882.

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