Two years ago, Kate Stevens gave me a call from her home in Victoria, British Columbia. It would plunge me into a fascinating, sometimes irritating, but ultimately rewarding project. Professor Stevens taught in the Department of East Asian Studies at the University of Toronto until her retirement in the late 1980s. She taught Chinese performing arts as literature for over twenty years and has made an extensive study of Peking drum singing, a storytelling genre which she performs. I had been and, in the Chinese way of looking at things, still was her student. After she left the university, I continued as a teacher of Performing Arts in China in her place, a post for which she recommended me. Now, she had something else on her mind for me. Would I be interested in writing a book on Chinese opera? A book? Surely, there were quite a number of these already. But what Kate Stevens had in mind was something quite different. That’s when she told me about Siu Wang-Ngai and his collection of photographs.

Siu Wang-Ngai is one of the most prominent photographers in Hong Kong. A lawyer by profession, he has won international recognition for his photographs. The Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain awarded him a fellowship for his theatrical photography in 1985, and honoured him with a second fellowship in 1989 for his pictorial photography. Mr. Siu’s photographs are frequently exhibited and published. He was chair of the Federation of Hong Kong-Macao Photographic Associations and often serves as a judge in Hong Kong photography exhibitions. Kate Stevens explained that one of Siu’s ongoing special projects was photographing Chinese regional opera. There are over 300 different regional opera styles in China. In recent years, outstanding troupes with China’s foremost performers have visited Hong Kong. Siu began photographing their performances in 1981 and has so far taken over 30,000 photographs of more than 200 operas in twenty-two regional opera styles. These photographs were what would make this book special. Siu was prepared to select a number of shots from his collection personally, but they needed text around them to explain the stories and give background. I was intrigued. In addition to my teaching work, I performed the painted-face role in the Chinese Opera Group of Toronto. I knew what it felt like, if only as an amateur, to wear the bold make-up, carry the heavy costume, and tell a story using conventions from a highly polished theatrical tradition. Maybe I could bring that experience to the photographs.
A month later I flew out to Vancouver to meet Siu. He turned out to be a quiet, unassuming man. As I got to know him better, I discovered that he was both gracious and considerate. He was accompanied by Kwan Lihuen, a charming gentleman who delighted me with his conversation on taijiquan (or tai chi chuan, a form of slow exercise), Chinese philosophy, and teaching English to Chinese speakers. Kwan, it seemed, had been instrumental in promoting the idea that Siu’s photos should be published.

I first saw those photographs spread out over tables in the offices of UBC Press. Kate Stevens, Siu Wang-Ngai, and I looked at them to see what kind of shape they might take. They were remarkable. Aside from major opera styles, Siu had captured regional operas that are rarely seen outside of China and are in decline even in China itself. His method was to shoot the plays in performance. He looked for particularly dramatic images in which gesture and facial expression conveyed both the theatrical moment and the flavour of the regional opera style. He used no flash or tripod. The result was a series of photographs that, in contrast to posed studio shots, conveyed vital and living operas in performance. The operas covered a broad range from historical dramas to ghost stories.

The first question to settle was audience. For whom was this book intended? From the start, we decided that it was not to be a scholarly work meant for specialists in Chinese studies. For a broader appeal, we decided not to assume a background in Chinese theatre. This meant, then, providing an historical overview to furnish the context of the operas. An anecdotal history of Chinese opera is therefore provided in Chapter 1. It also meant introducing the regional differences and stage conventions of Chinese theatre. The conventions are taken for granted by a seasoned opera audience but are quite foreign to most Western audiences, raised in realism. Chapters 2 and 3 cover regional variations and general operatic conventions. But what about the main matter, the bulk of the book? The answer came quickly. Stories. The book would provide a rich treasury of stories from the Chinese opera. The organization was there in front of us. There! Were there not a number of plays about emperors in that corner of the table? And over here! Look at the number of ghost plays on this side. Shuffling the pictures around provided a number of categories that took us through a sort of Chinese chain of being from heaven, through the whole social structure on earth from emperor to outlaw, to ghosts in the nether world. Each of the remaining chapters would deal with stories centring on a particular link in the chain. Each would open with a dramatic photograph to illustrate the general theme, and would follow with the sights and stories of several characteristic operas.

It was an intriguing idea. Use stories from Chinese opera to provide a window on Chinese social structure and experience. It would also prove challenging. My immediate task was to find Chinese scripts of these plays. Some of the plays were
famous, but I could not assume that the regional form shown in the photographs retold the story in the most familiar way. In fact, many well-known stories have telling variations in different opera styles. Thus a regional operatic version might have significant differences from the time-honoured folk story or from the Peking opera version. Other stories were not so well known, and we had little information for them beyond maddeningly short and vague program notes. Clearly, this project would require a great deal of research. Kate Stevens, in her meticulous way, had already organized a great deal of the information before I came to the project. Siu managed to locate some scripts in Hong Kong and mainland China. In addition, I was able to discover and verify information with the help of former professionals in regional opera who now live in Canada. A trip to Taiwan and Hong Kong to research and write was also instrumental to completion of the book.

The second task was to read the plays and retell them in a concise yet lively manner. That recounting also needed to provide useful comments to help the reader enter into the spirit of the story. Each section of the chain of being in the book begins with a short preface outlining traditional Chinese attitudes to that group. As romanized Chinese names can be confusing, naming characters has been done as little as possible. Pinyin romanization is used for names when they do appear and for the specialized terminology that appears in the chapters on regional opera styles and conventions. The only exceptions are for generally accepted names like Peking opera, instead of Beijing opera, and Cantonese opera, instead of Yue opera. [Indeed, there is an entirely different Yue opera style dealt with in this book, which is popular in Shanghai]. The text refers to cities by their modern names.

This book is meant for many people. Devotees of the theatre, east or west, will find Siu Wang-Ngai’s photographs a delight. They make the Chinese approach to drama concrete and vivid. The accompanying text gives these readers further access to this performance tradition by explaining the dramatic conventions and the stories. Those with a passion for China can use the photographs and text as an entry into traditional Chinese society, which still lives on the opera stage. The plays and commentary give them an intimate look at the lives of emperors, scholars, generals, common folk, and outlaws. Finally, this book is meant for all those who enjoy a good story. Chinese opera has a rich repertoire drawn from history, legends, myths, folk tales, and classic novels. These stories are full of colourful characters and surprising turns. It is not necessary to be interested in the Chinese dramatic tradition to sit back, like the Chinese audience of a regional opera, and enjoy a good yarn. Siu Wang-Ngai’s record of regional opera performance makes these yarns come alive.