

## STREET THEATRE IN CHINA IN THE 1930s

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Street theatre, *jietouju* (1), was born after the Mukden-Incident in 1931 when the Japanese began to gradually occupy China from the Northeast as means of protest and anti-Japanese propaganda. Being first performed in the Beijing-area, it was soon found everywhere in China: on streets, temple stages, carriages, by professional troupes as well as by amateurs. Today *jietouju* is considered as a great step forward in the development of spoken drama (*huaju*, 2) in China, towards drama as an important factor in reflecting a modern society.

Shortly after the Mukden-Incident in 1931 a new genre of theatre arose in China: the *jietouju*, spoken drama played in the streets. During the first years of its existence, it was a form of protest by students and theatre people against the Japanese invaders.

Only in 1937, with the beginning of the Sino-Japanese war, street theatre was systematically organized by people on the cultural front. Its aim was to strengthen the whole Chinese population in their fight for freedom and liberty. *Jietouju* was played everywhere and by everybody.

Until then, spoken drama with its short history in China, had mostly attracted young intellectuals. But now, street theatre became a way to express the hate, sorrows and hopes of the oppressed people and was very popular.

Now, what is known as street theatre, and where did it come from?

Ge Yihong (3)<sup>1</sup> claims that street theatre was directly influenced by the European 'Proletarisches Theater' – like the Piscator Theatre which was in vogue in Germany and Russia in the 1920s. In 1928/1929, Li Bozhao (4) brought Meyerhold's play "March to the Winter Palace" to China. Other Chinese students, coming back from abroad, introduced different Western plays to the Chinese audience.

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<sup>1</sup> Interview in Beijing, 8.9.1983

Chen Xiling (Yu Lin, 5)<sup>2</sup> sees the origin of jietouju in the tradition of "selling" songs in the streets for money and drinks.

Li Chao (6)<sup>3</sup> combines the two points of view: in his opinion jietouju (also called *guangchangju* (7) derived on the one hand from traditional amusements displayed in the open air like songs and operas that have existed for hundreds of years in China, and on the other hand from Western spoken drama.

Therefore in its wide sense all theatrical amusements displayed in the streets could be called "jietouju". In its narrow sense, as the term is used by the experts, and as it is used and discussed in my paper, jietouju means the new form of street theatre born after the Mukden-Incident to support and encourage the Chinese in their desperate fight against the Japanese.

How have jietouju plays been performed?

While in traditional open-air theatre, performances are in general on a temple-stage or on a carriage, jietouju was performed everywhere, even in the most inconvenient place. As for the different forms of "stages" and their impact on the audience, Guang Weiran (Zhang Guangnian, 8)<sup>4</sup> distinguishes three forms:

The first is the traditional one, on a carriage (or on a temple stage) as you can still find it today in Taiwan. The elevated stage and the closed back keep the distance between actors and audience and give the spectator the impression of a "real" theatre-performance.

The second form integrates walls of houses and landscapes as limitation and decoration of the stage. Even if this performance takes place at the same level as the audience, by having one side closed as a background, the spectator still gets the impression of watching at the theatre.

The third and most common form takes place on the plain ground, accessible from all sides; the actors are surrounded by the spectators and play among them. There is no longer any very clear difference between actors and audience. This Guang Weiran characterizes as the purest form of "illusionist-theatre": the spectators could become actors at any time, and the actors spectators. Later on, we will see how this principle has been integrated into the textbooks of jietouju.

As for the performance of jietouju, Guang lists some "nots", which distinguish this form of theatre principally from *huaju* and traditional opera:

- I. Jietouju does not use any stage properties.
- II. In general, performances are given in daytime, which means that there are no special illumination or light effects.

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<sup>2</sup> Chen Xilin (1), p. 1

<sup>3</sup> Li Chao, pp. 76/77

<sup>4</sup> Guang Weiran, pp. 6-11

III. There are no masks and painted faces.

IV. There is no musical accompaniment.

Guang condenses the principles of jietouju as follows: "...to use the most convenient place, the simplest preparation and equipment, to carry the most dramatic message in the plot, and it must be possible to perform (the plays) on the streets, or on the plain ground..."<sup>5</sup>

This means that by its stage properties and stage effects, jietouju is the simplest and most reduced form of theatre. The authors of a textbook have no possibility to use the usual and traditional forms and methods to illuminate the story. Therefore, writing a textbook for the jietouju is rather difficult: the story must be attractive to fascinate the audience, and simple to be understood without any artistic helps. It must reflect the everyday life of common people, and must carry out clearly the message: all Chinese must join the fight against the Japanese. Jietouju has certainly been one of the simplest forms of theatre China has ever had, but, as Guang points out, "one of the most effective..."

Where did the plays come from?

Unlike traditional operas, where most of the plots are adaptations from classical themes which glorified historical or pseudo-historical heroes and lovers or stories of supernatural beings, and huaju, whose protagonists are mostly middle class people, jietouju depicts the common people in their suffering and struggle for life during the Japanese occupation. Therefore most of the plays were written under the influence of events the authors saw or heard of. Guang Weiran writes about his "A Refugee's drama" (nanminju, 9):

"A Refugee's drama was written last year in September (1937, the author) at that time I had just come back from the bombing of Shanghai to Wuhan. In Shanghai, I served for a short time in a refugee camp, it's partially those feelings you find in this drama..."<sup>6</sup>

Most of the plays have been written or adapted in a way reflecting some similar events or impressions, so most of the plays were very short-living. It is therefore rather difficult to fix an approximate number of plays that exist: Printing-conditions were difficult, certainly only a few of the plays were printed and a lot of them are lost. Today, we know of about 50 titles.

As the plays reflect the current events, most of the stories are "new", but quite a few are based on older stories.<sup>7</sup> One of those is "Lay down your whip" (Fangxia nide bianzi, 10), the most famous and successful of all jietouju plays. Based on Goethe's "Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre" (2nd book, 4th chapter), Tian

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<sup>5</sup> Guang, p. 5

<sup>6</sup> Guang, p. 1

<sup>7</sup> Chen (1), pp. 63-77 and Kaulbach

Han, after coming into contact with Goethe's works during his studies in Japan (between 1914 and 1921) wrote a play entitled "Meiniang" (11) which was performed in the late 1920s in the "Nanguo" theatre-society (Nanguo she, 12). In 1932, Chen Liting (13) and others wrote a modernized and sinicized version, out of which Cui Wei (14) in 1936 wrote the play entitled "Lay down your whip". The incredible success of the play inspired other authors and theatre groups, and in the following years we find several adaptations. The gipsy-girl Mignon alias Meiniang, Miniang (15) or Xiangjie (16) who had already inspired the European Romantic literature, fascinated the Chinese spectator in her new form of a courageous refugee. To give an idea of the plots of jietouju, allow me to render the story of this play:

The play opens at a marketplace in China in a small town or village. After the sound of drums a fifty-year-old Chinese man called "the art-seller" (Maihan or Hanzi) comes out on the "stage" and announces the main attraction of his "troupe": a seventeen-year-old girl named "Miss Fragrance" (Xiangjie). She appears and sings the "Song of the 18th September". In the middle of her song she cannot physically carry on singing and stops. After asking her with harsh words to go on, Hanzi takes his whip to beat the girl. At this moment, a young worker jumps up and shouts: "Lay down your whip!". He struggles with Hanzi and the whip falls down to the floor. But as he is strangling the old man, the girl begs for mercy, telling him that Hanzi is her father. After some moments of astonishment in the audience, the girl tells her sad story:

Coming from Shenxi, they lost their whole family and property after the Japanese invasion. For years they wandered around and displayed some stories and songs on marketplaces. They suffered all the hardships refugees know. So her father, already defeated by hunger and despair, reacted this way and wanted to beat his own daughter, something he would have never done in normal conditions. The young worker teaches them and all spectators that to bring their desperate situation to an end, all Chinese must join in the struggle against the Japanese enemy. The whip is taken up again as a symbol of resistance. After a last "Song of the 18th September", the young worker, Hanzi and his daughter go away to discuss a plan to defeat the Japanese.

Here is another play, written by Hu Shaoxuan: "Dangbing qu" (17, "Join the army")<sup>8</sup> f.8: Shortly after the Marco Polo Bridge incident, a theatre troupe leaves one place to go to the next. On the street, they meet a thirteen-year-old boy, who asks them the way to Peking. The troupe leader inquires about the boy's home and parents, and he tells them that he lost his whole family in the bombing of Shanghai. Therefore he wants to go to Peking to join the army to fight against the hated Japanese. The troupe leader encourages everyone to follow this patriotic example, but considers the boy too young to fight in the army. He proposes to take the boy with him to Peking where he will care for him and

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<sup>8</sup> Chen (1), pp. 13-27

send him to school. Their enthusiasm and patriotism convinces everyone around, and together with the theatre people they all sing the title song: "Join the army".

A third play written with a special song is "In the hell-fire" (*Zai fenghuo zhong*, 18)<sup>9</sup> by Chen Xiling: A Chinese betrays two villages to the Japanese, and most of the inhabitants are killed by their soldiers. The surviving people flee, amongst them a man who carries his mother, and a bleeding old man who laments over the loss of his whole family. On their way, they are topped by the Chinese traitor and the Japanese soldiers. Fortunately at this moment Chinese soldiers arrive and kill the Japanese. The traitor is attacked and beaten, and in the end, they sing the song together: "Beat down the Chinese Traitor" (*Dadao hanjian*, 19).

Jietouju plays are one-act plays of about 15 minutes, usually performed by two or three protagonists and some other actors representing the masses, Chinese or Japanese soldiers. The protagonists represent poor Chinese civilians and cunning Chinese traitors, while the subordinate actors who represent the masses bring out the common meaning, and demonstrate how the audience should react. Therefore actors are mixed into the audience and tear down the barrier between them. In "Lay down your whip" for example, the young worker sits in the first row of the spectators to jump immediately onto the "stage" when Hanzhi wants to beat his daughter, giving the impression that somebody in the audience reacts spontaneously and helps the poor girl.

While in traditional opera the play starts with some explanations about the characters, the place and the circumstances (called *bai*, 20), presented by one of the main actors, in jietouju the action starts immediately, thus bringing the audience right to the heart of the play. The situation unfolds in a few lines, and the realistic war-scenes are told or played by the actors. More or less without any climax the stories end with the conclusion that all Chinese have to join to fight the enemy, the Japanese, and the even more dangerous people, the Chinese traitors, who are quite often clearly depicted as the Guomindang-people. The song, sung at the end by the actors and the audience, is the symbolic unification of the Chinese. Some of the plays were written with a special song, but the songs have been interchangeable. The absolute 'hit' of that time was the 'Song of the 18th September'— anyone over fifty I met in China in 1983 could still sing this song, from taxi drivers to librarians.

The simplicity of the story is parallel to the simplicity of the language: the everyday conversation is used exclusively, the language spoken and understood by everybody, including vulgar expressions. This means the plays had to be adapted according to the place and the dialect where the troupes performed, and often the troupes did not speak the dialects. Yao Shixiao (21)<sup>10</sup> told me, that

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<sup>9</sup> Chen (1), pp. 47-56

<sup>10</sup> Interview in Shanghai, 17.9. Yao Shixiao was with Mao Tsedong in Yenan

after 'translation' of the plays, the actors sometimes had to learn the plays by heart in a dialect they did not understand.

### The development of jietouju

According to Ge Yihong and others, jietouju appeared at the beginning of the 1930s in the Beijing area and spread out quickly. In 1936, students of Beijing University ignored the directives of the Guomindang and performed 'Lay down your whip' and other plays in Xishan. Shortly after, the Shanghai Film people organized a troupe of women and children who went to the front to Suiyuan to entertain the soldiers. The troupe left on January 9, 1937 and returned towards the end of March. One of the three plays of patriotic content they staged was again 'Lay down your whip'.

In summer 1937, people from film and stage gathered in Shanghai and decided to organize twelve 'Troupes to rescue from the destruction' (Jiuwang yanxidui (22); by their full name: 'Shanghai wenhuajie jiuwang xiehui jiuwang yanxidui (23) ); each troupe consisting of about fifteen persons, they performed anti-Japanese plays throughout unoccupied China. Two of the troupes started their work in Shanghai, while the others left Shanghai in September.<sup>11</sup>

After the fall of Shanghai, the theatre people moved to Wuhan, which became a 'second Shanghai' (Lü Fu, 24). The third Bureau of the Political Board of the Military Commission was established and the Guomindang became responsible for the Propaganda chiefly in the theatre. Lü Fu: "We used their money, performed our plays and sang our songs – I think this was a good system."<sup>12</sup>

The head of the bureau was Guo Moruo, the head of the theatre department Hong Shen. In summer 1938 Tian Han, Hong Shen and Chang Shu (25) assembled the former members of Jiuwangdui, and formed out of them the 'theatre troupes of the anti-Japanese fight' (Kangdi yanju dui, 26). Altogether, there were ten theatre troupes, four propaganda troupes, and one children's troupe, most of whom had lost their parents in the war. Guo Moruo (27) remembers:

"After the liberation, two films were produced about them: '8,000 miles with clouds and moon' and 'The stream's springwater flows towards the east'.... Before going to the front, they received two months of military training in the Yunhua-forests. These young people had a great will and an astonishing sense of self-sacrifice. It would be very difficult to tell in a book what bitter experiences they lived through after having gone to the fighting areas. Some of them were lost in the front lines of the armies, some of them fell ill and died, some of them went to jail (and the third troupe, which had gone to Shanxi was cut off for a very long time in the Yanxi mountains).

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<sup>11</sup> Xia Yan, p. 7

<sup>12</sup> Interview in Beijing, 12.9.1983

After many changes, eliminations and differentiations, some of the troupes vanished, and some of them changed completely. But some of them went for seven or eight years through the fire-hell and persevered until the victory.”<sup>13</sup>

In his autobiography ‘Hongpo qu’, Guo Moruo lists the nine (out of the ten) theatre troupes that went to the provinces with names of their leaders and the provinces they toured:

Name of the Group Leader	Province they toured
1. Xu Tao	Guangdong
2. Lü Fu	Jiangxi
3. Xu Shimei	Shandong
4. Hou Feng	Hubei
5. Liu Mansheng	Henan
6. Lu Huanmei	Hubei
7. Xi Qun	Zhejiang
8. Liu Feizhang	Hunan
9. Xu Sangchu	Guangxi <sup>14</sup>

It is almost impossible to depict a chronology of jietouju during the War of Resistance in a few pages, because it spread all over the country and arose everywhere. The history of jietouju is more or less the history of each theatre group and its influence on its audience. So to show how these troupes worked, I quote Bai Ling (28), who belonged to the third troupe:

“I came to Yen-an in 1939, I was seventeen years old. At that time there were a lot of students and young people in Yen-an. Our troupe included Ouyang Sanzun (the son of Ouyang Yuchien) and He Luting, who lives now in Shanghai. In our jietouju performances, there was always singing and dancing, generally written by He; while the actors performed, he wrote new plays. After having written one play, it was immediately performed. It was always the same routine: we marched everyday about 15 miles, our rucksacks on the back, carrying a violin with us. When we arrived, we performed two plays, we ate and slept, and the second day, we left for the next place. Often we learned the new plays while we marched.

Wherever we went, the population welcomed us warmly and invited us to their houses to wash and to eat. After we finished the first play they were very enthusiastic and they all shouted: ‘Down with the Japanese! Down with the aggressors!’ They could hardly calm down. They lived so much with the play, that sometimes we had to shelter the villain because they wanted to beat him.

The second day, when we left, they often accompanied us for a while, invited us to come back soon, and then waved goodbye until we were out of sight.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Guo, p. 103

<sup>14</sup> Guo, p. 103/104

<sup>15</sup> Interview in Beijing, 12.9.1983

While during the first years of the war of resistance against Japan jietouju grew and plays were performed everywhere in China, it declined by the end of the 1930s because of the political situation:

In 1939 Chiang Kaishek began to suppress the anti-Japanese theatre performances and to persecute their members. After the Southern Anhui incident in 1941, mass wartime performances were so restricted that they could not be carried out. Therefore in the Guomindang areas jietouju withered away, though it still existed in the anti-Japanese base areas.

After the war, some plays were presented in experimental performances, like 'Lay down your whip' in Beijing in 1957, and some Chinese told me that they had seen jietouju plays even after the Japanese defeat – but these were certainly exceptions: having been written in wartime as a form of propaganda, the plays lost their topicality after the war and were soon forgotten.

#### Other forms of street theatre

One sort of street theatre of basically the same sort as the jietouju, revived in the 1950s during the Korean war: the "living newspaper", huobaoju (29). It was also born at the beginning of the War of Resistance; the plays were written 'on the spot' and reflected and criticized the actual events. The plays often had no written script, they only followed a rough outline. Therefore few of these plays exist in printed form. As a description and comment of the political situation in a simple theatre form, they were another important pillar of anti-Japanese propaganda. Differences between the jietouju and the huobaoju were often fluent: Yao Shixiao for example regards his play 'The traitor has no chance' (Hanjian mo lu, 30) which was printed in collections of jietouju, today as huobaoju. He says about his play:

"At the time (1936, the author) Shanghai was full of refugees: peasants, women, children, coming from everywhere. And not all the people in Shanghai helped them. On the contrary, some tried to profit from their miserable situation and to cheat them. Under this impression, I wrote in 1936 in two days the play 'The traitor has no chance'. If I look at the play today, I must admit that it is not good at all, but at that time, these 'living newspapers' were very important."<sup>16</sup>

Li Chao tells us of a very interesting combination of huobaoju with traditional elements: the lion dance, which was used by actors who did not speak the local dialect to demonstrate the political situation without using language:

"I remember that the troupe that played in Guangxi in the area of the Zhuang minorities based their plays on people's art created a huobaoju 'The lion beats Japan' (Shizi da tongyang, 31). The intent of the play was to show how the Communist party united all the Chinese people to fight against the Japanese fascists. At the beginning of the play, a lion dances, accompanied by drums, and then falls asleep. The symbol, which represents the whole of China,

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<sup>16</sup> Interview in Shanghai, 17.9.1983

is that the country is a sleeping lion. The lion awakes and defends himself. Finally, the dancing lion symbolizes the army and the whole Chinese people who resisted and finally overcame the enemy.”<sup>17</sup>

Besides jietouju and huobaoju, nearly every form of traditional opera went into the streets with adaptations of classical themes – Chinese classical opera is full of heroes and heroines who sacrifice their lives and property for their country – like the Yang jia jiang and the Yue Fei-stories (32). In Wuhan for example, several troupes of classical opera were organized in 1938. He Man:

“One year after the war broke out, Tian Han joined the artists of the three communities around Wuhan and organized them into ‘people’s artists’: six troupes of Chu opera (from Hubei, Chuju kangdi xuanchuan dui), ten troupes of Han opera (from Hubei, Hanju kangdi xuanchuan dui), one troupe of Beijing opera (jingju kangdi xuanchuan dui) and one of Ping opera (from Hebei, Pingju kangdi xuanchuan dui, 33). After the troupes had been established, they received some training. On the one hand, they had to be concerned with the actual problems of the anti-Japanese fight; on the other, they had to experiment with their established arts, to give them the possibility of developing some new art.”<sup>18</sup>

In the years of war, some of the well-known dramatists of the huaju turned towards the opera and rewrote some traditional plays. In their plays, the great historical and pseudo-historical heroes and heroines revived to incite the people to resist Japan: Wu Song (written by Tian Han), Yue Fei (by Tian Han and Hong Shen), Liang Hongyu (by Ouyang Yuchien, 34) and many others.

Why did playwrights of huaju turn to rewriting traditional opera instead of producing jietouju plays? Actually, jietouju did not seem to attract the great playwrights of the 1930s very much: there is hardly a play written by anyone of them. I think there were several reasons for this:

1. Jietouju was rather primitive and more propaganda than real theatre. It was very unsatisfactory for an artist to write these plays. Guang Weiran certainly knew why he encouraged the intellectuals in 1938 to write jietouju plays, while nobody had to encourage them to write huaju plays.
2. With the development of the war, ‘dramatists and actors had to withdraw from the great coastal cities which were the centres of cultural development and theatrical life. They had lost their audience fond of modern theatre. They were confronted with an audience which was by and large only willing to accept traditional theatrical forms.’<sup>19</sup>
3. When the Guomindang began to ban and to persecute all anti-Japanese theatre performances, jietouju gradually disappeared in the Guomindang areas. On the other hand traditional operas, which depict historical events could be continued and were used in the same way to arouse the patriotic spirit of the people.

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<sup>17</sup> Li, p. 78

<sup>18</sup> Interview in Shanghai, 17.9.1983

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Chen Baichen in Nanjing, 19.9.1983

As a conclusion I may assert that jietouju is one of the milestones in Chinese history of spoken drama: for the first time in its short history in China, spoken drama spread everywhere in the country and created an incredible interest and enthusiasm among the people. After the Marco Polo bridge incident, jietouju became one of the most important forms of anti-Japanese propaganda on the cultural front.

As a way to express the problems and hopes of the common people, jietouju can be seen as a direct predecessor of contemporary spoken drama in China, and it would be very interesting to make a comparison.

The critics of jietouju held that jietouju has no artistic value which is certainly one of the reasons why the plays are not any more mounted on stage. Indeed, the almost trifling stories, the rough, unpolished language and the simplicity of movements and gestures have nothing in common with the traditional opera or the plays of Tian Han or Hong Shen. However it was not its artistic value which made jietouju an important form of spoken drama, but rather its capacity to bring the people together, to appeal to their sense of nationalism, to strengthen their will to resist the enemy, and to melt them into one front of resistance.

To become involved in the play, to join and to feel like belonging together and struggling together in their desperate fight was certainly the most important factor of jietouju. What Ouyang Shanzun (35) said about 'Lay down your whip' could be taken as an indication for the whole genre of this theatre:

"When the plays were mounted in a public place, actors and masses came together with an intensity of their hatred and an influence (on each participant), which has never existed before or afterwards (in the theatre)."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Kaulbach, p. 203

Chinese characters:

(1) 街頭劇 (2) 話劇 (3) 葛一虹 (4) 李伯釗 (5) 沈西苓；玉琳 (6) 李超 (7) 光場劇 (8) 光未然；張光年 (9) 難民曲 (10) 放下你的鞭子 (11) 美娘 (12) 南國社 (13) 陳鯉庭 (14) 崔嵬 (15) 迷娘 (16) 香姐 (17) 胡紹軒：當兵去 (18) 沈西苓：在烽火中 (19) 打倒漢奸 (20) 白 (21) 姚時曉 (22) 救亡演劇隊 (23) 上海文化界救亡協會救亡演居隊 (24) 呂復 (25) 田漢，洪深，張曙 (26) 抗敵演劇隊 (27) 郭沫若 (28) 白凌 (29) 活報劇 (30) 漢奸末路 (31) 獅子打東洋 (32) 楊家將；岳飛 (33) 楚劇；漢劇；京劇；評劇 (34) 田漢：武松；田漢，洪深：岳飛；歐陽予倩：梁紅玉 (35) 歐陽山尊；

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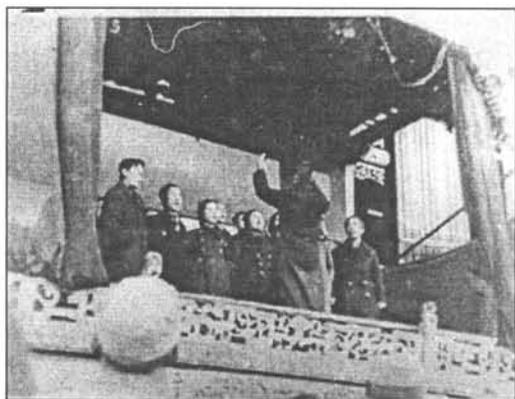
1. One "Anti-Japanese Theatre Troupe", 1938 in Wuhan



2. The "Second Anti-Japanese Theatre Troupe", 1938 in Jiangxi. On the right: Lü Fu



3. "Lay down your whip": Performance of the "Theatre Troupe to rescue from the Destruction", 1937 in the countryside. The old man is played by Lü Fu.



4. Performance on a temple-stage, 1937 in Jinghu



5. "Anti-Japanese Theatre Troupe", 1938 in Wuhan