

Collaborative Writing and the Spirit of the Age: A Small-Scale Archaeology of The Troubleshooters

WANG XIAOLU

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Wang Xiaolu

I

As a Chinese film completed at the end of 1988, *The Troubleshooters* continues to receive numerous screenings today. CCTV's Movie Channel airs it once or several times each year. The most recent documented broadcast took place at 8:00 p.m. on April 20, 2025, in CCTV-6's "Classic Replay" slot. The China Film Archive also re-screens the film from time to time. At the Seventh Beijing International Film Festival in 2017, two screenings were originally scheduled; tickets sold out immediately, and two additional screenings were subsequently added.

In what manner does a film made nearly forty years ago retain an audience today? The relationship between viewer and film differs across age cohorts, and every revival screening in effect restates the film's ideas. How, then, do young people today meet the gaze of the young wanzhu of 1988 in the cinema? Online responses and a small survey I conducted suggest that most young viewers today remain highly receptive to the film. Few report disliking or failing to understand it; another group says that, although they fully comprehend the wanzhu's spiritual world, they do not feel sufficiently close to it. The existence of the first group may show that the dramatic situation constructed by the film still persists and that *The Troubleshooters* continues to generate meanings in the present. The second group seems unable to grasp the historical logic of the film's "rebellion without cause"; it lacks the sensibility needed to connect the original context in which those ideas arose with present-day reality. Members of the third group are often young people with an affirmative attitude toward life. They resonate strongly with the wanzhu's rebelliousness, yet fear their radical avant-gardism and the risks it may pose to survival.

In any event, decades later *The Troubleshooters* still offers a living interface for two-way exchange. Among the countless films of the 1980s that function as "historical intermediaries" or transitional vehicles, it possesses extraordinary vitality. A publisher has recently decided to produce a book on the film, tracing its passage from novella to screen. China already had a tradition in the 1980s of publishing books devoted to individual films, but most appeared soon after a film's release. *The Troubleshooters* has now been in circulation for thirty-seven years. Because the historical climate changed abruptly, the film was neither adequately studied nor accorded its due standing at the time, and the work of articulating the questions of meaning surrounding it was never truly completed. Everything about the film therefore merits recovery from obscurity and renewed reflection. This opportunity also prompted director Mi Jishan to ask me for another essay for inclusion in the volume, and so I watched the film again.

Seen from the present, *The Troubleshooters* constitutes a comparatively thorough rupture within the series of works produced under the studio system of the 1980s. Most films made from the late 1970s through the 1980s retained a degree of continuity in performance style, intellectual substance, and the boundaries of expression. They may be understood as works created along an extension of the cinema of the 1950s through the 1970s. One may compare Hong Zicheng's literary-historical formulation of the 1980s as a "New Period along an extended line."¹ With *The*

¹Hong Zicheng 洪子诚, *Dangdai wenxue shiliu jiang* 当代文学十六讲 [Sixteen Lectures on Contemporary Literature] (Shanghai: Shanghai Wenyi Chubanshe, 2025), 177.

Troubleshooters, however, a great rift opened, and the expression of social thought in Chinese cinema acquired a new landmark.

On this viewing I also discovered that *The Troubleshooters* contains a relatively complete system of thought, one deeply embedded in the body of its age. The contours of that system still need to be traced and even evaluated from today's perspective. The composition of the film's narrative likewise calls for a small-scale archaeology, because that narrative has at least three sources: in addition to the credited screenwriters Wang Shuo and Mi Jishan, there is Xu Xing, whose name does not appear in the credits. The fact itself is not difficult to uncover. The harder questions are how this six-handed performance—this collaborative writing—was accomplished, and what such a creative mechanism meant in China during the 1980s.

II

Among the four films adapted from Wang Shuo's fiction in 1988, *The Troubleshooters* is generally considered the closest to its source. Its dialogue follows the novella with only minor abridgment. The other three films substantially transformed their originals. In *Samsara*, adapted from the novella *Surfacing*, the protagonist becomes trapped within the self and cannot break free; he eventually jumps to his death. The film's modernist train of thought was startlingly fresh, yet it feels as though the source text's time and space have been displaced. Like the novella, the film version of *The Troubleshooters* is intensely local and regionally inflected. This is a Chinese story set in Beijing in the late 1980s, with a clear object of address and a strong sense of actuality.

The Troubleshooters is renowned for respecting its source. Beneath the title in the opening credits, a line states that the film was adapted from Wang Shuo's novella of the same name. Yet more than thirty-five minutes of its 105-minute running time consist of plot material absent from the original—well over one third of the film. Subsequent verification shows that some of this material came from Xu Xing's *Variations without a Theme*, while another portion came from Mi Jishan himself. Mi was also the one who cut and reshaped episodes from *Variations without a Theme* so that they could be fused with Wang Shuo's novella.

The principal plot nevertheless comes from Wang Shuo. Three young men outside the conventional school-and-work-unit track—Yu Guan (played by Zhang Guoli), Yang Zhong (Ge You), and Ma Qing (Liang Tian)—establish the 3T Company, which solves people's problems, relieves their boredom, and takes the blame in their stead. Plot premises that just improbably out of reality are combined with a realist style, producing black humor and a tone of "sophisticated gray."² In the course of doing business they encounter all manner of clients. A proctologist, too busy with work, hires someone to go on a date with his girlfriend, Liu Meiping (Ma Xiaoqing). Bao Kang, a writer and entrepreneur whose talents have gone unrecognized, is to receive a "3T Literary Prize" at a gala arranged by the company. A housewife dissatisfied with her husband hires a substitute on whom she can vent her anger. When Ma Qing arrives and sees her smashing things while declaring, "I'm not living with him anymore," he too picks up the television set to hurl it to the floor; she stops him and complains that he is unprofessional.³

²Translator's note: 高级灰 (*gaoji hui*), literally "high-grade gray," is an aesthetic and design term for muted, complex tonalities. Here it names the film's deliberately understated tonal ambiguity.

³Editorial note: The manuscript reads "Yang Qing," a name that conflates Yang Zhong and Ma Qing. Since the described scene belongs to Ma Qing, the name has been regularized here.

Ding Xiaolu (Pan Hong), the principal female character in the film, is an old friend of Yu Guan's. Their relationship is simple in the novella: they take to each other, but no explicit romance is established. In the film they are clearly a cohabiting couple. Unmarried cohabitation still carried an avant-garde charge in 1980s Chinese cinema. Ding Xiaolu's story accordingly becomes deeper and more complete. It is also because of this intimacy that she later urges Yu Guan to apply to university; he refuses, and the two eventually separate on peaceful terms. This romantic plotline derives mainly from Xu Xing.

The film also adds a sequence in which members of the 3T Company work as hospital attendants, are sued by a client, and are then ordered to suspend operations for rectification. In the resulting crisis, Yu Guan becomes a stunt double in an action scene at a film studio and crashes through a car window. A production manager cheats him, and his plan to earn money to save the company fails. Dejected, the young men play cards in the office. The next morning they open the door to find a queue of clients waiting outside: many people have come to 3T for help. None of these episodes appears in the novella; all were added by Mi Jishan.

The term *wanzhu* denotes a "person of amusement" who makes play into a profession; it usually refers to an idler. Wang Shuo's source text resembles what would now be called wish-fulfillment fiction.⁴ Its first attraction is the pleasure of its language. When the young men encounter Zhao Yaoshun—an intellectual given to grand pronouncements in the novella, whose identity Mi Jishan directly changes to that of a professor of moral education—they find an especially inviting target for mockery. Zhao declares, "Young people, you have a future! You are living in great pain now. I shall appeal to society as a whole to care about you!" Yang Zhong replies without ceremony: "Please don't trouble yourself on my account. I'm just a dumb *bo-yi*."⁵

Wang Shuo's fiction excels in an exhilarating mode of speech. His characters acquire a kind of penetrating verbal lucidity: they can connect trivial incidents around them with affairs of state, history, and politics—with bodies of knowledge that have been fixed and sacralized—and make sport of the conjunction. The language may seem excessive, but it carries something of the Chan Buddhist shock of a sudden shout or blow.⁶ Through intense verbal stimulation it abruptly returns the listener to what is authentic and precipitates a kind of insight. Perhaps because the novella already offers such ample linguistic pleasure, it remains readable without further narrative engineering. It is therefore somewhat fragmentary, and its characters remain comparatively static, with little development. The film's story is more "complete." In particular, it adds the social system within which the *wanzhu* exist and extrapolates the fate they might encounter in Chinese society in the late 1980s. They do not, after all, live in a vacuum.

The year 1988 was called the "Year of Wang Shuo Cinema." The film establishment was shaken and rapidly mounted a critique. The 1990s debate over "the loss of humanism" was a major event in Chinese intellectual life, and it originated in criticism of Wang Shuo's fiction. The film world, however, criticized Wang even earlier, beginning with the films. In "A Brief

4Translator's note: 爽文 (*shuangwen*), literally "gratification fiction," is a contemporary Chinese term for popular fiction designed to deliver rapid, repeated satisfaction or wish fulfillment.

5Translator's note: 傻波依 (*sha bo-yi*) is a comic phonetic hybrid of the Chinese *sha* ("stupid") and the English word "boy." The hybrid form is retained to preserve its period slang and verbal play.

6Translator's note: 棒喝 (*banghe*) refers to the sudden shout or blow used in Chan Buddhist pedagogy to break discursive habits and precipitate insight.

Discussion of Wang Shuo Cinema,” Shao Mujun described *The Troubleshooters* and related works as “scenes of pathological lives lived by a segment of young people in a pathological society.” They “dwelt excessively on the entertainment effect of high-intensity episodes in the hooligan world, with the result that the films’ cognitive value remained at a relatively low level.” Viewers, he argued, could “see no positive force whatsoever propelling social progress,” because the films deconstructed every value, moral criterion, and code of conduct.⁷

Critics at the time plainly pathologized the life represented in *The Troubleshooters*. Watching the film today, and watching Mi Jishan’s creative reworking of the source, one instead finds that cinema’s transformation of the novella renders the young wanzhu’s real-world logic and intellectual trajectory in greater detail. Some of these ideas were latent in the original and later intensified by the director; others were absent from the original. The film thereby mounts a stronger defense of the young wanzhu’s legitimacy.

First, the young men’s speech is full of provocation, yet what they seek is no more than autonomy in their own lives. When Zhao Yaoshun expresses concern and says sympathetically, “You are living in great pain now,” they reply: Let me tell you, we are not in pain. Their will to autonomy is thoroughgoing. They will not even surrender the right to interpret themselves to an Other who comes to colonize them in the name of care. The professor of moral education fashioned by the film was a distinctive social phenomenon of the 1980s; here he symbolizes authority and intervention. The design of the character was explicitly inspired by the Shekou incident of 1988. On January 13 of that year, the China Merchants Building in Shekou hosted a “Dialogue between Youth-Education Experts and Shekou Youth.” Speakers including Qu Xiao declared that Shenzhen welcomed builders, not gold-seekers. Young people in Shenzhen asked what counted as a gold-seeker. Qu replied that the term referred to those who came to Shenzhen for high salaries rather than to contribute to national construction. The young people rejected his view; Qu concluded that Shenzhen’s youth had already gone down an “evil path.”

The professor of moral education continually pronounces judgment on the young people, placing them in a condition in which they may be governed. The film also heightens Zhao Yaoshun’s sense of hierarchy. To the young men working as hospital attendants he says, “What you contribute is cheap.” The film strengthens its negation of Zhao. In the novella he relieves his inner frustration by making anonymous telephone calls and swearing; the film adds a scene in which he secretly goes to the Great Wall Hotel to meet a nonexistent young female admirer. The film spares no effort in dismantling authority. When several young men who are “incapable of being serious about anything” establish a literary prize, the act becomes a parody of a system of cultural authorization—the most extreme possible deconstruction of authority.

The film’s will toward an autonomous life is directed not only at external authority but also at those closest to the protagonists. Both novella and film contain a scene in which Yu Guan’s father arrives at the 3T Company to demand an accounting. He always wants his son to report his thinking to him and lectures him that he must “do things beneficial to the people,” thus keeping the young man under supervision as though he were still a minor. Yu Guan responds with mockery and teasing. The film’s added episode in which Ding Xiaolu presses Yu Guan to sit the university entrance examination and is refused reads like a declaration that individual autonomy outranks love. Layer by layer, the text deepens and radicalizes its pursuit of an autonomous life.

7Shao Mujun 邵牧君, “Lüelun Wang Shuo dianying” 略论王朔电影 [A Brief Discussion of Wang Shuo Cinema], *Dianying yishu* 电影艺术 [Film Art], no. 5 (1989): 8.

The young wanzhu refuse interpellation.⁸ They may appear obstinate, but they will not compromise in their pursuit of an authentic self. This intense self-consciousness and individualism arose as a rebound from the history of collectivism; it was an intelligible historical momentum. Why is their language so aggressive? Authority plainly obstructs individual autonomy. The young wanzhu rise under the pressure of history, and consequently overshoot: their movements and voices are exaggerated. Yet the “hooligan flavor” critics heard in their language is not mere verbal swagger. It contains something like abstract historical revenge, accompanied by real bodily reactions, because those ideas once administered their concrete lives in every respect, governing both flesh and mind.

The rise of the individual is a defining feature of modern society. For us, it was also an ethical task at the outset of social construction. Whether an intense individual self-consciousness ultimately produces an inner void, and whether the individual can endow the self with meaning, are philosophical questions at another level. The academic and social contexts have since changed radically. Western scholarship long ago began to question individual subjectivity and has devoted itself to concepts of intersubjectivity and community. The mockery and suspicion directed at collectivity by young people of that era may strike young people today as incomprehensible. Each age has its own urgent tasks; attaining a genuine sense of history is therefore difficult.

The young wanzhu of that period did not, however, cling to the individual voice and lapse into solipsism. Habermas holds that spontaneous, purely self-generated organization seldom occurs: self-consciousness cannot be merely a phenomenon internal to the subject, but arises in social practice.⁹ The subject is constituted in the space between subjects, through communication and cooperation. The scene in which Yu Guan undertakes a dangerous stunt in order to rescue the company’s finances demonstrates his conscious willingness to assume responsibility for concrete others rather than for an abstract ideal. Yang Zhong and Ma Qing eventually stop him because the stunt is too dangerous. When they try to persuade Liu Meiping to separate peacefully from her boyfriend, their unfettered language certainly deconstructs the false love of everyday life; the film also shows their helplessness and seriousness in the face of emotional problems. They acknowledge the limits of their ability. Liu Meiping is later drawn to their genuineness and begins to join their company. This closely resembles the treatment in Huang Jianxin’s *Samsara*, adapted from Wang Shuo’s *Surfacing*: Shi Ba attracts Jing precisely because he never speaks in the false, grandiose, and vacuous idiom, making her feel at home in a life grounded in truth.¹⁰

Second, the 3T Company is more of a gimmick in the novella, whereas the film treats it with greater seriousness and constructs a trajectory from the suspension of its operations to its apparent rescue. Such small private companies carried a special allegorical resonance in Chinese

⁸Translator's note: 询唤 is rendered as "interpellation" in the Althusserian sense: the process by which ideology "hails" individuals and constitutes them as subjects.

⁹Stefan Müller-Dooch, *Yu'ergen Habermasi: Zhishi fenzi yu gonggong shenghuo* 于尔根·哈贝马斯：知识分子与公共生活 [Jürgen Habermas: Intellectuals and Public Life], trans. Liu Feng 刘风 (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2019), 437.

¹⁰Editorial note: The parenthetical phrase in the manuscript—"as in *Samsara* (and Huang Jianxin's *Surfacing*)"—is syntactically ambiguous. It has been regularized to reflect the intended relation: Huang Jianxin directed *Samsara*, adapted from Wang Shuo's novella *Surfacing*.

films of the 1980s. *The Troubleshooters* is certainly not a solemn story of entrepreneurship, but its narrator possesses an instinctive sensitivity to the subject matter and to survival. As a miniature social community, this emergent company is a schematic conception of the spirit of a new life. At the time, many scholars saw that characters in *The Troubleshooters* and other works by Wang Shuo refused to “elevate” their conduct and were willing to speak of private gain; they consequently denounced the works as “money worship.” This was to let one leaf obscure the whole view. A life in which the upper body soars in lofty ideals while the lower half remains unliberated cannot sustain itself; economic independence is the prerequisite for spiritual independence.¹¹

Contrary to contemporary critics who held that *The Troubleshooters* lacked cognitive value, I regard the foregoing as the film’s profound “cognitive value”—the realization of cinema’s cognitive function. In his preface to the forthcoming book on the film, director Feng Xiaogang writes that *The Troubleshooters* “used black humor to puncture the bubble of false, grandiose, and vacuous rhetoric. Under the good name of ‘altruism,’ it in fact broke open the shackles that had long imprisoned the legitimacy of ‘self-interest.’” As one who lived through the period, Feng clearly identifies the political implications of the *wanzhu* and the 3T Company. Reflection on altruism and self-interest was an important matter in the 1980s. One formula that emerged from the Pan Xiao incident—“subjectively for oneself, objectively for others”¹²—unwittingly converged with Adam Smith’s famous observation: “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest.”¹³ In China this is often condensed to: “It is not the baker’s kindness that keeps the people from hunger, but the baker’s profit.” Throughout the 1980s, when films represented self-employed household businesses or partnerships such as the 3T Company, these enterprises could acquire narrative legitimacy only after the souls and motives of those involved had been interrogated: were they working for society or for their own interests? One sentence in the novella defines the company’s position: “We are respectable businesspeople. Our purpose is to fill gaps and supply what is lacking in social services.” Yu Guan’s father responds: “If you are to solve the people’s problems, what do we need the government for?”

Today, “filling gaps and supplying what is lacking” can be understood in wholly positive terms. At the time, modes of social service were undergoing transformation. Previously, under the injunction to “serve the people,” the organization picked up the tab for the individual and arranged everything from material needs to spiritual life. Private actors were now permitted to intervene and to operate through the mechanisms of the capital market. In the scene Mi added at the end of the film, a long panning shot across the waiting crowd offers an exaggerated affirmation of the *renminxing*—the “people-oriented character”—of the 3T Company’s

11Editorial note: The manuscript reads 下本身 (“the lower self/body itself”), evidently a typographical error for 下半身 (“the lower half of the body”). The latter has been translated, and the intervention is recorded here.

12Translator’s note: The “Pan Xiao incident” refers to the nationwide discussion triggered in 1980 by a letter published under the pseudonym Pan Xiao in *China Youth*. The formula quoted here became emblematic of debates over individual interest and socialist morality.

13Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, 2 vols. (London: W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1776), bk. 1, chap. 2. The canonical English wording has been restored rather than back-translated from the Chinese quotation.

undertaking.¹⁴ The public needs the 3T Company and the young wanzhu. Here the film solemnly declares the legitimacy of this private enterprise and acknowledges the good of the market. Such a claim may require no emphasis today, but it was crucial in Chinese popular culture at the end of the 1980s. It also makes the film's social position more explicit and complete.

III

There is, moreover, a central question concerning the spiritual mechanism of the film's production: if more than one third of *The Troubleshooters* derives from other sources, why does it never feel abrupt or disjointed? Why does it still feel like a "complete Wang Shuo"? Frida Beckman, Deleuze's biographer, argues that the distinctive conjunction of Deleuze and Guattari in work and friendship "should not be interpreted as a union; it should be seen as a merging, a co-emergence achieved through thinking, an assemblage."¹⁵ In the creation of *The Troubleshooters*, the three narrators did not actually work together. Each made himself present through already completed writing, and their texts converged only in Mi Jianshan. Within those texts lay a recognition of one another across distance, and within that recognition a resonance of the spirit of the age.

Making a film, like acting, especially requires a sense of conviction and the courage to create. In a period of intellectual turbulence and confusion, it is vital to thread one's way through the crowd, to recognize and verify one another through reading, and thereby to gain encouragement: without this, the work cannot be completed. Like the operating mechanism of small companies such as 3T, creative work can function and generate the energy for action only through mutual recognition between subjects. Mi Jianshan had long admired Wang Shuo's fiction. He once wanted to adapt Wang's *Air Hostess*, but someone else bought the rights first—an episode that appears at the beginning of Wang's *Surfacing*. Later, when Mi discovered Wanzhu in the sixth issue of *Harvest* in 1987, he recalled: "I received the magazine that day and finished it that night. The next day I hurried to find the director of our studio's literary department. I said we had to move quickly on this. I was tremendously excited."¹⁶ After the literary department and arts committee of the Emei Film Studio discussed and approved the project, Mi quickly traveled from Chengdu to Beijing. He went straight to Wang Shuo's parents' home on Fuxing Road and purchased the adaptation rights.

I have described elsewhere why Mi became so captivated by the novella. His path through cinema in the 1980s was beset by setbacks, and he carried a pent-up sense of grievance. Reading Wanzhu, he recognized it as a turning point for Wang Shuo: "Before this, Wang Shuo stood between tradition and rebellion. From this point on, he became completely rebellious and satirical, directly mocking the lofty convictions of traditional ideas." This corresponded perfectly to the director's inner world. The story could be used to complete his own expression and

¹⁴Translator's note: 人民性 (*renminxing*) is a socialist aesthetic and political term denoting a work's orientation toward, representation of, or grounding in "the people." "People-oriented character" is used here to preserve that conceptual specificity.

¹⁵Frida Beckman, *Gilles Deleuze*, trans. Xia Kaiwei 夏开伟 (Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 2019), 51.

¹⁶All quotations from Mi Jianshan in this article derive from the author's in-person or WeChat interviews with him over many years.

release. I have previously discussed the film's spiritual autobiographical dimension, or its auteurist character, from this perspective.¹⁷

The contract was signed and the deposit paid, after which Wang Shuo was asked to adapt the screenplay. Judging from the history of his screenwriting, Wang seems to have had no prior experience as a screenwriter. Yet his mind worked rapidly, and he delivered the script within two or three days. "I had not yet left Beijing when Wang Shuo called to say that the adaptation was finished and told me to hurry over to his home." Wang had taken two copies of *Harvest*, cut the novella into segments, pasted them onto A4 sheets, and written in scene numbers—1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6—adding a few notes here and there. He handed the director a thick stack. "I told him I still had many ideas. He said, 'If you have ideas, take it back and do it yourself.' So I took it home and hurried back to rewrite the screenplay."

During the adaptation, Mi recalled, "I picked up Xu Xing's *Variations without a Theme* again. I felt there was a great deal I wanted to move over directly. I asked the assistant director to find Xu Xing and buy the rights. We were not buying the whole thing or adapting his complete story; we needed only some of its episodes." For that reason, Xu Xing received no screen credit.

When Mi Jiashan confronted three texts—the writers' texts and the text of his own life—a situation arose akin to what philosophers call "thinking together." Through mutual openness and embrace, one's own ideas necessarily become clearer and firmer; they can also be deepened and excavated at more complex levels. At the same time, this is a transmission of mental and bodily force. Such is my reasoned conjecture about the process of interweaving. The three texts here do not primarily oppose one another or generate countervailing tension; instead, they support and corroborate one another. The *wanzhu* in Wang Shuo's novella refuse to accept usurpatory intervention by others. They oppose a life under domination and are content to inhabit the margins. The pursuit of the "I" in Xu Xing's novella is entirely consistent with this. The "I" experiences a profound contact with the depths of his own mind and is committed to maintaining personal integrity—plainly also Mi Jiashan's inner condition. Thus, when the indistinct Ding Xiaolu of the source novella was grafted onto the trajectory of Lao Q, the female protagonist of *Variations without a Theme*, the overall structure and its ideas became much clearer.

In literary histories, Xu Xing and Wang Shuo are often placed side by side. In 1989 Beijing Normal University Press published *Malady of the Century: No Other Choice—Selected Fiction of the "Beat Generation"*, edited by Chen Lei. Its first three works were Liu Sola's *You Have No Choice*, Xu Xing's *Variations without a Theme*, and Wang Shuo's *Wanzhu*.¹⁸ Literary-world lore has it that Wang's early writing consisted largely of sentimental fiction and that his style changed dramatically with *Wanzhu* because he had read Xu Xing's *Variations without a Theme*. The latter, in turn, was said to have been influenced by the American novel *The Catcher in the Rye*, because no such narrative voice had previously appeared in the history of Chinese fiction.

17Wang Xiaolu 王小鲁, *Dianying yizhi* 电影意志 [The Will of Cinema] (Chengdu: Sichuan People's Publishing House, 2019), 32.

18Chen Lei 陈雷, ed., *Shiji bing: Bie wu xuanze—"Kua diao de yidai" xiaoshuo xuancui* 世纪病: 别无选择——"垮掉的一代"小说选粹 [Malady of the Century: No Other Choice—Selected Fiction of the "Beat Generation"] (Beijing: Beijing Normal University Press, 1989). The manuscript's footnote reads 世界病 ("Malady of the World"), but the verified title is 世纪病 ("Malady of the Century"); the latter is used here.

Variations without a Theme appeared in the seventh issue of People's Literature in 1985; Harvest published Wanzhu in its sixth issue of 1987.¹⁹ Their possible mutual influence remains an unresolved case in literary history. Xu Xing has earnestly denied that *The Catcher in the Rye* influenced *Variations without a Theme* and has repeatedly defended himself on the point. In the fourth issue of *Jiangnan* in 2015, he said: "Some people say that, among writers who overturned falsity, I was the first—that I influenced Wang Shuo, and so on. I do not think so at all. Literature has no seating order. Do not worry about other people's influence. What matters is that you clearly express what you most want to express." Xu thus considers both alleged lines of influence nonexistent. Yet if we attend to the creative psychology disclosed by the "anxiety of influence," perhaps both did exist. This, of course, is neither plagiarism nor imitation. The writers simply found a form for the expression of their thought: a stable inner world met and answered an external form. Like the film's mechanism of production, this is collaborative writing—you within me and I within you, mutually confirming and encouraging one another, even when the contact occurs only through reading rather than through interaction in the world. Such action propels cultural history forward. The history of human culture is a history of collaborative writing of this kind.

Despite the director's integration, the film's narrative inevitably retains something fragmentary and anthology-like. Its audiovisual dimension reintegrates these materials a second time, and does so with great success. The film captures the clamorous atmosphere of the period. From the opening black screen, it lays in jagged fragments of street noise recorded synchronously: the pop song "My Home Is on the Loess Plateau," an alarm, the sound of people queuing before the Chairman Mao Memorial Hall, a street news vendor crying out "major breaking news," and then Wang Di's urban rock. Visually, a succession of short shots is assembled: congested traffic, modern high-rises, construction sites in full swing, bewildered crowds, young people breakdancing on balconies, a domestic-worker market, a girl wearing a T-shirt printed with the words "FOREIGN DEVIL," and a foreign woman wearing one that reads "NO FOREIGN EXCHANGE CERTIFICATES."²⁰

All of these were new phenomena at the time, street scenes recorded on location by the cinematographer through documentary methods. As sound and image are interwoven, the film gradually composes an urban symphony, presenting an era entangled in ideology yet full of vitality. Within this integration, every fragment gives off a metaphysical radiance.

Through the young men's work, the novella *Wanzhu* presents a panorama of the age's social types. People seem caught in a vertigo of ideas. How does Mi Jishan render this condition? He creates an astonishing T-shaped catwalk sequence at the 3T Literary Awards gala, now the signature scene of *The Troubleshooters*. This eight- or nine-minute sequence consumed one quarter of the film's budget and ultimately pushed the production over budget.

It begins with two comic-role performers from Peking opera executing a chain of backward somersaults close to the stage floor. Then lavishly dressed fashion models emerge slowly and

19Xu Xing 徐星, "Wuzhuti bianzou" 无主题变奏 [Variations without a Theme], *Renmin wenxue* 人民文学 [People's Literature], no. 7 (1985). The manuscript gives no. 5; contemporaneous bibliographic records identify no. 7, and the correction has been made transparently.

20Translator's note: 洋鬼子 ("foreign devil") is a historically derogatory epithet for foreigners. Foreign Exchange Certificates were special coupons or currency used in China for transactions involving foreign visitors and imported goods before their abolition in the 1990s. Both slogans are reproduced literally because their collision is part of the film's documentary texture.

move toward the audience with sensual bearing. Emperors and generals, May Fourth youths, landlords and poor peasants, capitalists and workers take the stage in succession. They are joined by a country notable and a concubine, Red Guards and breakdancing youths, and women in bikinis. It is said that twelve women of the Qing court, wearing flowerpot-soled shoes ten centimeters high, also appeared with a little emperor only a few years old, but this passage was cut before the film's release. Nor is the sequence merely a fashion display. The figures onstage interact; landlords and the poor even come into conflict. At the end, however, everyone joins in a grand celebration and dances disco together.

This is no transitional number. It is a self-contained work of conceptual art. Many years later, Hong Kong's M+ museum purchased the under-ten-minute footage specifically and screened it as a complete work. Mi Jiasan believes that, in a playful way, he packed the condition of the age into this scene. He also had a conscious theoretical premise: the sequence was his application of the concept of the montage of attractions, learned at the Beijing Film Academy.

The montage of attractions combines segments detached from the structure of the plot in order to generate powerful emotions and ideas and transmit them to the audience. Although this sequence appears within the everyday business of the 3T Company and thus possesses a plausible logic within the story, one can feel its intense subjectivity: it is organized according to the creator's conceptual design. Ideological signs that would ordinarily be violently antagonistic acquire a synchronic co-presence here, and that fact is itself startling. This was an open era in which every kind of idea surged forth without discrimination. At the awards ceremony, for example, the prizewinning author holds a trophy made from a pickle crock while the plaintive music from the film *Bitter Cauliflower* plays over the scene: "When will the suffering people be liberated?!"

In *Variations without a Theme*, Xu Xing includes an examination scene. The "I" sits in a university classroom staring blankly at a question about thinking in images. Xu writes: "What is thinking in images? It is Othello striding in the stage gait of a tongchui painted-face role and singing a passage in xipi and erhuang, while Old Master Gao, wearing a melon-rind skullcap, executes an overhead lift and Xianglin's Wife performs a scissors-style transformation jump. That is thinking in images. . . ."21

The catwalk sequence may be the finest possible example of thinking in images, and it seems faintly connected with this sentence from the novella. Yet what the footage discloses is the externalization of the general spirit of the period. Also in 1988, Hao Zhiqiang of the Beijing Film Academy's animation department made a strikingly similar statement in his graduation short, *Wind*. Period-costume figures painted with Peking-opera facial designs, women in qipao, and political figures surge together in the eight-minute film. It presents a contradictory, chaotic, yet inclusive age, and its creative conception closely resembles that of the catwalk sequence. The short was never shown domestically and was completed six months before *The Troubleshooters*, so neither creator could have seen the other's work at the time.

The spirit of the age slowly emerges between the discursive productions of different speaking subjects. Through the confirmations that passed between himself and different texts, Mi

21Translator's note: 小花脸 and 铜锤大花脸 are Peking-opera role types; *xipi* and *erhuang* are its principal melodic systems. Old Master Gao is the patriarch of Ba Jin's novel *Family*, and Xianglin's Wife is the protagonist of Lu Xun's "New Year's Sacrifice." Xu Xing's sentence deliberately collides incompatible theatrical, literary, and athletic vocabularies.

Jiashan found his own narrative voice and audiovisual language. Almost the entire film uses synchronous location sound, uncommon at the time. There is also a great deal of improvisation—for example, Ma Xiaoqing pats Ge You's head and says, "This is full of wisdom"—and extensive location shooting. Yang Zhong and Liu Meiping's date on Chongwenmen Avenue, as well as Yu Guan's attempt to console the heartbroken Liu in a small street shop, were shot on the fly after the crew hastily set up a camera on location. Bystanders sometimes gathered, and many pedestrians can be seen looking directly into the lens. In Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless* (1960), this was elevated into an aesthetic device. Together with numerous authentic traces of the period, it gives the film unprecedented archival value and a powerful texture of actuality.

The Troubleshooters is an embodiment of the spirit of its age. Perhaps many films of the 1980s were embodiments of their age, but they often require more interpretation before we can recognize the period through them, and our reunion with history is correspondingly indirect. In *The Troubleshooters*, the embodiment is immediate. This immediacy arose from Mi Jiashan's struggle and negotiation with the administrative authorities—a process that may deserve an essay of its own. In sum, the creator's cultural disposition and the contingencies of the historical moment made the film a direct manifestation of the spirit of the age. Its openness and candor were unprecedented. Here we experience our most intimate reunion with the 1980s. I would call *The Troubleshooters* "a monument to the age."