Volume 19 | (2017) Issue 5   Article 4

Problem-based Variations in Teaching Stephen Dobyns's 'Kansas' in China

Tao Zou

University of Electronic Science and Technology of China

Follow this and additional works at: https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb

Part of the Comparative Literature Commons, Education Commons, and the Reading and Language Commons

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, Purdue University Press selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Recommended Citation

Volume 19 Issue 5 (December 2017) Article 4
Tao Zou and Hong Zeng,
"Problem-based Variations in Teaching Stephen Dobyns's 'Kansas' in China"
<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol19/iss5/4>

Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* **19.5 (2017)**
Special Issue *Against the "Death" of the Discipline of Comparative Literature*
Ed. Shunqing Cao
<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol19/iss5/>

Abstract: In their article "Problem-based Variations in Teaching Stephen Dobyns's 'Kansas' in China" Tao Zou and Hong Zeng discuss the multiple variations in their experience of teaching foreign literature in China, with the teaching of Stephen Dobyns's short story "Kansas" as an example and the positive results of their approach. Variations in a broad sense occur with the differences in the choice of literary text, translation, interpretation, and canonization. All these variations can be used to reflect on and resolve major current issues in teaching foreign literature, and to stage cross-cultural communication and creativity through foreign literature pedagogy.

Tao ZOU and Hong ZENG

Problem-based Variations in Teaching Stephen Dobyns's "Kansas" in China

In the field of comparative literature, while the traditional French school looks for "sameness," some other famous scholars, such as François Jullien, emphasize "otherness." Unlike either of them, the Variation theory proposed by Shunqing Cao aims to achieve a "harmony of both" (*Variation Theory* 232). Hence the following questions: How to realize such harmony? Can one provide, or create a speculative case to demonstrate such harmony? For the writers of this article variation is always a dynamic interaction between the involved sides, rather than the dominance of one side over the other. The traditional French School emphasizes the influence of one culture upon another, the US-American School aims to find the universal through analogy, while variation theory attempts to reach a state synthesizing dominant influence and universal analogy, similar to that depicted by the Chinese *Taiji*, within which two forces *Yin* and *Yang* interact constantly.

Figure 1. The image of *Taiji*

As teachers of foreign literature, we try to reach such harmony between foreign culture and local culture in our teaching practice. we realize that in our teaching, variations occur in different aspects. Variation here mainly refers to the adaptation and domestication in the reception of a foreign text. Firstly, the list of works we choose for students to discuss is quite different from those provided by foreign authoritative or canonical course books. The criterion for our choice of a literary work is that it can be applied to the contemporary Chinese context. In other words, we mainly choose those works which can cast special insight into essential problems confronting contemporary Chinese students. These problems may be moral, political, psychological, epistemological, existential, or aesthetic. From our teaching experiences, we have learned that many students regard a foreign literature course as a kind of dessert, something they can easily do without in their lives. For such students, only by illustrating that a foreign literary work can have deep connection with the essential problems in their own lives, and can cast profound insight into them, a teacher can foster their strong interest in reading foreign literature. Therefore, our teaching plan is problem-based. We start by sorting out the key problems confronting our students' lives, and then select works most powerfully addressing these problems.

Secondly, variations are brought about through the process of Chinese translation. Since the majority of students struggle to read the original texts, they prefer to read the translation, which may lead to drastically different understanding, even misunderstanding.

Thirdly, the most important variation happens in the interpretation of the literary works. We do not provide any background information before students read the literary texts, trying to make these works open texts for the students that allow for individual interpretation without intervention. Although this kind of interpretation strategy seems to be very similar to the close reading method espoused by New Criticism, they have contrastingly different orientations. While the close reading of New Criticism is text-oriented, the interpretations we want the students to produce is problem-based. In the classroom discussion, we often ask the students a series of questions which may lead to some answers to the key problems we sorted out in the first step. Students' interpretations are likely to be quite different from those of the readers in the texts' original context, and/or from the purpose of the implied author, due to conspicuous cultural differences and the difference of personal experiences. Then we try to explore the causes for such difference in interpretations, and make comparisons between students' interpretations and those provided by the author and foreign readers. The students' cultural schemata and personal experiences inform their individual reading. At the same time the texts' heterogeneous elements and artistic expressions can expand or reshape the readers' existent knowledge and beliefs. In this process of interaction between the students and the texts, the heterogeneous elements gradually begin to surface and are recognized and respected, as well utilized to work out possible solutions to the major concerns of the Chinese readers. Such a teaching approach,

in our view, can be regarded as an effective endeavor to harmonize sameness and otherness in cross-cultural study.

Fourthly, the above three kinds of variation are likely to bring about variation in the canonization of foreign literature. Since the texts are used to address major concerns in contemporary China, they may gain popularity in Chinese discussion platforms. Furthermore, if the interpretations of these texts are put into Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) or other web-based formats, they may become instantly popular and earn a notable place in the study of world literature. In the following sections, we will take our teaching of Stephen Dobyns's short story "Kansas" as an example to illustrate the above-mentioned variations, and to show the exciting results produced by such variations.

Among the primary problems listed for discussions in my classes of "Selected Readings of Foreign Literature," moral crisis is of the most central and enduring concern. In China, the recent ten years witnessed an obvious moral regression which aroused great anxiety in the public conscience, as well as empathy. Among a series of notorious moral events, the "Peng Yu Case" in 2006 is generally regarded as the first one which caused the biggest national controversy and in fact has caused people to hesitate before offering aid to the elderly. At a Nanjing bus station on 20 November 2006, a young man named Peng Yu and a retiree Mrs. Xu Shoulan accidentally collided with each other. As a result, Mrs. Xu fell down and sustained a bone fracture. Peng Yu helped her up and accompanied Mrs. Xu to a hospital with her family members. On 12 January 2007, Mrs. Xu sued Peng Yu for knocking her down and asked for 136,000 RMB for compensation. In the first trial the court decided that Peng Yu should pay 45,000 RMB to Mrs. Xu. This verdict dissatisfied both sides. Peng Yu asked help from social media while related news coverage and discussions proliferated across the internet in China. The majority of news reports depicted Peng Yu as a wronged hero, a victim of other people's intrigues, and blamed Mrs. Xu and her family for their supposed ingratitude and greed (Gong, "Reconciliation" 2008). Such blame on Mrs. Xu and sympathy for Peng Yu gave rise to the dangerous public opinion that one should not help injured people, for fear of retaliation and lawsuits. In the wake of the "Peng Yu Case," a lot of similar events were reported, which exacerbated the moral crisis, and intensified people's anxiety over doing good for fear of unjust retribution.

Many people and organizations in China expressed great concern for such moral crisis and hoped to find ways out of the moral dilemma. A lot of measures, both privately and officially, have been taken to restore confidence in human being's inner goodness and to protect the heroes' interest. The negative impact upon people's mutual trust caused by similar events as that of "Peng Yu Case," however, still lingers in public memory.

The short story "Kansas," written by contemporary American writer Stephen Dobyns, presents a good opportunity for exploring the varied dimensions of such moral crises. "Kansas" was included in *The Best American Short Stories 1999* (Tan and Kenison 48-54) and some widely-used textbooks, such as *Literature: Reading, Reacting, Writing* (Kirszner and Mandell 95-100). Although "Kansas" gained critical acclaim as soon as it was published, few Chinese readers know it. It is a story about the protagonist's reaction and possible choices in a dangerous situation and the consequences of such choices. "Kansas" illustrates Dobyns's capability to create with his writing a mirror for us to reflect "the dark within us all" (Vogel and Tilley, "Modern Poetry" 47) and then pushes us towards purgation.

The story can be divided into two parts. The first part was set in the early 1930s, during the period of the Great Depression in the United States. The protagonist, at the age of nineteen, on the back-country Kansas road, was looking to hitchhike to a summer school. He had waited for three hours before a Plymouth coupe passed him by, with a man and a woman laughing in the car. Half an hour later a farmer driving a Ford pickup stopped for him. The boy climbed into the front seat, and immediately saw a forty-five revolver lying beside the farmer. The farmer asked whether and when the boy saw a Plymouth coupe pass by, and told the boy that he was running after the man and the woman in it and he was going to shoot them, because the woman was his wife and the man was her lover. The boy dared not talk much to the farmer and got off when the pickup reached Lawrence, where his summer school was located. Just before he got off, the farmer warned him not to tell the police. The boy agreed and didn't tell anyone. He tried to search for relevant news from the local newspaper, but never found anything reported. That's the end of the first part. The second part is a deathbed scene, the protagonist is dying at the age of seventy-nine, surrounded by his family. He hallucinates four possible choices related to the event told in the first part of the story. The four choices are very thought-provoking, highlighting the moral dilemma the boy had been confronted with sixty years ago. we find that a detailed analysis and discussion on these alternative scenes is very helpful for preparing my students and myself for similar situations of moral crisis. According to my survey, none of my students had ever heard of "Kansas" before they took my class, and no textbook

edited by Chinese scholars had included this story, so my problem-based choice of that story as course material may initiate a new usage of that story.

As part of setting up for the discussion, we gauge students' attitude towards the moral crisis before any relevant discussions are conducted and comments are made in the class. We ask the students to watch a news report video clip about "Liang Ya Case" and then answer Questionnaire (I) quickly.

In the "Liang Ya Case," a 35-year old IBM project manager named Liang Ya fell down the stairs of Shenzhen metro station in the morning of 17 February 2014. In the next two minutes, six adults passed by without doing anything to help Liang Ya. Later, two people walked by and then returned to check Liang Ya's condition and informed the railway staff of the situation. Unfortunately, nobody had the confidence and skill to take some active measure to save Liang Ya, and she died before the ambulance arrived ("Liang Ya Died of Waiting?" <http://news.cntv.cn/2014/02/28/VIDE13936023591 53272.shtml>).

In order to elicit sincere answers from students, before the students answered the questionnaire, we explained to them that the purpose of this brief survey was to illustrate our capability and courage to face humanity's universal potential for harmful egotism and selfishness, and we assured them that we would share with them our own experience later. Our questionnaire includes the following two questions: (1) What's your most probable reaction if you were one of the passersby in the "Liang Ya Case"? (2) Why do you think the passersby shied away from helping Liang Ya? Students are required to finish the questionnaire in three minutes. Such a short time can help them to respond as spontaneously and unaffectedly as possible.

We have tested four hundred and sixty students, all of whom came from the thirteen classes that have taken my course, "Selected Readings of Foreign Literature" through six semesters from the year of 2014 to 2016. The results of Questionnaire (I) were as follows:

Answers to question (1): your most probable reaction	percentage
Do nothing and just walk by	28%
Inform the staff or policeman	58%
Besides informing the staff or policeman, take some active measures, such as trying to talk with her, staying with her, calling a familiar person who has first-aid knowledge, asking help from other passersby etc.	14%

Answers to question (2): why the passersby shied away from helping Liang Ya	percentage
She is a stranger and helping her may be very troublesome.	32%
Influenced by many news reports similar to "Peng Yu Case," the passersby are afraid of blackmail.	26%
The passersby are in a hurry and have something urgent to do.	18%
The passersby are lack of first-aid knowledge and capability.	13%
Each passerby assumes that there are many other people who can help her.	11%

Table 1. The results of Questionnaire (1) and (2)

From the results shown in the above forms, we know that students were strongly influenced by the moral crisis raised by the "Peng Yu Case" and similar events. The reasons students provided in the questionnaire for passersby' indifference also mirrored their own concerns for jeopardizing themselves in helping others.

In order to check their answers, before we declared the survey results to them, we asked them to guess the percentage of their classmates who would choose to do nothing and pass by in the "Liang Ya Case." To my great surprise, the percentage soared up to 60%. Then we couldn't help asking them, "Do you think that you can hope that others will save your family members if they were in a dangerous situation as Liang Ya was in?" There was a long silence after posing this question, and many students looked very sad. Then we explained to them that it did not mean that they were not

sincere in answering the questionnaire, but that they knew their selfishness and egotism and wanted to present a better self. This interpretation cheered them up a little bit. At the same time, they seemed to realize that the darkness of the moral crisis was seeping into them.

After the questionnaire was done, we asked them what first impression the story "Kansas" made on them and what questions they had about the story. The questions they feel most puzzled about, and put forward most frequently are as following:

A. The boy's reaction in the first part of the story is very normal, and most people may react similarly. He should not feel responsible for the farmer's possible tragic outcome. If so, does it imply that the boy's inability to let it go only bespeaks of an excessive sensitivity on his part rather than true moral dilemma?

B. What are the implications of the four alternative scenes in the second part of the story?

The above questions reflect the impact of the moral crisis upon their interpretations of "Kansas." Judging by their answers to Questionnaire (I), we detect that they may feel the farmer's problem was a private matter and letting it interfere with the stranger-protagonist's private life can cause potential danger and trouble to the protagonist. Furthermore, since the farmer was dangerously carrying a gun, the protagonist's shying away from such kind of situation is very normal and understandable, and did not mean that the protagonist was cowardly or irresponsible.

In order to push students further to reflect on the above questions, we guided the class discussions to focus on two important issues: how to understand the farmer, and the relationship between responsibility and subjectivity presented by the four alternative scenes.

Students often ignored the farmer's impact on shaping the protagonist. Therefore, we asked them to focus on him first. At the beginning of discussion, the expressions students most frequently used to describe the farmer are negative, such as simple-minded, stubborn, and imprudent. Then we asked them to explain why the farmer stopped his car for the boy. The discussion of this question led to two of their important findings: the farmer is kind-hearted. He may stop for the boy involuntarily as he often did before, or he may hope to find someone to chat and distract him from the bloody revenge he planned. However, some students did not agree with the second possibility (we did not notice the second possibility at the beginning either), arguing that the farmer was very determined to kill for revenge. To support their argument, they provided two cultural reasons: the tough and masculine cowboy images they constantly saw in US-American films, and the popularity of gun culture in the United States. What's more, they think the following three textual clues can further verify their point:

A. The farmer and his forty-five seemed to stand between him and that future. They formed a wall that the boy was afraid to climb over. (Dobyns, "Kansas" 96)

B. The farmer kept touching a red boil on the side of his neck, and asked, "When you have something wicked, what do you do?" Then he answered himself, "You stomp it out, that's what you do---you stomp it out." (96)

C. More than by the farmer's gun, he had been frightened by the strength of the farmer's resolve. It had been like a chunk of stone and compared to it the boy had felt as soft as a piece of white bread. (96)

Because the students cited the Chinese translation rather than the original English text, we had to make sure first whether there were obvious variations between the source text and the target text that may influence students' interpretations. It turned out that the Chinese version did strengthen the farmer's determination and corresponding impact upon the boy's reaction. In the first textual clue, the Chinese version is "农夫和他的左轮手枪就矗立在他和那个未来之间，成了一堵让他惧于攀越的高墙," which omitted translating "seemed to," and turned the uncertain tone in the source text into an affirmative one in Chinese. As to the second textual clue, "You stomp it out" is translated into "你肯定会下狠手解决掉," meaning literally "You will certainly use a heavy hand to get rid of it." For the Chinese readers, the word "肯定" (certainly) enhanced the farmer's resolve. Thus one's impression of the boy's fear triggered by the forty-five revolver and of the farmer's resolve was intensified, as a result the boy's responsibility for the incident was alleviated, and the readers' sympathy with him strengthened, all these reinforced the effect produced by the third textual clue.

After exploring the differences between the Chinese version and the source text, we asked students why the farmer repeated saying "You stomp it out," and whether the repetition in his words and his touching the red boil manifested the farmer's determination or implied, instead, his hesitation and inner struggling. After debating, together with the students we reached another important consensus that the farmer was unwilling to carry out the murder. The logic reasoning is as following: First, if he were really determined to kill for revenge, he would not pick up the boy, whose hitchhiking will slow down and obstruct the farmer's revenge; Second, his keeping touching the red boil on his neck implied his nervousness about the murdering, since one tends to betray subconsciously such kind of body language in a state of nervousness; and third, when one repeatedly says something before that thing is done, it is likely that he has not made up his mind about it yet and hopes to gather strength through compulsive self-persuasion and justification.

Discerning the farmer's kindness and hesitation is essential for the understanding of the protagonist's lifetime remorse and upset feeling when looking back on the hitchhiking incident. From the students' questions presented earlier, we know that they did not quite understand the protagonist's moral dilemma, and regarded his moral self-interrogation as excessive. The farmer's kindness to help the protagonist and hesitation to take revenge established an emotional and moral tie between the farmer and the protagonist, and the fact that they are totally strangers to each other highlights Emmanuel Levinas's idea of "unlimited responsibility" for the welfare of others (*Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* 10).

After recognizing the farmer's positive personality, students are required to summarize the factors shaping their previous negative impression of the farmer. Besides the influence of U.S. cowboy films and gun culture, and of the variations in the Chinese translation, another important factor they provided is the negative impact of moral crisis in question, which leads to distrust between strangers and resistance to get involved in others' lives. The formation of a negative image of the farmer can reduce the readers' sense of guilt which felt by them through empathy with the main character.

In the dying protagonist's hallucination, the four alternative scenes in the second part of "Kansas" unfolded in sequence. For the sake of convenience, we name them $Scene_1$, $Scene_2$, $Scene_3$, $Scene_4$ respectively, and the corresponding scene in the story's first part as $Scene_0$. To clear up students' confusion about the significance of the four alternative scenes and their unfolding orders, we asked them to analyze the self-image of the protagonist in each scene judging by the 19-year old protagonist's reaction to the farmer's behavior. The results of our discussion are shown in the following table:

Scene	The 19-year old protagonist's reaction to the farmer's behavior	Self-image of the protagonist
$Scene_0$	The boy dare not talk much with the farmer, and left the farmer near his destination, without reporting to the police.	Undetermined
$Scene_1$	The boy witnessed the farmer's killing of his wife and her lover and then his suicide.	A helpless bystander
$Scene_2$	The boy persuaded the farmer to give up the murdering plan and accompanied him to the police station to ask for help.	A successful negotiator
$Scene_3$	The boy dare not talk much with the farmer, but he reported to the police after getting off, only to find that the farmer was killed by policemen an hour later.	A shameful traitor
$Scene_4$	The boy tried hard to persuade the farmer to change his plan but failed, and bravely stood in front of the farmer's wife and was shot dead accidently by the farmer.	A brave hero vs. a pathetic victim

Table 2. Analysis of the self-image of the protagonist in each scene.

In $Scene_0$, the protagonist never knew what happened to the farmer. This uncertainty of the final result led to the indetermination regarding the protagonist's self-image, which troubled him over his lifetime. Stephen Dobyns said in a 2004 interview that his writing impulse was to "freeze some moments" as life keeps moving in time ("An Interview"). Freezing some essential moments by writing is actually one kind of attempt towards self-definition. Although life is tedious, we try to define ourselves by remembering some key moments or turning points. To the protagonist in "Kansas," the hitchhiking experience with the farmer was a turning point. What's tragic to him was that he could not

find an appropriate position for himself in that experience to fulfill his self-definition, due to the unknown end of that experience. Dobyns holds that "something can only be defined when it's settled" ("An Interview" <http://www.cortlandreview.com/features/04/spring/stephen_dobyns_intervi ew.html >). His self-defined position echoes Hanna Arendt's argument that one's essence "can come into being only when life departs, leaving behind nothing but a story" (*The Human Condition* 193). When the protagonist in "Kansas" was approaching the end of his life, he was struggling for a fixed definition of his subjectivity, of his essence. The four alternative scenes reflected this struggling process.

Contradictory arguments occurred in the interpretations of Scene$_4$. To our surprise, about one third of students held that the protagonist died as a pathetic victim rather than as a brave hero. We took it for granted, according to my experiences of reading western literature, that the implied author depicted the protagonist as a hero, to show his sympathy with ordinary people and his respect for the nobility in human nature. Therefore, we had not expected students' argument that the protagonist died as a pathetic victim. It made us think retrospectively on the students' cognitive schema, and we judged that the moral crisis triggered by a series of events similar to "Peng Yu Case" might have played a key role in the students' "pathetic victim" model when interpreting the protagonist in "Kansas." As mentioned before, Peng Yu is depicted by a lot of news reports and comments as a wronged hero, and a victim of other people's intrigues. Within such a context, it's natural for students to regard the protagonist's action in Scene$_4$ as meaningless, and such interpretation corresponds well with the result of Questionnaire (I).

We discussed with students the logical order of the four scenes, hopefully, to change the negative judgment towards the protagonist in Scene$_4$, by highlighting the psychological motivations underpinning the struggling process. The protagonist's reaction to the farmer's words and behavior in Scene$_1$ is most similar to that in Scene$_0$, and the result is most devastating among all scenes in terms of the loss of life, since three people died in that scene. Because the choice in Scene$_1$ is closest to "reality" and leads to the greatest loss, it was pumped up first into the protagonist's consciousness. Such a result, implying the self-image of the protagonist as a helpless bystander and a failure, frightened him and consequently pushed him to another extreme, an idealistic image of himself, as a psychological retreat. Thus Scene$_2$ sprang up in the wake, to suppress the derogative and humiliating self-image of the protagonist in Scene$_1$, and to soothe his fear and shame. The self-image of the protagonist reflected in Scene$_2$, however, was too ideal to be credible, since it's almost an impossible mission for a nineteen-year old boy to dissuade the middle-aged angry farmer from revenge on his adulterous wife and her lover, and to make the farmer to report himself to the police. Therefore, Scene$_2$ was more a sort of involuntary self-deceit on the part of the protagonist, and in self-doubt and as a corrective, the protagonist's mind had to dangle towards another direction. In Scene$_3$, the boy reported to the police to prevent the farmer from killing, only to find that the policemen shot the farmer dead. Although only one person died, the farmer's death was probably most upsetting to the protagonist, since the farmer helped the boy's hitchhiking and the boy had promised not to report him to the police. The protagonist may feel such deep remorse for the tragic end of the farmer that he believed he should shoulder the responsibility for the farmer's death, and replace the farmer's life with his own as an atonement. Therefore, as the psychological reaction to his guilty feeling involved in the outcome of Scene$_3$, in Scene$_4$, the protagonist chose to stand between the farmer and his wife, and got shot by the farmer. Just as Levinas said, "It is the very fact of finding oneself while losing oneself" (*Otherwise* 11). The protagonist found himself while losing himself, through "one supreme act" in Arendt's terms. According to Arendt, "Only a man who does not survive his one supreme act remains the indisputable master of his identity and possible greatness" (*The Human Condition* 193). When Arendt said the above words, she had Achilles in mind. To us, the "Kansas" story provides a different type of hero. Unlike Achilles who chose a short life and premature death to freeze a desirable identity, the protagonist, like most of us, trembled before and shied away from dangers. Despite this rather unheroic response to perceived hazards, he recognized his shortcomings and limitations and tried hard in his lifetime to reach a better self. At the last moment of his life, the protagonist's struggle for a satisfactory selfhood was fulfilled. He is a hero closer to us, and his example more plausible, and consequently, instructive, than that of Achilles.

Through the above analysis of the four scenes, the students were quite moved by the protagonist's self-interrogation and life-long attempt to reach a better self, and agreed that the protagonist was a hero rather than a pathetic victim. After the textual analysis, Tao Zou shared with them her own personal unsatisfactory experience in the Wenchuan Earthquake in 2008. Her sincerity in self-interrogation and her struggling for a better self encouraged more students to share their experiences of moral dilemma. After that, we also discussed the specific measures we could take if we were

involved in "Liang Ya Case" and other controversial cases. Both students and ourselves felt better prepared for similarly difficult choices.

In order to check the changes in students' choices in events involving moral dilemma, we asked students to fill Questionnaire (II) when we met them again in the next week. 70 students from two classes in the first semester of 2014 were asked to sign their real names on both Questionnaire (I) and (II). We were afraid that signing their real names may influence the truthfulness of students' answers. Therefore, in the following semesters, students signed their responses with individual marks which would not expose their real names but provide evidence for the teacher to match each student's two questionnaires. We were glad to find that there were no significant differences between the results signed with a real name and with anonymous marks. Questionnaire (II) included the following two questions: (1) Please recall and write down as precise as possible your answer to the first question in Questionnaire (I)—what's your most probable reaction if you were one passerby in "Liang Ya Case"? (2) Please imagine in considerable detail what you would do if you were the boy in "Kansas."

Before the students started to answer Questionnaire (II), we told them that the first question was designed to test whether they had a good memory or not. Our real purpose of the first question, however, was to test the possible changes of their attitudes toward relevant moral cases. According to the science of memory, the subject's present goals and interests will influence his/her memory of relevant information (Greenwald, "Totalitarian" 603-18). F. C. Bartlett, one of the early researchers of memory, proposed a theory that the brain retrieves information according to some traces, and these traces "live with our interests and with them they change" (*Remembering* 212). If students' recall had significant changes or fabrications, it implied that their relevant goals and interests had changed.

The result showed that the students' recalling of their answers to the first question of Questionnaire (I) had significant variations from their original answers, though they had the first questionnaire just one week ago.

Answers to question (1) in Questionnaire (I)	Original percentage	Percentage from recalling
Do nothing and just walk by	28%	25%
Inform the staff or policeman	56%	39%
Besides informing the staff or policeman, take some active measures, such as trying to talk with her, staying with her, calling a familiar person who has first-aid knowledge, asking help from other passersby, etc.	16%	36%

Table 3. Differences between students' first responses and their recalling

From the above table, we know that a lot of students tend to remember themselves as having chosen to take active and concrete measures to help Liang Ya, when they really didn't do so previously. The modified positive memory implied that they became more involved in solving the moral crisis. Just as Miss X. C. Pei said, "Before I had this class, I had no idea about how to deal with the difficult situation in 'Liang Ya Case.' The only thing I could do was to report to the police, or shrug off, or blame others. In fact, I was not different from those passersby who just walked by. After the discussion, I plan to do more. I get some clear ideas about how to protect myself and at the same time try my best to help others. Sometimes I hate myself, just because I did not put my ideas into practice" (translated by the authors).

Contrary to the majority of students whose recalled information were more positive than the original one, there were twelve students whose recall turned out to be more conservative than their original answers. Three of the twelve students came from the classes required to sign their real names in their questionnaires, so we asked them to explain the possible reasons for the comparatively conservative information retrieved by their memory. They provided the following two reasons: (1) Two of them wanted to show a better self in their first response. Influenced by the discussion of "Kansas" and the teacher's sincerity in sharing her personal experience with the students, they exposed their true attitude unconsciously in recalling. (2) One of them stayed in the former class just for ten minutes and then left to deal with some personal urgent thing, and missed the discussions between students and the teacher. Among the other nine students who signed with a special mark rather than

their true name, one student provided a telling example of how one's memory can cheat oneself in a period as short as one week. In the class, we asked the teaching assistant (TA) to quote some examples from the two questionnaires to show the significant differences between the original answer and the recalled information. We had doubted that the TA may have made a mistake when she provided the following example (translated by the author):

Original answer	Shout for others' attention and then approach Liang Ya to make sure she needed help, then report to the police and ask for others' help (After all, the metro station is a public sphere, in other places I may not do that way).
Recalled information	I would go to help her in a public sphere where there was a camera, and at least go to report to the railway staff.

Table 4. An example of incorrect memory

We asked the TA whether she could make sure that the above two answers came from the same person, since the diction of these two answers were far from being similar. At this moment, M. H. Lan stood up to admit that they were his answers, and that he was greatly surprised by the trick his memory played on himself. He then explained that on the one hand, he wanted a better self in the first response, and on the other hand he was influenced by students' emphasis in the prior week's discussions on using a camera to record the scene for self-protection, in case the person they attempted to help had a malicious intention. Looking again over his two versions, we could find that M. H. Lan did show the same concern about whether the space was safe for him to take measures or not. That is to say, in his cognitive script for such kind of situation, before he decided whether to get involved or not, finding a witness was his first step, because a witness would help to prove his innocence if any controversy arose between him and the person he tried to help. Other students' suggestion of using a camera matched his need for a witness, thus his memory took this suggestion for his own idea! These findings supported Barclay and Wellman's argument that the imagined events or details which matched the expectation of one's present cognitive schema or script were often regarded by the subject's memory as something that had really happened before ("Accuracies" 93-103). Then, can we infer that by showing the students problems in their relevant schema/script for difficult situations, and then training them to imagine with vivid details their positive behaviors in such kind of situations, we may help to reconstruct their schema/script and make them better prepared for similar situations?

We feel fortunate that through the discussion of "Kansas," students have come to understand their ineluctable responsibility for helping others. The protagonist's struggling process provides a telling example to illustrate Levinas's idea that responsibility is always already there, and "the impossibility of declining responsibility is reflected only in the scruple or remorse which precedes or follows this refusal" (*Otherwise* 7).

Our problem-based design of foreign literature courses is warmly welcomed by many students on and off campus. More than 10,000 students have enrolled in our MOOC each semester since 2016. The great number of students' positive comments suggests that this kind of design efficiently promotes students' interest in foreign literature. And awareness of variations in foreign literature courses is also meaningful both to students and teachers. To illustrate the variations more clearly, further investigation about and comparison between readers' relevant reaction and interpretation in larger scale home and abroad will be done later.

From the above analysis and discussion, we venture to draw the following conclusion and give some suggestion about teaching foreign literature. First, we should always attend to the variations in translation, since many students access these works through translation. Variations in translation may have significant influence upon students' interpretation. Second, we need not follow the classical anthology in choosing literary texts. Instead, the teacher should keep in mind what the students are most concerned about, and what are the major problems of the students and the whole society. Then choose the literary text which can help students to answer these questions. Third, we'd better begin with our own puzzling over the literary text, rather than with the writing context or the authoritative arguments by native speakers of the source language, since what our students feel difficult to understand may be most valuable for exploring the cultural or civilizational differences and spurring inspirations for examining our major social problems. Through these procedures, we may help to discover the values of some neglected foreign works, produce new insightful interpretations, sharpen

students' perception of linguistic and cultural differences, and make foreign literature a stage for cross-cultural dialogue, and a fountain of new inspirations for solving our problems. In this way, we may reach harmony through variations.

Works Cited

Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. 2nd edition. Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1998.
Barclay, C. R. and H.M Wellman. "Accuracies and Inaccuracies in Autobiographical Memories." *Journal of Memory and Language* 25 (1986): 93-103.
Bartlett, F. C. *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1932.
Cao, Shunqing. *The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature*. Heidelberg: Springer, 2013.
Dobyns, Stephen. "Kansas." *Literature: Reading, Reacting, Writing (Fiction)*. Eds. Laurie G. Kirszner and Stephen R. Mandell. 5th edition. Beijing: Peking UP, 2006: 95-100.
Dobyns, Stephen. "Kansas." Trans. Yanming Xie (谢艳明), Collection of Geographical Fiction in the Journal of World Literature (《世界文学》地理小说集粹), People's Literature Publishing, 2007. 254-61.
Dobyns, Stephen, and Ginger Murchison. "An Interview." *The Courtland Review*. (14 December 2004): <http://www.cortlandreview.com/features/04/spring/stephen_dobyns_interview.html>.
Gong, Pixiang (President of Jiangsu Provincial High Court). "Reconciliation and Withdrawal of the charges in Peng Yu Case" ("江苏省高院院长公丕祥：南京彭宇案已和解撤诉") (March 17, 2008): <http://www.hicourt.gov.cn/news/news_detail.asp?newsid=2008-3-17-9-37-52>.
Greenwald, A. G. "The Totalitarian Ego: Fabrication and Revision of personal History." *American Psychologist* 35 (1980): 603-18.
Kirszner, Laurie G., and Stephen R. Mandell eds. *Literature: Reading, Reacting, Writing (Fiction)*. 5th edition. Beijing: Peking UP, 2006.
Levinas, Emmanuel. *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1981.
"Liang Ya died of waiting?" (等待急救的梁娅死于"等待"？). cctv.com (28 February 2014): <http://news.cntv.cn/2014/02/28/VIDE1393602359153272.shtml>.
Tan, Amy, and Katrina Kenison eds. *The Best American Short Stories 1999*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999.
Vogel, Mark, and Janet Tilley. "Modern Poetry in the Classroom: The Dark Within Us All: Stephen Dobyns' 'Bleed'." *The English Journal* 80.3 (1991): 47-50.

Author's profile: Tao Zou(邹涛) teaches selected readings of foreign literature, English fiction, and US-American literature at the School of Foreign Languages, University of Electronic Science and Technology of China (UESTC). Her interests in scholarship include comparative literature, and narrative studies. Zou's publications include "The 'inter-/independent spectrum' in Gish Jen's Novels" *Contemporary Foreign Literature* (2016), "Dilemma of Auto/biographical Narrative in Coetzee's *Foe* and Reflection on Arendt's thoughts on Narrative Identity" *Chinese and Foreign Culture and Literary Theories* (2015), and *Narrative, Memory and Selfhood* (2014).
E-mail: <zoutao1976@uestc.edu.cn>

Author's profile: Hong Zeng (曾红) teaches comparative literature, and Chinese literature at the School of Foreign Languages, UESTC. Her interests in scholarship include comparative literature and American literature. Zeng's publications include *The Semiotics of Exile in Literature* (2010), and *A Deconstructive Reading of Chinese Natural Philosophy in Literature and Arts* (2004). Email: <http://zenghong@uestc.edu.cn>