Cultural Unconscious And L2 Writer’s Identity Construction—A Case Study On Ha Jin

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ABSTRACT

By juxtaposing the cultural unconscious with relevant psychoanalytic concepts by Freud, Jung and Lacan, this article attempts to expound the connotation of the cultural unconscious from the levels of individual, collective and linguistic sign unconscious. Then it proposes a model to discuss the relationship between the cultural unconscious and identity construction, which may provide a new perspective for the theoretical framework of L2 writer’s identity construction. Based on the model, the author makes a case study on an American Chinese L2 writer, Ha Jin. Ha Jin’s fiction reveals the cultural unconscious manifested in his writing and reveals his psychological mechanism of identity construction in the conflict and integration of Chinese and Western cultures.

1. Introduction

In a monolingual paradigm, a mother tongue is always a privileged language which stands for a condensed narrative of one’s origin and identity (Yildiz, 2012: 12) and act as the single locus of emotional expression and attachment. In his influential speech On Different Methods of Translating, Schleiermacher even holds that every writer can produce original work only in his or her mother tongue (Lindemann, 2015:118). However, using a second language (L2) to convey personal affection became possible with the advent of globalization, which is characterized by the process of increased physical displacement and a multilingual paradigm. When identity is detached from the mother tongue, people who stay in a host country can also reflect their cultural
positions and re/construct their identities through the interaction between the real world and second language writing.

Much scholarship has revolved around a constellation of world-class L2 writers such as Joseph Conrad, Vladimir Nabokov, Milan Kundera, etc., but little has focused on Chinese ethnic L2 writers who are at a relative periphery position in world literature but have still made contributions in their own right by bringing up their Chinese experience in an L2 globalized lingua franca. Over the course of research on L2 Chinese ethnic writing, most articles centered on writers who left China in the early 20th century, among which Lin Yutang (1895–1976) and Eileen Chang (1920–1995) draw the most attention. Currently, there are generally three conventional approaches to this group of L2 writers. First is the linguistics-oriented approach which investigated L2 writers’ linguistic style (Shujuan, 2016; Li, 2010) from the strategy of cultural transfer they adopted in their works; second is the literariness-oriented approach which delved into the literary value of their creations by a meticulous text analysis (Huang, 2011; Louie, 2012) and third is the culture-oriented approach which discusses how cultures and ideologies inform literary production from writers’ double identities (Qian, 2010; Ellery, 2013). Many of the articles ground their theoretical framework on post-colonial studies, which reveals that L2 writers’ identity is not essentialized but can be changed and constructed through an inter/transcultural dialogue.

Those analyses above indeed shed insight on the topic, but they still have two problems. (1) The research on young L2 writers is relatively scant. Since China’s reform and opening-up policy in the 1980s, a group of new immigrant writers has emerged in western countries after the 1990s, especially in the United States, like Ha Jin, Li Yiyun, Qiu Xiaolong. The story they brought to western readers is very different from their predecessors and is worthy of attention. (2) Given the fact the formation of one’s identity always involves a psychological dimension that remains much unexplored in the current study; it is necessary to examine L2 writers’ construction of identity from a conscious perspective. So this article attempts to focus on the new immigrant writer Ha Jin who came to the US after 1980. Meanwhile it intends to illuminate the link between the cultural unconscious and identity, the manifestation of cultural unconscious in Ha Jin’s works and his psychological mechanism of identity construction in the conflict and integration of Chinese and Western cultures.

2. Cultural unconscious

Ontologically the concept grows out of the integration of “culture” and “unconscious,” but it is not a simple combination of two existing concepts. The term “unconscious” was not systematically explored until it tied a close link with psychology. It is Freud who thoroughly explained the function and inner logic of the unconscious in his groundbreaking work, The Interpretation of Dreams. In his early theories, he considers unconscious as the id repressed from one’s unfulfilled instinctual desires. This formulation has been criticized by other scholars due to his overemphasis on sexual instinct. The later more accepted definition conceives the unconscious as a reservoir of feelings, thoughts, urges, and memories that are outside of our conscious awareness, but continues to influence our behavior and experience (Siegfried, 2014: 2). The unconscious in relation to the cultural unconscious that this article discusses is closer to a cultural mental
structure including one’s belief system and value of the world, which is controlled by an invisible power that is out of human awareness but keeps exerting influence on people’s lives.

As for the concept of culture, most people may associate it with a static-related one that covers the knowledge, material production and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement (Linton, 1998: 32). But the culture in relation to the cultural unconscious is more connected with its dynamic feature as its etymology shows the word derives from Latin “colere” which means consciously human cultivation or nurture; actively fostering growth. Raymond Williams also describes it has the sources in “the tending of natural growth” and “then, by analogy, a process of human training” (1983:16). In Chinese, “文化” (culture) can also be traced to its original meaning as a verb: to nurture and order human life by teaching established rites and behavior. Thus, the word “culture” in “cultural unconscious” not only refers to the static condition but also includes the dynamic process where material and non-material factors wield influence on human life in consciously constructed forms, of which the dynamic process is more crucial for the understanding of the cultural unconscious.

From the analysis above, we can see when “unconscious” and “culture” are conjoined, “cultural unconscious” becomes an integrated concept that derives new connotations. In form, an antinomy composed of unconscious and conscious structures with the conscious structure self-consciously made discernible (Gu, 2012: 28). In content, the cultural unconscious share commonalities with but also differs from the concepts from psychoanalytic psychology which includes Freud’s personality psyche, Jung’s collective unconscious and Lacan’s linguistic sign study in the following three levels.

(1) Cultural unconscious on the individual level. There are some similarities between the “unconscious” in the “cultural unconscious” and Freud’s model on personality psyche which has been divided into id, ego and super-ego (Freud, 1989). Among the three concepts, the super-ego is approximate to the cultural unconscious, which is also characterized by the individual conscious and subconscious. The super-ego’s criteria for moral judgment grows out of the internalization of various social disciplines and regulations, which is generally in parallel with the individual level of the cultural unconscious since it is the embodiment of social culture in the depth of one’s mind. The cultural unconscious like the super-ego alternating between conscious or unconscious affects an individual’s views on life and his or her outlook for the world. Besides, the cultural unconscious putatively shares the characteristics of an individual desire with Freud’s “symptom formation,” who relates “symptom formation” to the return of repressed desires: “it is not the repression itself which produces substitutive formations and symptoms, but that these latter are indications of a return of the repressed” (Freud, 2008: 229).

(2) Cultural unconscious on the collective level. The cultural unconscious bears witness to the ethos of a nation’s culture, manifesting the behavior patterns and spiritual system that an individual relies on in a specific community. In this regard, the cultural unconscious in the collective level is akin to Jung’s collective unconscious. But the difference is that the archetype of the latter is a stable and continuous psychological structure inherited from human ancestors in the primordial past and is applicable to all groups regardless of their ethnicity and state (Jung, 1969: 433). By contrast, the former maintains stability only in a relatively short time, say 2 or 3 generations, and is very
susceptible to change after being trained or cultivated for some time. In other words, Jung’s collective psychological structure is common to all humans grounded on a species-specific and genetic basis while “the cultural unconscious is cultivated by historical experiences and social conditioning, specific to the mentality of a given culture or tradition” (Gu, 2012: 34).

(3) Cultural unconscious on the linguistic sign level. Saussure considers the sign as the object that combines a signifier and a signified into a meaningful unit (2011:66–67). Inspired by Saussure’s linguistic theory and Freud’s human psyche model, Lacan introduced linguistic signs into psychanalysis. The signifier, according to Lacan, is a conscious language while the signified is a symbol of unconscious desire. The meaning of the signifier is ceaselessly shifted from the signifier to the signified, which in turn becomes another signifier. The signification is always deferred with the signifier constantly sliding on the signifying chain, which is regarded as being supported by a vector until it stops by an anchoring point (Lacan, 2001: 231). The reconceptualization of the sign by Lacan suggests a similar structure in the cultural unconscious which is also composed of a binary opposition between the signifier and the signified: culture is the signifier which is visible and conscious in most occasions while the unconscious is the signified which is invisible and mostly out of consciousness (Gu, 2012: 31).

3. Cultural unconscious and the identity construction of L2 writers

Literature is always in company with culture in the journey of human intellectual exploration. For Chinese ethnic L2 writers in America, most of them left China in adulthood. As evident in scholarship, late adolescence and early adulthood is a critical developmental stage for identity formation (Meeus, 2011; Arnett et al., 2014). The Chinese socio-cultural elements, such as language, societal norms, history, and belief systems are deeply entwined in their minds and internalized as a part of their cultural unconscious, which proffers them a stable ethnic and cultural identification. However, the immigration into America put them into an insecure and intersected position, which is concomitant with a myriad of challenges, particularly the psychological conflicts of cultural identity negotiation, given the vast disparities between eastern and western culture. Meanwhile, the living experience in America, which reshaped their language use, values, behavior pattern and even their previous view about China, also becomes an integral part of their cultural unconscious. Studies show when individuals construct a multicultural identity, they need to address two main concerns: (a) cultural maintenance, the degree to which cultural identity and its collateral characteristics are held as valuable and worthy of preservation; and (b) intercultural contact, the degree to which individuals think they should participate in other cultures. When these two aspects are simultaneously explored, the majority of the immigrant youth adopted an integration approach to acculturation (Cohen & Kassan; 2018 Ellis & Chen, 2013; Berry, 2006). That’s also the choice made by many American Chinese L2 writers, which means to construct their negotiated identity with high levels of involvement in both the Chinese and American cultures.

If a text is the coding of linguistic signs, the signs are profoundly affected by the writer’s cultural unconscious. Influenced by a dual cultural unconscious, L2 writers seek to construct their identity through the selection and reshuffle of the writing material
which grows out of their past living experience in China and current lives in the adopted country. In the individual level of the cultural unconscious, they would make a reflexive self-understanding pertaining to their identity by incorporating their personal experience into their creation; consciously or unconsciously repress and release their desires in their writings and the identity of the characters in the stories in some way is the incarnation of writers’. In the collective level of the cultural unconscious, they attempt to return to the scenes of history and have a dialogue with the past by recreating them in the stories. Driven by the Sino-American unconscious culture of the communities or societies they were and are exposed to, they reexamine the collective culture and strive to construct the new identity by a reflection of the convention. In the linguistic sign level, under the influence of the individual and collective cultural unconscious, L2 writers’ identity is eventually substantiated by signs in the works with metaphor and metonym as the representation of signifier and signified respectively. The visible culture, or in other words, the lifestyle and habitual behavior of a group, are manifested by the effects of metonym while the invisible unconscious is revealed through the effects of metaphor, two of which can be transformed to each other in certain conditions. Since the meaning of the signifier is ceaselessly shifted from the signifier to the signified, which in turn becomes another signifier, the metonymy analogically can be transformed into the metaphor as to show the deferred meaning of the significance.

![Diagram](image.png)

(Before/After the writer’s immigration)

From the analysis above, I propose a model above to show the relationship between L2 writers’ cultural unconscious and the construction of their identity. It illustrates the dualistic conflicts and integration of Sino-American experience, eastern-western culture and native-second language. This model can provide insights that are useful to analyze the psychological structure of the L2 writers and be valuable in delineating how the paradoxical cultures subtly shape the writer’s identity as well as how their identity plays a role in their creation.

4. A Case Study on Chinese American L2 Writer Ha Jin

Born in northeastern China in 1956, Ha Jin came to pursue doctoral studies at Brandeis University in 1985. As the winner of most major distinctions for fiction in the United States – National Book Award, PEN/Faulkner, PEN/Hemingway, Asian American Literary Award, among others, he is probably the most highly acclaimed Chinese ethnic L2 writer in America. His fiction is known for a realistic style as he believes literature is a testimony that not only documents past events but also reminds readers of their own existential condition (Cheung, 2012:4). Although many of his novels depict the physical
details of Chinese everyday life, the characters and plots are more like the transplanting of Chinese stories into Western soil due to his complicated identity shaped by the cultural unconscious from the two countries. In the following parts, drawing on the model above, I will make a specific analysis of how Jin constructs his identity in his works from the levels of the individual unconscious, collective unconscious and linguistic sign unconscious.

4.1. Cultural unconscious on the individual level and the construction of identity

It is worthy to note that Freud’s individual unconscious stems from the psychological repression of instinct, desire, and impulse which are not morally or esthetically sanctioned by society so when Freud helped patients unveil their unconscious feelings, he believed that there was a defense mechanism at work that actively resisted these efforts to keep the unwanted thoughts hidden. However, the cultural unconscious is not the result of psychological repression from those unaccepted desires but the outcome of cultural acquisition in a broad sense. The unconscious culture that people acquired is, instead of being morally or esthetically forbidden, much subscribed by the society.

By reading Jin’s award-winning work of fiction Waiting (1999), it can be found that many of his linguistic expressions in his English writing are characterized by the features of his mother tongue, which can be seen as an outcome of cultural acquisition.

1. She hated the telltale’s bone marrow. (ibid:196) 恨之入髓
2. Above the table a sign with these giant words was suspended from an iron wire: Secure the Law like a Mountain. (ibid:216–17) 执法如山
3. He belched, and his mouth was filled with acid gastric juice, which almost made him vomit. (ibid:270) 胃酸
4. “Like I said, this is my personal matter.” (ibid:128) 我的私事
5. “Small friends – boys and girls – you can eat as many goodies as you want, but don’t take any home. Understood?” (ibid:242) 小朋友

The underlined words in examples 1 and 2 are two Chinese idioms with the first referring to hating someone bitterly and the second to enforcing the law strictly. Similar expressions can be found in English but Jin renders the phrase as a heterogeneous quality by a direct translation from Chinese. Examples 3 to 5 are common expressions in Chinese which have ready Anglophone equivalents; however, Jin’s language seems to deviate from the convention of English and some is even grammatically problematic: he put “acid” and “gastric juice” side by side in example 3, a rather cumbersome combination in English; not letting go of the Chinese stock phrase “我的私事,” he transferred “a personal matter” into “my personal matter” in example 4. The collocation “small friends” to describe boys and girls in example 5 also sounds erratic. Most of Jin’s style of verbal communication, like the examples shown above, sounds neither authentic nor necessarily wrong.

Accompanied with the wow factor of his novelty in creating a foreignized quality in English is the reprimand for Jin, who is accused of betraying his mother tongue by critics from China or nitpicked by native English speakers for solecisms. But if his “problematic” linguistic expression is examined from the perspective of the individual cultural unconscious, those charges against Jin seem unfair.

As mentioned before, the cultural unconscious is always in part unknown and, in part realized. It is also true to Jin’s psychological process when he employs English, or China
English, if more specifically, in his writing. It is a conscious process because he knows the key to distinguish him from the native English writers is to write not in docile imitation of the American tradition but to consciously invent a new language to write out the sense of duality or polyphony while integrating the English with the linguistic features of his Chinese background. That’s why we see that so many Chinese idioms, proverbs, or metaphors directly translated from Chinese are widely used in his stories as a deliberate linguistic strategy. It is also an unconscious process in that the Chinese linguistic features, to some extent, express the release of Jin’s repressed desire for his mother tongue. As he claims in a number of interviews, his love for the Chinese language, especially the ancient Chinese poems which nourished and inspired his literary creation – he is quite sure that if he had chosen to write in Chinese at the very beginning, he would have achieved much more in the domain of literature than today (舒晋瑜, 2013). When asked whether he would read the books written by his counterpart writers in China, he answered he would only buy the English translation versions because he was afraid he couldn’t help speaking Chinese in his English class if he didn’t refrain himself from reading too much Chinese (Ha,Bei:2008). As Freud claimed, repression, after all, is never complete. What is repressed is destined to return – even if only in the form of a compromise (Oring, 1993:290). The process of his writing offers him a vent so he can let go of his repressed desire for Chinese. In this sense, his choice of words seems based no less on conscious knowledge than on unconscious feeling or sudden inspiration – attributes that are more inherent than acquired (Tsai, 2005:61). Therefore, Jin’s linguistic expression is a dual process characterized by his conscious and unconscious use of both English and Chinese. It is not a betrayal of his mother tongue or verbal infelicities but a result of his cultural unconscious for the two languages.

Jin’s compromising attitude toward the writing language not only lay bare his struggle with the mother tongue and the adopted language but also the hybrid identity position he chooses for himself in another culture. He stands at the border of two languages, and two cultures; he refuses to be categorized into American writers or Chinese writers and is content to accept the peripheral status quo as he said in his essay – on the border is the only proper place where he can claim his existence and make contributions to standard English (2010:469).

Besides the linguistic expression, Jin’s individual cultural unconscious also reified through the characters he created in fiction, which in some way is the showcase of his inner conflicts resulting from the Sino-American cultural clash. The short story “A Good Fall” (2009) depicts the Chinese monk Ganqin’s poignant life in New York. Like many Chinese migrants, Gan expects to come back home with loaded gifts and dollars after his 3-year stint in an American temple where he teaches kung fu class. However, besieged by a disease and the constant failures of getting his passport and two years’ salary back from his boss Master Zong, he thought he could only end all with death. Before his suicide, he prayed that his soul could return to China and his parents’ debts could be forgiven. Behind Gan’s obsession in going home is Jin’s individual cultural unconscious of China’s traditional Root Culture: no matter how far you go and how great achievements you made outside, coming home and family reunion is above anything else. Jin said in many interviews that immigration to America is not his original intention. Being visibly Chinese in a race-conscious society will forever peg him as a “foreigner” (Martin 2011: 6). That’s why even after he obtained a full professor title in 2002 and his works were
accepted by American mainstream literary circles, he still applied for a full-time teaching position at a Chinese University in 2004 and wanted to come back (Ha, 2012). In the story, Jin’s attachment to home is projected onto his character Gan: he showed no interest in an American girl Cindy’s hint that he could get a permanent residency by marrying her. It is not only because he is a monk, but also in his subconscious, he exclusively belongs to the place where he comes from. However, as Hall maintains, identity is framed by two axes or vectors: the vector of similarity and continuity; and the vector of difference and rupture (Hall, 1989: 226). Gan’s identity is deemed to show its difference under the influences of the new culture. After the failure of getting his salary back, Gan began to eat meat at Fangu’s home because he “has no idea where he would have his next meal” (Jin 2009: 220). When the restaurant owner suggested changing a vegetarian dish for him, he spoke out what he really thought – he preferred the dish with shrimp and scallops. His acceptance of the change of his dietary habit implies his attempts to adopt a mainstream lifestyle by effacing his distinct attributes. Voluntary abandonment of his original identity and embracing a new one seems the best option he has to tackle the aporia he confronted in America. But severing one’s past is always painful and a struggle. When Gan prepared to end the pain by jumping off a 5-story building, “his stomach churned and sent up a chunk of scallop … that he hadn’t chewed thoroughly” (Jin 2009: 229). The savory scallop as a symbol of a new life and identity stimulated his ultimate resolution for self-adjustment. For a moment, he regretted doing so and spread out his arms swinging in the falling. All the years of training in martial arts adjusted his body and prevented him from a fatal injury. When he woke up in a hospital with a broken leg, he found he became a celebrity in the local community since his story was widely covered by the media. An attorney told him he would receive his salary and an enormous sum of damages from the temple soon. Although he knew he couldn’t be a kung fu coach or a monk anymore, he was happy to accept these changes because as he said at the end of the story, at least he could learn how to date girls from then on. From this regard, his jumping is really “a good fall” as the landing ushers in a new life for him. It is the “fall” that pushes the immigrants like Gan to adjust their identity and the relationship to home and the host country, which is also the theme that Jin envisions to convey – the identity is not only about “who I am” but more about “who I can be” and homeland is not about “where I am from” but “where I am.” Gan’s attitude shifting from homesickness and depression to the acceptance of his new identity also reflects the author’s struggling cultural unconscious in exploring an achieved identity. The plots and characters are part of Jin’s personal memory and understanding of eastern and western culture, which bespeaks his courage and contemplation of identity construction.

4.2. Cultural unconscious on the collective level and the construction of identity

The individual’s perception of the real world is inseparable from the community and the era that he/she lives with. With the acceleration of globalization since the 1980s, multi-ethnic cultures are continually interacting and integrating. The invariable adjustment of an individual’s cultural consciousness also reflects the changes of the times. As a member of society, the individual conscious is bound to be affected by the impacts of the history and time-honored culture; however, it is impossible to discuss collective conscious in this globalized age without taking into account the influence of the culture that is formed and
subject to change in a relatively short period. Jung’s collective unconscious in a broad sense seems insufficient in interpreting the impacts of the changing culture on the individual. Compared with the collective unconscious, the cultural unconscious is more flexible with a focus on the socio-historical context in a specific and relatively short period.

The collective cultural unconscious is demonstrated in Jin’s unfolding of what a group of Chinese thought is at a particular time. Take the Cultural Revolution for example, which is a recurring setting in Jin’s novel. In the short story, “The Richest Man” included in Under the Red Flag (1997), surgeon Li was denounced by the league members of Mao Zedong Thought as a reactionary because he broke the porcelain button of Chairman Mao by accident. In fact, Li risked his life in the Korea War and was awarded the merit citation twice for his contribution to saving the lives of 2000 Chinese soldiers. But it was no use arguing since the whole country was plunged into a cult of personality for Mao. In the story, there are many descriptions of how the public, driven by a collective cultural unconscious, make a scene of Li: “They brought him into the dining room, where about a hundred people were waiting. In the storm of slogans Li was taken to the front” (1997: 71); “Down with current landlord Li Wan,’ a man shouted, and the crowd followed him, shouting in unison”(ibid: 72); “That night Li was jailed in the stable behind the inn, and a group of men went to his home and confiscated all the valuables and his bankbook” (ibid: 75). A similar collective unconscious occurs in Jin’s depiction of a group of elementary students. In the short story “A Decade,” teacher Wenli gave a lesson in her class about a letter that Chairman Mao had written to the Albanian Communist Party. In the letter, there was a sentence like this: “You (the Albanian Communist Party) are a grand eagle soaring bravely; in comparison, the Russian Revisionists and the American Imperialists are merely a pile of yellowish dirt” (ibid: 203). Wenli told the class the Soviet Union and America were not real dirt, but Chairman Mao used a metaphor to show our contempt for them. Then the whole class was in a tumult. Like the fanatical supporters of the league members of Maoism, the students were convinced that Wenli was wrong, not only wrong but reactionary. If Chairman Mao thought they were dirt, it must be right. How dare she change Mao’s meaning! (ibid: 204). The students reported the case to the Worker’s Propaganda Team in school, which consisted of five illiterate men. A week later, Wenli was sent to a village in the countryside to be reformed through labor. By a portrait of the absurd collective behavior, Jin conveys a quite clear message that when power is highly concentrated and personal will replaced, the rule and law of the society may become a quasi-religion, Mao became the only means the individual can depend on to ensure a secure political identity. Consequently, the cult of personality and anti-intellectualism became a collective cultural unconscious, which was used to discipline and repress people’s thoughts. But the cult of Mao has gone in today’s China with the change of its political environment, which shows the cultural unconscious, unlike Jung’s collective unconscious, which can apply to all human beings, is subject to change and only for a specific country and group.

In addition to reflecting the collective unconscious through the portrait of collective behavior, Jin lay bare the collective psychology by adopting a collective narrative “we” in his writing. In the short story “The Woman from New York” collected in The Bridegroom (2001), the narrator “we” are the citizens of Muji, a northeastern city in China and the story took place in the 1980s after China ended the Cultural Revolution and implemented
the new policy of opening-up and reform. “We” find that the protagonist Chen, who was the math teacher in the local college, came back to Muji after her four years of study in a graduate program in America. But no one in Muji welcomes her return: the college that she worked for fired her; her husband filed for divorce; “we” all think that she must find a sugar daddy in America; otherwise, how can a foreign woman survive there. “We” are shocked when we heard Chen wanted to move the whole family to America because for three decades, no family in “our” city had moved that far away except for a few who had left for Hong Kong and Japan. “Our” knowledge about America is also ambivalent: “we” think it is such a wealthy country that “Wall Street was paved with gold bricks” (2001: 157) but it is also corrupted and frightening – Chen’s husband believed that once he was in New York he would be sold as a laborer or a gigolo. This plot in some way mirrors Chinese people’s inadequate access to and limited knowledge about the western world at the beginning of the 1980s. Although the Cultural Revolution was over and the opening-up policy was put into effect, people were still reluctant to accept new things and attuned to judge the unfamiliar stuff right or wrong by conventional thinking or ideology instead of the fact per se.

Since Chen’s return, what “we” cannot understand is not only her western fashion style but also her “bizarre” way of thinking. When Chen knows her former colleague professor Fan denounced her as an old American man’s concubine, she decided to sue her for calumny and claimed for financial compensation. That was odd for “us” because “we” had never heard of a court that would handle such a trifle and there would be a lawyer available for a personal case like this (2001: 160). “We” think the only solution to the problem is through the school leader’s mediation or a settlement in private. More importantly, how can she think of financial compensation as a way out? It was a matter of one’s reputation, which cannot be restored by money (ibid: 160). Behind “our” bewilderment for Chen’s behavior is the different collective cultural unconscious between China and America when individual rights were violated. In the 1980s, “calumny” is still a new term for many Chinese and people were inured to solve the trouble by an adjustment of a personal relationship, while Chen who represents the American way of thinking is prone to address the problem by law and money. This story also suggests that the L2 writers who are in search of a settled identity just like the Chinese people who are in the period of economic transition in the 1980s need to face many challenges and uncertainties, but all of these are an inventible stage before they finally construct an achieved identity. With the integrated collective cultural unconscious from the east and west, Jin strives to untangle his complicated identity in both the criticism and inheritance of his culture of origin.

4.3. Cultural unconscious on the linguistic sign level and the construction of identity

Like the shifting between signifier and signified, culture and the unconscious are also in a dynamic relationship. As I mentioned earlier, the concept of the cultural unconscious can be viewed as cultured unconsciousness grown out of a period of conscious cultivation; it can also be transformed into “unconscious culture” by a reversed rhetoric which refers to a lifestyle ingrained in a person, a group or society.
In the text, the dynamic relationship between signifier and signified is represented by metaphor and metonymy. Taking a cue from Jakobson’s inquiry on the two opposed axes of language – metaphorical axis and metonymical axis, Lacan defines metaphor as the effect of signification with the substitution of one signifier for another in the signifying chain since there is an inherent resistance to production of meaning in language (2001:164–66). When another signifier substitutes a signifier, the displaced one makes its presence by a metonymy. The metonymy is a diachronic movement from one signifier to another along the signifying chain, as one signifier constantly refers to another in a perpetual deferral of meaning. But in the logic of the cultural unconscious, it works in the opposite way: the culture/signifier is the effects induced by the unconscious desire/signified, so the latter is supreme over the former.

Because the signified/unconscious is repressed, it returns in the form of what the signifier/culture refers to at the beginning and of the surplus meaning produced in the metaphor. The subject incorporates the conscious or subconscious desire into his/her expression through condensation (metaphor) and displacement (metonym) to reveal its ambivalent and paradoxical affection. L2 writer’s emotions, which are not explicitly expressed in the text, indicate the complicated ideologies that the writer experienced in the dynamic transformation between the cultural unconscious and unconscious culture.

Influenced by the combined forces of the individual and collective cultural unconscious, Jin realizes his identity construction by virtue of linguistic signs in the text. The metaphor and the metonymy can be interpreted as the implication of his anxiety over and anticipation of his dual identity. The decoding of the metaphor and the metonymy may reveal the author’s as well as his character’s cultural unconscious and unconscious culture.

Jin’s novel A Free Life (2007) features a look at a Chinese immigrant family and the character Wu struggling to make their new life in America. Wu’s struggle for a dignified life can be viewed as the metonymy of many Chinese immigrants’ early lives in America. In the novel, Wu first pursued his doctoral studies at Brandeis University which is also the school Jin held his doctoral degree from and finally made his establishment with his wife in Atlanta by running a Chinese restaurant of their own after years of hardships. In the eyes of outsiders, they have succeeded and won the respect of the locals. But the economic upturn does not give Wu much sense of belonging. He cannot help looking homeward and the nostalgia can only find a vent through his poetry writing. To devote more time to his writing, he sells his restaurant and works in odd jobs again like before. In other words, the realization of the materialistic American dream does not ensure Wu an achieved identity. Instead, “the struggle had ended so soon that he felt as though the whole notion of the American dream was shoddy, a hoax” (2007: 428). In this sense, the Wu family’s efforts to survive and thrive are not only the metonymy of the trajectory of immigrants’ lives but with the deferral of the meaning of the signifier and the change of the subject’s desire, it dynamically transforms to a metaphor of Wu’s repressed cultural unconscious – a failed American Dream. Facing the reality that the native country is inaccessible and the adopted country is detached, Wu pins all his hopes on his poems. Poetry then becomes a metaphor for the spiritual redemption of a struggled diaspora. It is the only vehicle at Wu’s disposal to substantiate a spiritual American Dream characterized by freedom and independence, which are also a cornerstone for poetry. He told his wife Ping he could take poetry as his religion if he needed one (ibid: 311). In the world of
poetry, Wu seems to find a way to deal with his identity, which also indicates the author’s attitude toward the identity he anticipates to build in his real-life: to be a metaphysically independent and free individual, not attached to any group and beyond any ideology even at the price of wasting the whole life without getting anywhere and of becoming a joke in others’ eyes (ibid: 619).

Poetry as a symbol also occurs in Jin’s other novels but has a different meaning. In the novel Waiting, there is a plot in chapter two that Commissar Wei, who is an intellectual PLA officer, has a blind date with a nurse, Manna, during the Cultural Revolution. He surprises her by taking out of a book of Whitman’s Leaves of Grass and reveals his passion for the poet: “This is a remarkable book of poetry, and the poems are so robust and brave they include everything. In a way, they form a universe. I’ve read this book four times” (1999: 98). After saying that, he seems to realize that he showed his private feelings too much which should have been maintained in secret under that political circumstance. He suggests Manna read the book and exchange her ideas of the poems by writing him a letter. This scene can be seen as a metonymy of Whitman’s impact on Chinese intellectuals’ lives during the first half of the 20th century and Guiyou Huang divided the influence into two significant periods which both took place before the Cultural Revolution. The first is during the May Fourth Movement around the 1920s, when young intellectuals found in Whitman, a model for his embrace of vernacular language and his rejection of prosodic rules. To Chinese poets and intellectuals in the early decades, Whitman stands for an individualist and iconoclast and his anti-elitist insistence on democracy was also tempting. The second period coincided with China’s military struggle against the Japanese invasion and the subsequent civil war during the 1930s-1940s. Whitman’s writing was praised as heroic or martial pieces (Huang, 1997: 39–44).

In this regard, reading Whitman’s poems can be understood as an unconscious culture, which is most visible and perceptible, in China’s intellectual circle at that time. By designing a plot of an intellectual officer talking about Leaves of Grass, Jin reifies the unconscious culture by a metonymy. Given the political environment was destructive and repressive then, Wei’s mere love for an American author could lead him to trouble but he still recommends this book to Manna regardless of the risks. So the unconscious culture of reading Whitman here can also be taken as or dynamically transforms to a metaphor of the intellectual’s cultural unconscious, which is majorly invisible and imperceptible, of the pursuit of freedom and humanity: even working under a treacherous system, it is still possible that the environment has not distorted the individual’s sense of compassion symbolized by his or her love of poetry (Sturr, 2002: 9).

Besides poetry, Jin’s predilection for religion is also quite apparent as a number of his novels have implicit or explicit portraits of Christianity. Many of his characters would have an unexpected encounter with the Bible or other symbols of Christianity when they are in a plight such as the captive Yu Yuan who insists on reading the Bible in War Trash, the mistaken “angel” Manna in Waiting, Professor Yang who makes a delirious monologue of Dante’s Divine Comedy in The Crazed, not mention a group of American Christian missionaries in Nanjing Requiem. If those Christian-related signs are interpreted as Jin’s efforts to display the unconscious Christian culture by metonymy as many details of the religious practices like Christmas Day, rituals of mass are described, in a deeper level, they are a metaphor of spiritual redemption for people in a predicament – the projection of Jin’s cultural unconscious of religion after his 30 years’ living in an
officially Christian nation. By the shift between metonymy and metaphor, the dynamic transformation of the cultural unconscious and the unconscious culture is realized. Those linguistic signs imply what the author does not express clearly in the texts, including the repressed culture, psychological struggle and anxiety for identity after immigration. What Jin tries to underscore in the Christian-related scenes is his faith in religious power: as the country is capricious and unreliable which is the theme of many his stories, religion can be counted on by the ordinary people to confront the cruel fate and laid as the foundation for an independent identity. The function of religion here is akin to the poetry discussed above. The two kinds of power are instrumental in helping the individual, especially the immigrants to break up the myth of binding one’s identity with a country and complete the process of identity construction by self-realization.

5. Conclusion

Jin grew up in the Maoist era in China while the living experience in America empowers him with a chance to rediscover his identity from a new perspective. Like other L2 writers, Jin’s faith, value and way of thinking represented in his writing are a manifestation of his integrated cultural unconscious from eastern and western culture. By using the model of the relationship between the cultural unconscious and the construction of identity, we can better understand how he revisits the past and explores the future in the journey of identity formation. From the analysis above, it can be concluded that shaped by his Sino-American cultural unconscious, Jin’s English linguistic expressions are permeated with the Chinese way of thinking; many characters share similar experience and attitude with the author, which can be seen as the release and reappearance of Jin’s memory hovered in his individual cultural unconscious. The unfolding of the Chinese and American collective culture in the fiction and the adoption of a collective narrative is Jin’s combination and recreation of the two countries’ historical memory. It is the author’s effort to revisit the origin of his identity and reposition it through the critique and reflection on the collective culture. Metaphor and metonymy are the characteristics of the cultural unconscious on the linguistic sign level as well as the means to reify the author’s identity, which takes the form of a transformation between the cultural unconscious and unconscious culture in certain conditions. The metaphor and the metonymy reveal the writer’s repressed desires and the yearning for an achieved identity. In the discussion of the relation between identity, individual and hom-eland, Jin has always held an open, flexible and independent position. As an L2 writer who stands at the border of two countries, he well understood some of his identity could be constructed but some cannot be changed. His only mission is to write a significant enough masterpiece that can penetrate the country, the language and bring him home.

Note

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