
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Postcolonial Displacement and Transgenerational Identity Crises in Ling Ma's *Severance*

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ABSTRACT

Ling Ma's debut novel *Severance*, which garnered the Kirkus Prize for Fiction and was shortlisted for the National Book Critics Circle Award, chronicles through its first-person narrative the multigenerational displacement experiences of Chinese immigrants in contemporary America. Anchored in the protagonist Candace's autodiegetic narration, the text meticulously interrogates the tripartite manifestations of displacement—geographical rootlessness, cultural liminality, and psychological fragmentation—that permeate the immigrant experience. This study undertakes a prismatic examination of displacement in *Severance*, dissecting how Candace's familial trajectory manifests across the three constitutive dimensions. Situating their narratives within specific historical conjunctures and transnational social matrices, this analysis elucidates not merely the multifaceted causes of their displacement but also its reverberations. Ultimately, the textual exploration reveals how these individual displacements coalesce into a palimpsest of collective struggles against the homogenizing forces of global capitalism, thereby exposing the Janus-faced nature of 21st-century globalization.

KEYWORDS

Displacement; Postcolonialism; Identity; *Severance*; Ling Ma

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1. Introduction

Ling Ma, a Chinese-American writer whose bicultural trajectory spans her birth in Sanming, China and formative years across Utah, Nebraska, and Kansas, embodies the transnational consciousness permeating her oeuvre. A graduate of the University of Chicago and Cornell University's MFA program, Ma synthesizes journalistic precision with literary sensibility—a duality honed through prior careers in journalism and editing, as documented in her novel (2018, p. 245). Her fiction, celebrated for its sardonic wit and anthropological acuity in dissecting immigrant epistemologies, interrogates the porous boundaries between cultural memory and contemporary identity formation. This interstitial positioning, manifested through protagonists navigating hyphenated existences, establishes Ma as an emerging luminary in transcultural literature.

Ma's 2018 debut novel *Severance*, recipient of the Kirkus Prize and National Book Critics Circle Award finalist distinction, crystallizes her thematic preoccupations. The narrative's critical success, including its 2015 Graywolf SLS Prize-winning chapter, stems from its polyphonic exploration of globalization's discontents—from labor alienation to mnemonic fragmentation. Through its Chinese-American protagonist Candace Chen, the text maps the cartography of cultural liminality, transforming personal displacement into an allegory of late capitalist subjectivity. Particularly noteworthy is Ma's deconstruction of essentialist identity paradigms through characters perpetually translating between cultural lexicons.

Building on this textual foundation, a postcolonial hermeneutic reveals *Severance's* nuanced engagement with hybridized identities. The novel's protagonist, functioning as a contact zone between residual colonial power structures and neoliberal cultural economies, exemplifies what Bhabha terms "the third space" of enunciation. Ma's narrative strategies—employing ironic detachment alongside visceral cultural detail—subvert monolithic identity narratives while exposing the epistemic violence inherent in assimilationist discourses. This dialectical approach neither romanticizes cultural syncretism nor succumbs to postmodern fragmentation, instead charting what Glissant (1997) might call a "poetics of relation" within globalized

displacement.

Ling Ma's *Severance*, while ostensibly categorized as post-apocalyptic fiction (Schaub, 2018), transcends generic conventions through its bifocal interrogation of late capitalist alienation and diasporic subjectivity. The narrative framework, alternating between pre- and post-pandemic timelines (Serrano-Muñoz, 2021), mirrors the protagonist Candace Chen's fractured identity as a second-generation Chinese American. The Shen Fever pandemic—a biological metaphor for cultural entropy—causes people to become obsessed with repetitive tasks and eventually leads to their death. Candace's immunological resistance to the pathogen positions her as both observer and participant in civilizational collapse, her survival paradoxically intensifying existential vertigo.

Prior to the outbreak, Candace's assimilationist trajectory epitomizes millennial precarity: securing a position at Spectra, a New York-based publishing conglomerate, she meticulously curates banal product descriptions for Bibles—an ironic commentary on capitalism's sacralization of consumerism (Ma, 2018). The pandemic's escalation renders these professional rituals obsolete, propelling her westward migration with a survivalist group. Their subsequent deification of Shen Fever as transcendental enlightenment exposes capitalism's latent theological dimensions, wherein viral martyrdom becomes the ultimate commodity fetish. Candace's eventual disavowal of this eschatological cult underscores Ma's central thesis: that identity construction under globalization necessitates critical engagement with, rather than blind adherence to, inherited cultural scripts.

This existential odyssey intertwines with Candace's own filial retrospections, revealing intergenerational parallels in displacement. Her parents Zhigang and Ruifang's navigation of Chinatown's "thirdspace" (Soja, 1996)—simultaneously inhabiting Manhattan's corporate spheres and ethnic enclaves—prefigures Candace's own interstitial positioning. Through analepses detailing their immigration struggles, Ma deconstructs the assimilationist mythos, demonstrating how first-generation survival strategies become second-generation psychological burdens. The novel's structural duality, juxtaposing pandemic chronology with flashbacks to Candace's cross-cultural negotiations. Each temporal stratum illuminates different facets of cultural hybridity: pre-pandemic scenes dissect microaggressions in corporate multiculturalism, while post-collapse episodes expose identity's performative foundations when social structures disintegrate. This narrative oscillation ultimately indicates that diasporic identities reside in the unstable points of identification made through strategic subversions of cultural hierarchy.

2. Literature Review

Since its publication, Ling Ma's *Severance* has garnered increasing critical attention within transnational literary circles, emerging as a prism through which scholars examine pressing sociocultural concerns of late capitalism. The evolving critical discourse surrounding the novel reveals a plurality of thematic concerns that collectively situate the text as a seminal contribution to twenty-first-century world literature.

Building upon these cultural analyses, Michaels (2019) positions the work within neo-liberal globalization paradigms, arguing that it stimulates transcontinental dialogues on fractured identities within collapsing social infrastructures. This analytical trajectory finds resonance in Saraf's (2019) and Atasoy's (2022) examinations of corporate hegemony, particularly their investigations into the sacralization of market fundamentalism and the economic consequences of pseudoscientific pandemic responses. Parallel scholarship by Waples (2021) and Däwes (2021) employs intersectional feminist frameworks to interrogate the epidemic narrative genre, exposing both the systemic vulnerabilities of marginalized populations during public health emergencies and the biocapitalist mechanisms perpetuating racialized disparities.

The novel's transnational dimensions receive nuanced treatment in Gullander-Drolet's (2021) study, which traces nostalgic intertextualities connecting 1980s Sino-American economic relations to contemporary manifestations of consumerist dystopia. Serrano-Muñoz (2021) and Akkoyun (2023) extend this geopolitical reading through their respective analyses of the text as an allegorical commentary on twenty-first-century necropolitics, particularly its reimagining of zombie apocalypse tropes as metaphors for late capitalist alienation.

Recent scholarship demonstrates an emerging critical consensus regarding the text's prescient engagement with post-pandemic realities. Schaab (2022) and Connell (2022) investigate the persistence of pre-crisis ideologies in shaping post-traumatic social orders, with particular emphasis on the reconstitution of reproductive labor within neoliberal economies. Cherniavsky's (2022) theoretical intervention positions the novel as a battleground for competing critical methodologies, while Westrick's (2023) timely analysis establishes interconnections between COVID-era Sinophobia, historical immigration policies, and the textual construction of Asian American subjectivity.

While extant scholarship has proffered analyses from diverse vantage points, collectively providing an extensive exploration of Ling Ma's *Severance* and establishing it as a seminal text that interrogates contemporary sociocultural complexities, lacunae persist in the variegation and profundity of critical approaches—a hermeneutic gap that invites fresh interpretive frameworks.

Chronicling the Chinese immigrant diaspora through Candace Chen's autodiegetic narrative, Ma's novel meticulously delineates the ontological liminality inherent in transnational displacement. The protagonist's family unit—comprising father Zhigang Chen and mother Ruifang Yang—embodies the quintessential immigrant paradox: their pragmatic establishment of a mercantile existence in New York's ethnic enclaves exists in dialectical tension with profound anomie within American mainstream society. This psychological bifurcation manifests as simultaneous nostalgia for ancestral cultural roots and tentative affiliation with the Chinese-American community—a demographic that serves as both cultural touchstone and constant reminder

of alterity. Candace's intergenerational positioning exacerbates this existential duality, rendering her perpetually betwixt and between Sinic traditions and Western modernity through what Homi Bhabha might term "the third space" of cultural hybridity (Bhabha, 1994).

By adopting displacement as its critical lodestar, this study undertakes a tripartite analysis of geographical rootlessness, cultural liminality, and psychological fragmentation within the Chen family. Through historicizing these phenomena within the family's specific migratory trajectory and the broader Chinese-American experience, the analysis reveals how Ma's narrative transforms individual biography into collective allegory. Such exegesis not only augments existing critical discourse on Asian-American literature but also advocates for heightened scholarly engagement with Ma's oeuvre—a corpus that continues to challenge essentialist notions of identity in our globalized epoch.

3. Brimming with Anticipation, Voluntary Immigration

As lexically substantiated by the Oxford English Dictionary (2020), the term "displacement" entered the English lexicon in 1605, denoting "the removal of someone or something by someone else which takes their place" (p. 505). This semantic trajectory further evolves to encompass "the enforced departure of people from their homes, typically because of war, persecution, or natural disaster" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2020, p. 505), thereby encoding an inherently coercive dimension antithetical to individual agency. In scholarly corroboration of this conceptual framework, Deek (2016) postulates that "geographical displacement is closely related to the concrete reality of the state of exile brought about by the material and physical movement in the crossing of frontiers and borders" (p. 22). Notwithstanding these prevailing conceptualizations, Zhigang's displacement necessitates differentiation from involuntary migration patterns characteristic of political persecution or refugee crises. As meticulously documented by Ma (2018), he "had been granted the opportunity to study in America through a scholarship from the University of Utah" (p. 144), emerging as the quintessential representative of first-generation immigrants who actualized the "American Dream" through strategic transnational mobility. His deliberate transgression of national boundaries—relinquishing his Chinese homeland for American residency—constitutes a paradigmatic instance of geographical displacement infused with volitional impetus. Textual evidence reveals this migratory decision stemmed from a tripartite impetus: deteriorating familial relations, socioeconomic adversities in post-revolutionary China, and the magnetic pull of U.S. immigration policies during the historical juncture depicted.

First and foremost, strained familial bonds inscribed indelible scars on Zhigang's psyche, directly compelling his resolve to depart. Although Zhigang and his third brother bore a striking physical resemblance, the latter harbored profound disdain for Zhigang, frequently deriding him as "the capitalist" and "some prodigal son" (Ma, 2018, p. 82). There were even instances when, in a state of inebriation, he accosted Zhigang while muttering, "You can't just come back" (Ma, 2018, p. 82). Moreover, his wife, Ruifang Yang, recounted that Zhigang's family antipathy was so pronounced that he solemnly declared to her, "We are never going back" (Ma, 2018, p. 149).

Second, adverse domestic circumstances catalyzed Zhigang's migration. In *Severance*, Ling Ma meticulously examines the ramifications of cataclysmic historical events. Through chronicling Zhigang's experiences, the author illuminates how such traumas imprint intergenerational legacies, shaping lives in indelible ways. Owing to the eruption of the Cultural Revolution, all Chinese universities were forcibly "shut down for several years" (Ma, 2018, p. 146), necessitating Zhigang's relocation to the U.S. for academic advancement. Edward Said (1994) posits in *Representation of the Intellectual* that "for the intellectual an exile displacement means being liberated from the usual career, in which 'doing well' and following in time-honored footsteps are the milestones" (p. 46). This suggests that displacement carries liberatory potential, offering intellectuals opportunities to forge new professional horizons. Thus, Zhigang's voluntary geographical relocation to pursue education embodies this dynamic. Additionally, given China's status as a developing nation at the time, it struggled to provide competitive remuneration and robust employment prospects for its intellectual cohort. Emigration therefore emerged as a viable strategy to transcend maternal impoverishment and actualize career aspirations—contextual imperatives that compelled Zhigang's departure. During a confrontation with his wife, he lamented China's austere realities, decrying its dire employment landscape where "the only good jobs in China are government jobs" (Ma, 2018, p. 39). Abroad, he escaped societal upheaval and accessed higher education, exemplifying how adverse domestic conditions and aspirations for upward mobility propel Chinese individuals to seek settlement in developed nations.

Thirdly, Zhigang's relocation was facilitated by advantageous immigration policies in Western nations and prevailing societal expectations regarding them. Following World War II, aiming to foster amicable diplomatic ties with Asian nations, the U.S. government implemented more inclusive immigration policies tailored to individuals from the Asian continent. Subsequently, the repeal of restrictive early 20th-century immigration laws, culminating in the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, abolished the national-origins quota system. This landmark legislation granted individuals from Asian countries immigration rights comparable to those from Western nations, thus playing a pivotal role in facilitating the realization of Zhigang's aspirations.

Among approved immigrants, highly educated individuals and skilled professionals received priority consideration. Against this backdrop, Zhigang's immigration journey proceeded smoothly; he secured an opportunity to study in the United States via a scholarship at the University of Utah, matriculating as a graduate student at this leading public research university. The institution provided full funding for his doctoral studies in economics. Indeed, "He was the first graduate student from China to

be admitted into the department" (Ma, 2018, p. 144). Materially, Zhigang's immigration proved successful. He seemingly attained everything he desired in America, transforming from a minority figure into an emblem of the American Dream. Following the attainment of his doctoral degree, his initial position in the United States was "an analyst position at an insurance firm" (Ma, 2018, p. 39)—a distinctly respectable occupation compared to the menial jobs historically undertaken by many Chinese immigrants upon arrival, such as laundry work, waiting tables, or cooking. Zhigang's diligent work ethic enabled him to bequeath a substantial inheritance to his daughter Candace upon his passing: "the family coffers or whatever would last me just long enough—maybe, say, for the next ten, fifteen years—for me to be comfortable with not working, long enough to be useless" (Ma, 2018, p. 45). Thus, starting from scratch in America, Zhigang forged a respectable career and acquired the means to bring his daughter from Fujian to the United States for higher education. Moreover, passing the U.S. citizenship test marked a profound milestone in Zhigang's life, signifying his formal psychological disavowal of emotional attachment to his Chinese heritage. As Candace observes, her father demonstrates reticence about revisiting his past; consequently, it is plausible that only through formalizing his estrangement from China did he feel sufficiently unburdened to candidly share his life experiences there. Collectively, these details suggest Zhigang harbored a determined desire to forge ahead and commence a fresh chapter in the United States, deliberately weakening ties with his past in China.

In comparison to the protagonists depicted in other literary works focusing on immigration, Zhigang's assimilation into this nation appears conspicuously smooth. Nevertheless, his trajectory of success is not fortuitous, but rather meticulously cultivated. The enclave of Chinese immigrants, distinguished by its unique collective identity, exhibits unparalleled aptitudes in acclimating to Western countries. The confluence of his personal experiences and the multifaceted dimensions of his Chinese heritage has substantially eased his transition to America. Primarily, Zhigang coincided with the denouement of the Cultural Revolution, "when Chinese universities reopened and accepted only a few students, that he gained admission" (Ma, 2018, p. 146), for which he got the chance to go to university for further study. The acquisition of advanced education engendered a cognitive elevation that primed him for eminence within American societal strata.

Besides, indomitable tenacity emerges as a pivotal determinant propelling his success. Persevering ardently in scholastic pursuits, as well as diligent labor, Zhigang exemplifies the quintessential immigrant commonalities: hard work and perseverance. Following the opportunity to commence tertiary education in China, "he had studied so hard that he had developed ulcers and lay in bed for days" (Ma, 2018, p. 146). After relocating to the United States, Zhigang "had worked hard his whole life, taking late hours at the office, coming home to cold leftovers in the fridge. He received promotion after promotion, in part because he went into the office on weekends too. His work ethic was like that of many other immigrants, eager to prove their usefulness to the country that had deigned to adopt them" (Ma, 2018, p. 158).

Furthermore, Zhi Gang aspired to become a literary professor, although this dream remained unattainable. However, "he taught himself English using a translation of the French novel *The Red and the Black*. He looked up every single word in a Chinese–English dictionary" (Ma, 2018, p. 159), a practice that may have inadvertently instilled Western values in Zhi Gang. Given that literature serves as a predominant vessel for Western ideologies, it plays a crucial role in propagating bourgeois thoughts. Classical literature mirrors aesthetic hegemony, as the concept of "free literature" is "in reality linked to the bourgeoisie" (Lenin, 1982, p. 31). Art and literature, as the ideological tool of ruling classes, serve as a mechanism to promote class interests. The selection of certain literary classics is entirely determined by the ruling class, serving as a means for them to consolidate their power. Zhi Gang's attraction to Western values through his reading drew him closer to the Western world and facilitated his cultural adaptation.

Leveraging these advantages, immigrants like Zhigang gain societal acceptance in America, frequently ascending to elite status while making significant contributions across scientific, pedagogical, economic, and medical spheres—ultimately bolstering the nation's intellectual and socioeconomic fabric.

Despite Zhigang's material achievements, his psychological losses warrant attention. Material success alone cannot bring inner happiness. As Mourid Barghouti (2004) stated, "[i]t is enough for a person to go through the first experience of uprooting, to become uprooted forever" (p. 131), which implies that once displaced, one remains displaced indefinitely. The initial step of geographic displacement in the journey of being uprooted often accompanies a sense of rootlessness and nostalgia. In stark contrast to his wife Ruifang's discomfort, Zhigang's inner struggles were not openly manifested as he endeavored to survive in the United States. However, he grappled with homesickness and solitude, albeit expressed in a subdued manner. Zhigang's longing for his homeland was manifested in his fervor for Chinese literature; even after relocating to the U.S., he continued to collect Chinese literary works, as Candace discovered in her father's belongings posthumously. "Most of our family belongings had been placed in storage...The law firm would have then forwarded this last box to the storage facility that held my family's possessions, from my childhood things to my father's collection of Chinese literature" (Ma, 2018, p. 35). As He (2012) said, the initial wave of immigrants is geographically distant from their home country and experiences significant challenges due to linguistic and cultural disorientation (75). Upon his arrival in the United States, Zhigang experienced a sense of foreignness within American society and struggled to adapt to his unfamiliar surroundings. The sense of displacement and uncertainty experienced by immigrants in an unknown country is compounded by their deep-seated ties to Chinese cultural heritage, which have been ingrained within them since birth. Consequently, Zhigang sought solace from this collection of Chinese literature to establish a feeling of belonging amidst the novelty and strangeness of the new place. Moreover, despite his illness, he made the

deliberate decision to return to his home country to visit his relatives, aiming to use this occasion as a means to mend ties with his family. "I'd visited Fuzhou during high school. My father had been sick, and the trip was understood as a peacemaking attempt with his relatives, who had felt abandoned after he'd moved to the States" (Ma, 2018, p. 69). It illustrates that even after immigrating to the United States, Zhigang did not entirely sever his ties with China. It's hoped that by strengthening connections with Chinese relatives, he could mend his emotional wounds.

In summary, Zhigang Chen epitomizes those Chinese Americans whose migration embodies a voluntary geographic displacement, involving departure from their homeland to settle in the United States. Zhigang's narrative of immigration underscores the intricate connections between geographical displacement and personal aspirations, domestic circumstances, international policies, and the ambition to transition from the periphery to the center of the world. Beyond Zhigang's material accomplishments, his nostalgia and desolation are portrayed, unveiling the psychological void resulting from the upheaval of geographic displacement.

4. Dwelling in Foreign Land, Difficult Adaptation

Similar to geographical displacement, cultural and linguistic displacement emphasizes the removal from the previous cultural or linguistic environment. Ruifang Yang as one of the members of Candace's family, confronts strong cultural inadaptation in traditional customs and language following immigration. Contrasted with her husband Zhigang, Ruifang exhibits heightened sensitivity towards cultural shifts and is notably more resistant to embracing them initially. Chinese immigrant women meticulously juxtapose the disparities between their motherland and new location, as well as between the past and present in their everyday experiences, reminding them of the dispossession of their indigenous cultural heritage. "To be removed from an imagined regular, habitual cultural and familiar environment is to be culturally displaced. To be dispossessed from the authorization and legitimizing of one's natal culture and its judicial power is to be culturally displaced" (Deek, 2016, p. 32). The cultural conflicts evoke a continuing distress in the inner heart of a new land and indicate Chinese females' removal from their regular and habitual environment. In this sense, Ruifang's hard cultural adaptation procedure reflects a cultural displacement registered in traditional customs and language.

Traditional custom often serves as a medium for expressing one's cultural belonging. Candace's mother, Ruifang Yang, grows up in a conventional Chinese household, where she is steeped in the rich tapestry of Chinese customs and traditions. In the 1980s, she forwent a job as a certified accountant in Fuzhou to accompany her husband to Utah. Initially, she envisioned her stay in the United States as temporary and instead looked forward to returning to her hometown someday. Consequently, when she first arrived in America, she diligently upheld Chinese cultural practices to foster a feeling of familiarity and to nurture her sense of belonging. "Among the other wives, Ruifang flourished. She joined the ladies' committee and helped plan out every Sunday lunch. They organized Bible study groups on Friday nights. Whenever a Chinese holiday approached, the committee prepared big, extravagant celebrations, using the church space to worship and to celebrate at the same time" (Ma, 2018, p. 152). This portrayal effectively transports Ruifang and readers back to China. In consequence, traditional customs emerge as the binding thread that connects Ruifang with her motherland, symbolizing her unwavering Chinese cultural heritage and denoting her Chinese cultural belonging.

Language understood as "both a means of communication and a carrier of culture" (Williams, 1994, p. 439), indicates the cultural displacement Ruifang suffered from. It transcends mere linguistic expression to symbolize an individual's cultural consciousness and identity. Ruifang faced the harsh reality that English has shifted from a subject in school to the dominant language in her new environment, while her native tongue was marginalized. Language functions as "the medium through which conceptions of 'truth', 'order' and 'reality' become established" (Ashcroft, 2002, p. 7). As a medium of perception and comprehension, language molds individuals' perspectives of the world around them. Proficiency in a language reflects the depth of one's connection to the cultural milieu it embodies. Hence, errors in language usage by individuals from other different cultural backgrounds underscore their distinction with native speakers and their distance from mainstream society. While Ruifang possessed basic knowledge of English expressions, her mastery of the language was not yet proficient. Therefore, she experienced a sense of embarrassment, when Mormon missionaries visited her and plied her with brochures. In her attempt to express gratitude, she made a minor mistake by saying "Sank you" instead of "Thank you," and Mormon missionaries "didn't understand her thick accent when she'd ask them to take their shoes off before stepping inside" (Ma, 2018, p. 147). The missionary failed to comprehend her intended meaning, leading Ruifang to subsequently ignore their repeated visits by pretending to be absent when they called next time. This language barrier exacerbates Ruifang's distress, highlighting her detachment from American culture as a newcomer and outsider.

Furthermore, language as a crucial carrier for the inheritance, development, and prosperity of culture, intertwines with historical and cultural identity and legacy. Simultaneously, as a cultural phenomenon, language constitutes an essential aspect of cultural endeavors, with the two mutually reinforcing and permeating each other. Despite experiencing cultural displacement upon immigrating to the United States, Ruifang became a member of the Chinese Christian Community Church, where she and fellow immigrants established Mandarin language learning courses. "To teach their children how to read and write Mandarin, they created an after-church Chinese language program, taking up a Sunday collection to buy pinyin guidebooks and teaching materials. When her daughter arrived, Ruifang thought, she could join this school too. And then she wouldn't lose the language"

(Ma, 2018, p. 152). Through this initiative, Ruifang aimed to ensure that the succeeding generations of immigrants would not lose the ability to learn Mandarin, preserving their connection to their homeland and roots, reflecting Ruifang's commitment to and inheritance of Chinese culture. Subsequently, although afflicted by Alzheimer's disease, Ruifang frequently reminisced about her experiences in China and repeatedly mentioned them to Candace. Even in her final moments, she addressed Candace "with solemnity in Chinese" (Ma, 2018, p. 160). The various details provided indicate that Ruifang maintains a profound emotional devotion to her place of origin, coupled with an unwavering loyalty to her Chinese identity and a deep-seated appreciation for Chinese culture.

For Chinese female immigrants, the process of adapting to a new culture poses considerably greater challenges than it does for their male counterparts. In analogous circumstances, male and female immigrants may have contrasting experiences. Cultural differences impart less difficulty for Chinese male immigrants, while female immigrants are more susceptible to cultural displacement. A multitude of factors contribute to the gender differences among Chinese immigrants in adapting to a new culture.

To begin with, in contrast to male immigrants, Chinese female immigrants lack robust migration aspirations and impetuses. Represented by Ruifang, Chinese wives migrate to the United States as appendages to their husbands, with their relocation being somewhat involuntary. Their familiarity with this terrain remains notably deficient before their sojourning to America. Upon their initial arrival in the United States, Ruifang and her husband Zhigang are accommodated in a subpar basement, which leaves her with a negative first impression. The house where they live is a basement in poor conditions, "the beige carpets stank of cigarette smoke and the sweet-sourness of mildew" (Ma, 2018, p. 145), and even the nearby grocery store is about a mile away. Because human beings are naturally nostalgic and inclined to memory, the displaced can be caught in the pain of nostalgia and of the alienation brought by both place and him/herself, thus "becoming fragile and disorientation" (Deek, 2016, p. 25). Therefore, without a strong immigration determination and adequate understanding of the destination, female immigrants are prone to feelings of disorientation when confronted with discrepancies between their expectations and realities, often nurturing a strong desire to return to their homeland.

What's worse, Ruifang encountered cultural shocks and an intensifying sense of displacement in the United States, as she faced obstacles in attending gatherings and securing employment due to language barriers. Unable to speak fluent English, Ruifang reduces communication with others, eventually leading to the situation where "[t]hey left every party early, and soon, they stopped attending such gatherings at all" (Ma, 2018, p. 146). Consequently, she loses opportunities to engage with mainstream society, resulting in diminishing connections with her surroundings. Besides, since the 1960s, a saying has been circulating in China that "women can hold up half the sky," as Chinese women at that time began to gradually participate in various types of work. Before emigrating, Ruifang "had been a certified accountant, and she accountant among her clients various city and regional government officials. That her job had been deemed important enough for her to remain in Fuzhou during the Cultural Revolution, while her sisters, along with other youths, had been banished to menial labor in the countryside for years" (Ma, 2018, p. 146). This indicates Ruifang's successful career in China.

However, upon arriving in the United States, she faced job rejections due to "her lack of fluency with English and her lack of a work visa" (Ma, 2018, p. 146), eventually settling for sewing and manual labor, a drastic shift in work that brought her a profound sense of loss. When tired at work, she often blamed her husband for bringing her to the United States. Ruifang exemplifies the experiences of Chinese women migrating for their family, struggling with high expectations of America, language barriers, and the lack of a work visa, which hinder their integration into American society. Amid an unfamiliar culture, Chinese female immigrants experience a strong sense of discomfort, making cultural adaptation a challenging journey for them.

5. Floating Like a "Ghost", Rootless Existence

Candace represents the descendants of immigrants, and in contrast to her parents, Zhigang and Ruifang, her relocation to the United States at a tender age made the process of cultural assimilation in her new environment less arduous than it was for her mother. Nonetheless, she copes with a dual cultural dilemma that hampers her sense of belonging to the lands of both China and America, exacerbating her rootlessness.

Renowned post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha (1994) elucidates in *The Location of Culture* that displacement signifies "the fragmented and schizophrenic decentering of the self" (p. 310). This conveys two understandings: firstly, displacement transcends mere geographic displacement to encompass profound psychological implications; secondly, it is intricately linked to the formation of one's cultural identity. Candace confronts a state of psychological displacement. The conundrum of identity stemming from the interplay of dual cultures gives rise to a shared struggle among second-generation immigrants. Due to the cultural differences carried by different geographical spaces, displacement tends to refer to the cultural identity problems brought about by this displacement. Hence, Candace's psychological displacement primarily arises from her identity dilemma and the awkwardness of being trapped between American and Chinese cultures. She yearns for a unified cultural identity to elude the label of "the other" projected upon her by society, yet the complexity of dual cultures renders this aspiration elusive. Uncertain of her cultural belonging, she appears to straddle both the American and Chinese worlds, yet deep down, she feels disconnected from either. She experiences a perpetual sense of dissonance, whether in the American milieu or amidst the backdrop of China.

In *Severance*, Candace was born in China, and her parents moved to the United States when she was four years old. It wasn't until she turned six that she finally joined her parents in their new American abode. Struggling to acclimate to her unfamiliar surroundings, she harbored a fervent desire to return to China, lamenting, "When we moved to the U.S., I had wanted to go back home, there was nothing I wanted more, I got on my knees and begged like a dog" (Ma, 2018, p. 41). Even months after arriving in the United States, Candace found herself still grappling with the overwhelming novelty of her environment, as she reflected, "I was still dazed at the variety and surplus of the supermarkets, miles of boxes and bottles lit with fluorescent lighting" (Ma, 2018, p. 16). Before moving to the U.S., Candace was considered as "calm and obedient" (Ma, 2018, p. 154); whereas, following the relocation, a metamorphosis took place, transforming her into someone "angry, chronically dissatisfied, bratty" (Ma, 2018, p. 155). This drastic shift in temperament results from psychological displacement. For a child unversed in the complexities of the world, alterations in external surroundings have a direct and palpable impact on their perception. Hence, despite her limited understanding of identity issues in this new land, Candace's formative years in China left her ill-equipped to promptly assimilate to the strains of immigration.

Moreover, Candace was cognizant that when her parents brought her to America, they hoped that she would "pursue academic excellence, mature, secure employment" (Ma, 2018, p. 157) and eventually achieve the American Dream. Her father, Zhigang, believed that "[t]here are abundant opportunities here. Candace has the potential to truly make a name for herself" (Ma, 2018, p. 39). In the eyes of her parents, Candace's success transcends personal fulfillment and extends to bringing honor to the entire family, aligning with the ethos of success in traditional Chinese values, which embodies that Candace's parents have sky-high hopes for her. However, she ultimately fell short of attaining immense wealth and prosperity, settling for a modest life in New York. Even amidst the catastrophic onslaught of "Shen Fever", she dutifully continued her work and lived in American society like a "ghost" "Walking around aimlessly, without anywhere to go, anything to do" (Ma, 2018, p. 38). It underscores Candace's failure to achieve the conventional notion of success in China, failing to meet the expectations of traditional values.

As a measure to contain the spread of "Shen Fever", the US Congress implemented a travel ban that prohibited citizens from Asian nations from entering the United States, in which "the New York Times reported that a travel ban was passing through Congress to prevent citizens of Asian countries from visiting the United States. A list of the banned countries was provided, China at the top of the list" (Ma, 2018, p. 177). Even though "Shen Fever" was transmitted through a fungal agent rather than human interaction, individuals of Asian descent were barred from entry, which made Candace encounter increased difficulty in meeting fellow Chinese individuals due to the travel ban, exacerbating her sense of marginalization and being "the other". At the severity of "Shen Fever", a fungal infection, Candace endeavored to reach out to her relatives in China to ascertain their well-being. When she attempted to contact them, the only available number she found belonged to her first aunt, who possessed limited English proficiency, but despite repeated efforts, she failed to contact with her. Subsequently, she resorted to conversing with her cousin Bing Bing via WeChat, while by that time, she had lost her "reading comprehension of Chinese characters" (Ma, 2018, p. 179), relying on Google Translate to convert English to Chinese before pasting it into the chat. Through this convoluted process, Candace managed to engage in stilted, fundamental conversations with Bing Bing, which inevitably devolved into a series of emoticons, leaving both parties exhausted and unable to comprehend each other. The lack of communication with her relatives and her life in America have contributed to Candace's diminishing proficiency in Mandarin, leading to a gradual detachment from her native culture on a linguistic level. These instances illustrate after her relocation to the United States, Candace's ties with China have gradually faded, and her Chinese identity has begun to be shaken.

Though initially resistant to immigrating to the United States, Candace eventually came to recognize the opportunities for personal growth and advancement that the country offers, influenced by her family environment and exposure to a different culture. The realization alleviated her strong longing for her homeland in China, gradually instilling in her a sense of yearning for the United States. It was during her third year in the new land that she beheld the scenes within the American office building, prompting her to exclaim, "[t]he city was really beautiful" (Ma, 2018, p. 41). At that moment, she fully understood her father's desire to leave China for a life abroad, driven by a longing for freedom. From then on, she made a firm resolve to one day reside in New York City. Following her graduation, she chose to land a job at a publishing company, Spectra, in New York City.

Additionally, Candace and her father successfully passed the U.S. citizenship test, which indicated that they had obtained legal American citizenship. Notwithstanding the adaptation to life in the United States, the impact of psychological displacement continued to linger. On one occasion, Candace hosted a shark fin dinner party in her apartment, inviting some American friends. Throughout the evening, she endeavored to fit in with her American friends, repeatedly participating in their pastimes, "I wandered from room to room, circulating, playing at everything and losing, laughing hysterically as I scattered the cards, stumbled on the mat, jumped up and down, out of sync. When other people are happy, I don't have to worry about them. There is room for my happiness" (Ma, 2018, p. 48). After participating in each activity, she retreated to her own room, undisturbed. Even within the confines of her own space, she felt somewhat like "a homeless person", relishing in the "insulated" sensation (Ma, 2018, p. 49). It illustrates Candace's lack of belonging within her American social circle, as well as her incomplete acceptance of her American identity, despite possessing a U.S. citizenship certificate. Psychologically, she still holds a degree of alienation from American culture, as evidenced by the sense of dislocation and detachment brought about by psychological displacement—a feeling of being physically present but devoid of a genuine sense of belonging.

As a Chinese American maneuvering between two cultures, Candace confronted the identity crisis and inevitably personified

cultural hybridity. Her experience was characterized by a persistent sense of displacement and estrangement in both America and China, never feeling entirely at home in either. Given Candace's profound attachment to her hometown in the early days, she couldn't abandon it entirely in favor of American culture. Conversely, having benefited from American material foundation and more opportunities, it was difficult for Candace to refuse to assimilate into American culture. Accordingly, she found herself wrestling with a sense of disorientation and bewilderment as she navigated the intersecting terrain of both cultures. Undoubtedly, these were all outcomes resulting from psychological displacement. Therefore, Candace was eager to establish a psychological "third space" to achieve a blend of two cultures. According to Bhabha (1994), the "third space" is an ambivalent site where cultural meaning and representation have no "primordial unity or fixity" (p. 37). It transcends the mere amalgamation of discrete identity categories and is "neither the [o]ne nor the [o]ther but something else besides" (Ma, 2018, p. 28). Rather than opting for a binary approach of choosing one culture over the other, she tries to embrace select aspects of both Chinese and American cultures. This inclusive and diversity-oriented approach was characterized by multilingualism and multiculturalism, resulting in a harmonious coexistence of cultural identities.

However, her attempts were unsuccessful, and ultimately she did not achieve cultural hybridity nor construct a psychological "third space". On the one hand, when she visited China, she found herself unfamiliar with some relatives, as "her contact with them has been intermittent at best" (Ma, 2018, p. 69). To top it off, after the outbreak of the "Shen Fever," Candace was unable to reach her family, leading her to lament, "[t]he remainder of my family, distant genealogical lines, dimming" (Ma, 2018, p. 179). It shows her diminishing connections with China. On the other hand, she once considered America a symbol of freedom and identified her American identity with living in New York. After graduation, Candace cohabited in New York with her boyfriend Jonathan. During a conversation, Jonathan and Candace discussed the future increase in New York's cost of living, the declining healthiness of food, and the growing number of graduates. Jonathan asked Candace if she would consider leaving New York with him, because "Manhattan is sinking" (Ma, 2018, p. 15), but she declined his invitation and chose to stay in New York. Following the outbreak of the "Shen Fever", as one of the few immune survivors, she decided to join a group of others heading west to rebuild society. Nevertheless, within that organization, she was confined to a room by the leader Bob, and lost all her freedom. During her time in captivity, she began to question the supposed freedom in America. Through a stroke of luck, she managed to escape the organization. Afterward, she finally decided to leave New York and let go of the identity she had defined as "American". She kept "pressing on, at a painful crawl" (Ma, 2018, p. 243), but her ultimate destination remained unknown.

6. Conclusion

Through the narratives of Zhigang, Ruifang, and Candace, Ling Ma deftly illustrates how "displacement" manifests across geographical, cultural, and psychological dimensions. Zhigang embodies the exhilaration and anticipation of voluntary geographical displacement, yet concurrently experiences a profound sense of rootlessness and nostalgia. He is impelled to depart his homeland by strained familial dynamics, adverse sociopolitical conditions in China, and propitious U.S. immigration policies. Conversely, Ruifang exemplifies the plight of Chinese women migrating for familial reunification, grappling with idealized perceptions of America, linguistic barriers, and the absence of work visas—factors that impede their integration into American society. Her arduous cultural adaptation process reflects a cultural displacement inscribed in linguistic and traditional schisms, often prompting her to harbor a visceral longing to revert to her native land. Candace's rootless existence, meanwhile, encapsulates the psychological ramifications of displacement, where she drifts aimlessly like a "ghost," bereft of belonging or meaningful connection. She navigates a state of psychological displacement arising from her identity quandary and the ambivalence of being suspended between American and Chinese cultural spheres. She yearns for a cohesive cultural identity to escape the label of "the other" imposed by society, yet the dichotomy of dual cultural allegiances renders this aspiration elusive. Candace's family trajectory illustrates how globalization's permeation of political, economic, and cultural spheres has intensified displacement's multifaceted manifestations, establishing it as a definitive phenomenon in contemporary society. For migrants traversing geographical boundaries while enduring the existential severance from their cultural roots, displacement constitutes an inescapable condition. Consequently, within literary criticism, displacement analysis has matured into a critical interpretive lens for excavating textual complexities.

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