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# Neoliberalism's Zombies: Ling Ma's *Severance*, COVID, and Anti-Asian Racism

Elizabeth Westrick

**Abstract:** In this paper, I argue that Ling Ma's 2018 novel, *Severance*, weaves together Asian American identity, capitalism, and neoliberal ideals into a zombie apocalypse novel that works to critique the systems of global capitalism and the ways in which Asian immigrants are positioned within this system. Through the figure of the zombie who has been infected by a virus the global community refers to as "Shen Fever," Ma elucidates the dehumanized, pathologized nature of the relationship between race and labor in the United States. I will also argue that these ideas have been realized in the COVID-19 pandemic and the handling of a crisis by a capitalistic, neoliberal government. My argument will then move to the realization of Ma's imagined world in the COVID-19 pandemic. Here I will discuss the parallels COVID, the rise of anti-Asian violence, and Ma's depiction of Candace's Asian American identity and allusions to immigrant acts that have historically positioned Asian Americans as non-citizens and foreigners.

*Keywords:* zombies, neoliberalism, immigration, global capitalism, racism

The zombie is a figure historically associated with African slaves and their forced labor in the Western Hemisphere; bodies who, according to their origins in Haitian folklore, were raised by Voodoo priests to work the plantations. In a broad sense the zombie is "the death of the individual who

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continues to lumber forward” (Lauro and Embry 96). Originating in the slave narrative, the legend of the zombie is a reaction to the horrors of forced labor and its dehumanizing effects. The zombie metaphor is striking in the way that it demonizes the loss of consciousness ascertaining that a human is made human through the ability to think and exercise one’s own will.

Ling Ma’s 2018 novel *Severance* is, simply put, about zombies, mindless bodies that are alive but not living. In this novel everyone has succumbed to the Shen Fever, the fictitious fungus that had originated in Shenzhen, China and spread throughout the globe via cargo shipments to international ports. The protagonist of the novel, Candace, is one of only a few known survivors of Shen Fever, a part of a small band of people who were never affected by the virus. Those who were infected are stuck in their mindless routines, unconsciously going through the actions of their everyday lives until their bodies give out, the fever rendering them zombies in a perpetual state of labor highlighting the effects of capitalism and the traumatic results of dedicating one’s life to work, especially by immigrants and minorities. The novel follows Candace’s life in New York City after she graduated from college during the 2007–2008 economic recession, as the Fever begins to take hold and ultimately renders the city uninhabitable and non-functioning, and her escape from the city where she meets fellow survivors. Her experiences before and through the pandemic as well as those of her life after New York are marked by her being a Chinese immigrant, her parents having come to America when she was six years old for better work opportunities. Through writing the protagonist as an Asian American woman working in New York City and utilizing the zombie figure as a result of the effects of global neoliberal capitalism, Ma illuminates the historical and modern day pathologization of Asian immigrants in America and their position, as coined by Lisa Lowe in her novel *Immigrant Acts* (1996), as abstract citizens and the model minority. All of these facets of *Severance* come together to portray the stark realities of global circuits of capitalism and their effects on all Asian people, especially Chinese people living in China or in America, highlighting the trauma and alienation of their labor through the image of the Shen Fever-infected zombie.

The zombies that Shen Fever conjures are just as Lauro and Embry described, living people who have lost control of their bodies. Ma writes of them, “They aren’t really alive... the fevered were creatures of habit, mimicking old routines and gestures they must have inhabited for years, decades” (28). Those infected by Shen Fever were not violent like many zombies portrayed in popular media such as in the series *The Walking Dead* or the movie *Dawn of the Dead* where the monsters are mindless beings on the hunt for human brains (Lauro and Embry 87); they went about their business until they lost consciousness and control of their bodies, unconsciously going through their routines until their bodies could no longer support it. By imagining the zombie as a nonviolent being whose

demise is brought upon them through the performance of labor and routine, Ma questions the merit of capitalism and its effects on those whose lives are controlled by its demands. In its origin from enslaved African Haitian lore, the zombie is essentially a product of colonization and demands of capitalism. The same is true of Ma's zombies. The fevered are products of capitalism, bodies enslaved by the demands of a capitalistic society with no sense of direction outside of labor. Stuck in their daily routines, the zombies created by the Shen Fever are quite literally working themselves to death, a stark critique made through a fictitious trope.

### **Capitalism, Racialization, and Identity**

Candice's Chinese American identity is impossible to overlook when examining the critiques of capitalism and racialization offered by Ling Ma in *Severance*. In her book *Immigrant Acts*, Lisa Lowe states that, "Understanding Asian immigration to the United States is fundamental to understanding the racialized foundations of both the emergence of the United States as a nation and the development of American capitalism" (ix). Ma depicts the relationship between Asian immigrants and capitalism as explained by Lowe in *Severance* most clearly through Candice's parents who immigrated to the United States from Fuzhou, China when she was young because her father believed in democracy and the promise of the American Dream. The Chinese government opened their borders to foreign trade in 1978–1979 under the rule of Deng Xiaoping. This allowed for the transfer of students between China and outside nations such as the United States, the ticket Candice's father used to get to America to study medicine. The image of the Asian immigrant does not offer much variation from Candice's father throughout history, people in search of better opportunities in the United States but their options and opportunities limited by the Chinese government and their abstract acceptance in America. Lisa Lowe writes, "A national memory haunts the conceptions of the Asian American" (Lowe 5). Many workers came to America seeking a better life for themselves and their families. The cost of this supposed better life was much higher than they could have anticipated. Governed by a people who valued whiteness and the security of their power, Asian immigrants were excluded from the rights white Americans enjoyed. Unable to escape the cycle of oppression they are trapped in by being Asians in America, they live their lives in a state of constant otherness, a phenomenon Ma illustrates through Candice and her Chinese parents.

The history of Asian immigration to the United States has always coincided with American demands of labor. Much like the prominence of outsourced labor in today's world, when America was being developed Asian people were brought on at much cheaper cost, with American businessmen able to pay them

less for their labor due to their lack of rights as immigrants as well as their supposed lesser worth as non-white bodies. They earned much less money for their work than a white man would; this was exploited consistently throughout history. Laws were put into place to stop the naturalization of Asian immigrant workers, thus reducing their lives to ones of constant limbo, never able to settle down and fulfill their American Dreams. Not only did this lack of rights stop them from having political rights, but it was also compounded in every other aspect of their lives; they were never able to secure a real place in American consciousness. Ma illustrates this sentiment in the way Candice reflects on her conditional place in America, one that she does not fully occupy or is allowed to live in. When describing Candice's place as an Asian immigrant in the United States Ma writes, "Too often it feels like we don't belong. Too often, we may wonder [whether?] we're just wandering aimlessly by living here" (Ma 179). This passage illustrates the condition of the Asian immigrant void of work in a society where an entire group of people's worth is found through their labor. Here Ma highlights the zombie-like nature of those working under the oppression of capitalism, especially Asians and Asian Americans. Even though they were being exploited, Asian immigrants were still making more money than they would have had they stayed in Asia. The demand of their labor through capitalism is high and, like in today's global circuit of capitalism, they continue to work in terrible conditions for little pay because it is still better than the poverty they experienced elsewhere. This is compounded into the racialization of Asians and Asian immigrants into commodities, people who are there for the use of the white consumer. This translated into exclusive laws and discrimination as the Asian person was identified as less than their white peer. The dehumanizing and lessening of the Asian and Asian American subjects' worth through its legalization rings true and is compounded in today's neoliberal capitalist system as seen in the events of *Severance* in both the manufacturing hubs of Shenzhen and in Candice's personal relationship with work; both parties' situations reflect the high value of labor and the simultaneous devaluing of Asian labor in the eyes of a globally capitalistic world.

The situation of the world's global economy in a phase of late neoliberalism is crucial to the critique Ling Ma makes through *Severance*. According to Fulong Wu's "How Neoliberal is China's Reform? The Origins of Change during Transition", "A popular (and grossly simplified) working definition of neoliberalism would describe it as 'a market-driven approach to economic and social policy based on neoclassical theories of economics (aka capitalism) that maximize[s] the role of the private business sector in determining the political and economic priorities of the state'" (619). It is through this economic climate that the events of *Severance* unfold. Ma positioned the characters of *Severance* very purposefully in this period of neoliberal capitalism, specifically setting

the immigration of Candice's parents during the Chinese border openings of 1978–1979, a time that is inexplicably important to the argument made about the characters' positions within the global circuits of capitalism as Asian subject. Candice's parents immigrated to the United States in 1978 due to a newly opened China, one seeking globalization in both trade and education. The opening of the Chinese borders during 1978–1979 was aimed at furthering Chinese knowledge through foreign education and economics through foreign trade. Ma strategically utilizes this historic time to further the implication of capitalistic pursuits controlling the actions of nations. Had China not seen an economic advantage in opening their borders, Candice's parents would not have been allowed out of the country to join the other Asian people in America's commoditized labor force. This does not just act as a critique of America though; Ma is also able to bring the morality of Chinese labor in China into question as well. When considering what the position of Candice's family in China would have been had they not immigrated to America, it becomes clear that their future would have been equally ruled by the demands of capitalism on Asian labor in China, unable to escape global capitalism in their home country either. Considering both the state of neoliberal capitalism and the opening of China in 1978–1979, Ma is able to directly point to the global oppression of Asian labor, something that cannot be pinpointed to one nation in particular, a global system that is irrevocably unescapable.

Ling Ma mirrors the shared experience of Asians and Asian immigrants through the identities Candice experiences living in New York City. The reason for many immigrants' moves to the United States is their pursuit of happiness, the pursuit of better work opportunities. This sentiment directly reflects how deeply ingrained capitalism is in society. Through placing Candice's father into this mold, Ma brings attention to the effect of economics and the value placed on labor on those living under capitalism, especially immigrants and their children. To showcase this point Ma writes Candice as taking up the moniker "NYC Ghost" during her introduction into American labor culture after her college graduation. She spends the first months of her time in New York photographing the city, cataloging its sights while never putting herself in her work. She seemingly doesn't exist, a ghost whom no one notices while she lives off of her inheritance. She is a ghost when she does not have employment, but drops the blog and ghost image as soon as she begins work at Spectra. This emphasis on the importance of work is compounded in the sentiments passed down to Candice from her parents. Her mother tells her, "Your father is an ambitious man. He wants a better life for you, and it's only possible in America. You are his only child. You must do better or just as well as him...I just want for you what your father wanted: to make use of yourself...No matter what, we just want you to be of use" (Ma 190). This statement reveals the immense value put on labor by

Asian immigrants; Candice's parents only wish for their daughter is to work, to make money. This value stemming from capitalism gives one an identity. Before having a job, Candice was identified as a ghost, a being not even worthy of being seen. While she is not actively working, Candice is seen feeling shame for not being 'useful'. Of this Ma writes, "I live off of my parents...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. The fruits of my immigrant father's lifelong efforts would be gobbled up and squandered by me, his lazy, disaffected daughter" (Ma 50). Useless and unseen when without work, Candice finds employment and dedicates her life to her job. When Shen Fever begins to spread in New York City, she is offered an incredible amount of money in exchange for continuing to work while the majority of the staff leaves the city in search of safety. Despite the danger she is putting herself into by staying in New York, Candice disregards them and chooses the financial stability her labor would provide. "I laid it out and scanned it—the hours I would be at the office, the direct deposit payment, the liability disclaimer in the event that I contracted Shen Fever—and signed it, my signature riddled with seismic tremors caused by my shaking hand" (Ma 219). The tremors described by Ma in this excerpt of *Severance* exemplify the effect of the expectations of Asians and Asian Americans' labor; they do not want to be subjected to these conditions and expectations but do so anyway in their pursuit of capital and stability. The positioning of Candice and her boss, Michael, in this passage are also of the utmost importance when dissecting the relationship between Asians and white Americans in neoliberal capitalism. Michael is a wealthy upper-class man while Candice is situated below him in the Spectra hierarchy. Michael reiterates his desire for Candice to think this decision over many times; he knows how dangerous and impractical the offer he is making Candice is despite the high reward he offers her for its completion. Despite this, he makes Candice this offer to stay at the office and risk her health because it will benefit him and his company, reducing Candice's worth as a human to her labor. And work Candice did. She was the last remaining Spectra employee, the only non-fevered person she saw in New York City. Eventually Candice moved into the Spectra office where she continued to work while the city was left desolate. It wasn't until the day her direct deposit landed in her bank account that she decided it was time to leave the city, a hub of commerce and now disease. As soon as her usefulness was realized in the form of her payout, Candice flees, suddenly aware of the oppressive, unhealthy situation she conceded to being a part of. Through forcing Candice to choose between her personal health and work, Ma illuminates the realities Asians and Asian immigrants face, having to choose between these things in their real lives, both historically and in the present.

Candice works for Spectra, an intermediary company that outsources the

production of books for their customers. Within the wide range of books produced by Spectra, Candice works in the Bible department and deals directly with the factories that make the products in Shenzhen, China, the place for which *Shen Fever* is named, it being the epicenter and home of the pandemic. This detail is exponentially important to Ma's critique of capitalism and its connection to the pathologization of Asians, pointing to the poor conditions and high demands of consumers and their devastating effects on those producing these products. The labor conditions required to sustain the capitalist society depicted in *Severance* is verbatim of the current labor conditions of Chinese workers in facilities that accommodate mass production of goods. Calling upon Ngai Pun and Jenny Chan's "The Spatial Politics of Labor in China: Life, Labor, and a New Generation of Migrant Workers" (2013), the parallels between the conditions leading to the development of the *Shen Fever* and those plaguing Chinese workers in the real world are undeniable. Most obvious of these similarities is their immersion in Shenzhen, China. Shenzhen is where Spectra's Bibles are manufactured. When visiting the location Candice notes what look like apartment buildings located close by the factory and is informed that that is where the workers live. This small observance points to the existence of the hukou system in China, the household registration system put in place to prohibit the permanent relocation of rural Chinese workers to urban areas. While they are unable to relocate, they are encouraged by the government and extreme poverty to move to urban coastal areas to work in factories like the one Candice visits. Because these rural workers cannot officially take up residence in the areas that they are employed, they are put up in dormitories with ten or more workers in a single room. When Candice notes the building outside of the Shenzhen factory, she also mentions clothes, specifically nightgowns, hanging outside of the windows. According to Pun and Chan these clothes are, "the flags of the new working class in an era characterized by the advent of global capital in tandem with the Chinese state" (182–183). An epicenter of hukou rule, Shenzhen is home to the production facility of a major supplier of Apple products. It was reported that, "In 2010, within a period of five months, thirteen young rural migrant workers attempted suicide at the Shenzhen facilities of Foxconn, the employer of 1 million Chinese workers" (Pun and Chan 183). It can be no coincidence that Ling Ma chose to write of her zombie-producing disease as originating in the same place where 1 million workers live in terrible conditions, unable to legally settle and build their lives, a place where labor is the only worth of a human being.

The situation of current-day Chinese workers in the hukou system is eerily similar to the history of Asian immigration to America. The Page Act of 1875 is the most notable in relation to the conditions of Chinese workers. In the hukou system workers from rural areas are unable to settle down at the place they are working, essentially labeling their life's purpose as labor. In this government



sanctioned set-up, poverty-stricken people from rural Chinese provinces are convinced to work in manufacturing hubs in urban cities. While they move and work in these cities, they are denied the ability to register as residents of their respective city, still considered residents of the province from which they hail, and are subsequently denied access to any public benefits and aid they would be entitled to as registered residents of the city they work in. This is all in an effort to not allow rural impoverished workers to settle down and build lives for themselves in urban areas. The Page Act in America worked in the same way. This piece of legislation banned the spouses of Chinese workers from migrating to the United States; like the rural workers today, the Chinese workers were unable to settle down having been separated from their loved ones both by distance and legal exclusions. The Page Act actively sought to stop the production of “anchor babies” by Chinese migrant couples. If a child was born in the United States by a Chinese couple the child would legally be an American citizen. Being the parent to an American citizen is a strong reason to stay in the United States and not return to their country of origin. By not allowing Chinese women into the U.S. through the Page Act, the American government was able to successfully stop the settling of Chinese workers in the country as to not disturb the white body politic of the country in the 1800s. They, too, essentially lived to labor, their lives’ purpose only to work. Separated from their families and their lives controlled by the constant work schedule, the Chinese workers in *Severance* become the prototype zombie, reflected through history and real-life conditions in the modern day.

## The Construction of the Zombie

The zombie does not just appear out of thin air, it is created. In the case of their original Haitian slave narrative, zombies were products of the labor the enslaved Africans were subjected to on the plantations. In the case of *Severance*, zombies were created through airborne fungal spores that infected the host and rendered them in a state of constant routines. The fungal spores that contained Shen Fever were moved through global capitalistic trade. In chapter 1 of the novel, a staff meeting is held at Spectra and one of the points on the agenda was to inform the workers about an outbreak of the Shen Fever. It had not yet spread to many people but was something the company was informed about because “the popular theory is that it somehow traveled here through the shipment of goods from China to the States” (Ma 20). A few pages after the conclusion of the meeting Candice is met with a problem regarding the production of a specific Bible, the Gemstone Bible, due to health problems plaguing those who make the gemstones. Even after informing the client who ordered the Bibles that workers were dying from the materials used in production, they were adamant about finding a different supplier; unconcerned about the conditions by which

their goods are made, the client thought their desire for consumption was a just enough cause to endanger the lives of countless workers. This is just one example in *Severance* of the demands of capitalism surpassing the importance of the wellness of those working under it. The global level at which the Gemstone Bible was produced creates even more distance between the producer and consumer, dehumanizing workers to a physically harmful level. Through this instance Ma explains the conditions through which Shen Fever was able to travel. With no concern for how a product is made, by only caring about the end result, people across the world were able to turn a blind eye on the fact that their unadulterated consumption was the reason the fungal spores were able to travel and spread so fast. It is through this global capitalistic circuit that Ma is also able to showcase the ways in which the uncontrollable demand for goods spreads production operations like those in Shenzhen to other parts of the world, condemning more people from different countries to their fate of being infected by terrible conditions produced by capitalism. Ma writes:

“First, the U.S. manufacturing jobs went to Mexico, to the maquiladoras that staffed laborers willing to work for cheaper rates than Americans. Duty-free, tariff-free... Later, a portion of those jobs went to suppliers in China, which offered cheaper labor rates, even cheap enough to offset the shipping costs that coincided with a rise in oil prices. And after this, in another few years, the jobs will go elsewhere, to India or some other country will offer even cheaper rates.” (85)

The global capitalist circuit is never-ending, as illustrated by Ma. There will always be a cheaper labor rate and more cost effective, albeit dangerous, production method. The demand for goods by Western countries from “third world” countries is summated in the interactions between Candice and Balthazar, the Chinese man who shows her around the Shenzhen facility. He states, “We manufacture the emblematic text to propagate your country’s Christian Euro-American ideologies, and for this, for this important task, you and your clients negotiate aggressively over pennies per unit cost, demand that we deliver early with every printing, and undercut the value of our labor year after year” (Ma 83–84). Through positioning Candice as the head of the Bible manufacturing department at Spectra, Ma highlights the Anglo-Christian dominance of capitalism, white Christians predominantly being the driving force of the oppressive systems that plague those not of the majority. It is through the Chinese manufactured Bibles that Shen Fever is spread and the insistence through which the goods are made despite the risks and conditions that they are produced that creates space for the zombie-making virus to be created and spread. Ma’s critique of the exploitation of Asian labor is clear in the work done in *Severance*; by highlighting the incessant demand of goods by the consumer, Ma powerfully articulates the way in which capitalism is run and the negative ways its methods affect everyone, especially the Asian person who never fails to

end up with the short end of the stick.

Stemming from the expanse of capitalistic critiques, in her novel Ma offers an imagined result of the system seen in Candice's decision to settle down with her baby, Luna, in deserted Chicago. Ma uses the setting of Chicago, more broadly a city, to metaphorize capitalism at the end of the book, the wreckage in which Candice is choosing to restart her life, and where civilization is at. Of this Ma writes, "To live in the city is to take part in and to propagate its impossible systems. To wake up. To go to work in the morning. It is also to take pleasure in those systems because, otherwise, who could repeat the same routines, year in and year out?" (290). The city metaphor draws on the immersive effect of capitalism, the way in which people subscribe to it and live within it even if it persecutes them. It also reveals the way in which society has adapted to living in a capitalistic economic system, the way in which it is made palatable by those forced into its confines. This use of the city offers different interpretations as to what Ma is insinuating about the supposed end of capitalism and what comes after. On one hand, Candice's settling in Chicago could be seen as a classic case of humans repeating the past; in this vein, Candice is going back to the life she knew and will likely revert back to, one of work and endless routines. On the other hand, this metaphor is one of hope. By bringing Candice back to the city, the image of capitalism in this case, Ma provides a scene in which the world can pick up from where it left off and do better. In tandem with this positive reading of the city, Pun and Chan offer hope through their work on the current day conditions of Chinese laborers in the hukou system that reflect the finale of *Severance*. Although the lives of the workers in the Chinese dormitory labor regime are largely controlled by the companies they work for, the poor conditions and close living quarters are a sort of breeding ground for resistance and union-esque groups to form. They write, "workers also reclaim the limited living space and time to which their labor and lives are confined to create and remix culturally diversified repertoires of social struggles...By turning their collective dormitories into communal spaces, they open up new opportunities for labor resistance" (Pun and Chan 188). Both in real life and in *Severance*, the undercurrent of hope prevails among the conditions that plague those stuck in the grip of capitalism, a silver lining that speaks to the possibility of change

The exploitation of poor 'third world' country labor coincides directly with the current and historic racialization of Asians in the United States and on the global stage, especially at the expense of Asian people as depicted in *Severance* due to the demands of global circuits of capitalism. Ma makes this critique manifest through Shen Fever and its zombies. Connecting the zombie narrative, global circuit of capitalism, and racialization of Asian people, Ma utilizes the pathologized racialization of Asians and Asian immigrants. As discussed earlier, Shen Fever originated in Shenzhen, China. In *Severance* this is the place where

the Spectra's Bible production takes place. In the real world it is also the location of mass production of products. This location functions as both an epicenter of the exploitation of workers and Shen Fever. When solely considering the effects of Shen Fever originating in China on the racialization of Asians and Asian immigrants, a parallel can be clearly drawn between the pathologization of the Asian subject as a carrier of disease, both in a historical sense and in a metaphor pointing to the spread of the means by which mass production is conducted. In the past Asians have been persecuted and discriminated against due to their association with the origins of diseases like Shen Fever and COVID-19. Especially true in today's current climate, Asians are targeted due to their association with uncontrollable disease and in accordance with xenophobic readings of them as carriers and manufacturers of disease. This pathologization is manifested in the titles of "Shen Fever" and "The China Virus".

Ling Ma utilizes the zombie figure to expose the dehumanizing conditions of capitalism, especially on the Asian and Asian immigrants. Through this, Ma likens Chinese workers who are forced into the exploitation of their labor due to the demands of capitalism to a being who is neither alive nor dead, someone who is just a body with no consciousness. In spreading this condition via fungal spores to everyone in the world, a stark critique of global capitalism is seen, one that warns of the dire effects of this economic system and the racialization within it. Lisa Lowe writes, "Historically, the U.S. state has constructed different national "emergencies" around "the immigrant." Our critical task now is to make the present emergency an active state of emergence in ways that respond to the contemporary conditions of global restructuring—conditions that exploit Asian workers in Asia and in the deindustrialized United States" (176). Ling Ma responds to Lowe's call to action through *Severance's* many critiques, especially through Candice's survival and pregnancy. Candice is an isolated woman, obsessed with work, and facing the everyday challenges of being a racialized Asian figure in the global circuit of capitalism. Her condition is mirrored by those who live under hukou who are living in a zombie-like state. Through her survival, Ma points to the hope and change that is being fostered within the factory dormitories, a resistance to the conditions imposed by capitalism in the real world. Candice survives just as the exploited Asian zombie laborers do—the promise of a better tomorrow realized in the wake of global disaster.

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