

MOTHER-tongue (Pomegranate Offering)

Alice Ji-Won Kim

Extended Artwork Description

Language is enduring; it is a transformative experience. I am constantly floating on my mother tongue and outside the womb.

Drawing inspiration from the esteemed Korean writer Park Wan-Suh, this collection showcases an array of handwritten and intricately illuminated manuscripts merged into a vast painting. This artwork visually interprets a pivotal moment from Park's narrative, "쟁이들만 사는 동네 (A town where only -er live)." The tale weaves the life of a man who wanted to capture a blood-red sunset on canvas, and the sacrifice of his devoted wife. Park ingeniously manipulates the suffix '-쟁이 (er)' throughout the story, ingeniously revealing the quotidian lives of late 20th-century Koreans through a tapestry of words and linguistic twists (tongue-liners). Intriguingly, the painter ultimately captures the coveted RED hue, only to realise at life's end that it was derived from his wife's profound sacrifices—her blood, sweat, and tears.

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, an American novelist of South Korean descent, was a producer, director, and artist who crafted a compelling oeuvre centred around themes of displacement and loss. Tragically, Cha was raped and murdered in New York shortly after her novel "DICTEE" was published in 1982. Her work consistently grappled with the intersections of her mother tongue—Korean—and the languages of her diasporic experience, namely English and French. Cha's artistic practice was characterised by an experimental approach to language that involved repetition, manipulation, reduction, and isolation, exploring how language is Cha's in unstable and multifaceted expressions. For instance, "White Dust from Mongolia," one of Cha's famous works, narrates the story of a woman who has lost her memory and ability to speak. This character mirrors the historical experiences of Cha's own female ancestors, who fled to Manchuria to escape Japanese colonial rule. The tongue is an ignition of language's limitations that invites a profound reimagining of the body's role. The tongue's dual nature—as both a physical organ and a conduit for language—serves as a catalyst to express bodily sensations. My tongue has evolved into a medium linking me to my mother. Yet, the essence of my own language teeters on the brink of erasure.

Born from the lineage of my mother, grandmother, and countless forebears, my existence transcends geographical boundaries, nourished by their sacrifices. Although my little repertoire now includes English and Japanese, it differs significantly from my mother's language. Like the painter in Park's story, my pursuit of 'red' is feasible due to the foundational sacrifices made by my mother. Nonetheless, I find myself adrift, unanchored by any single locale.

In this project, through transcription, I meditate on my language and the others. This linguistic exploration is my pursuit of 'red,' but it is also an outcome of cutting open the womb of the mother, the maternal sacrifice. The Korean tradition of 'Sagyöng,' the ancient art of transcribing sutras, often described as a harmonious blend of writing and painting, dates back nearly two millennia. The transcription transcends mere preservation; it becomes a transformative experience, engaging the transcriber physically and psychologically. Transcribing is also what I am used to the most as a student in Korea, and I left calluses on my fourth finger. Historically, the Korean alphabet, initially used predominantly by women, plays a critical role in this linguistic journey.

"Pomegranate Offering" by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha encapsulates this concept with mouth, pearl, red, tears, and blood motifs. In connecting with Park Wan-Suh, Theresa, my mother, and all my Korean female ancestors, I engage through my mother tongue and alphabet and the diverse languages that have come to define my identity.

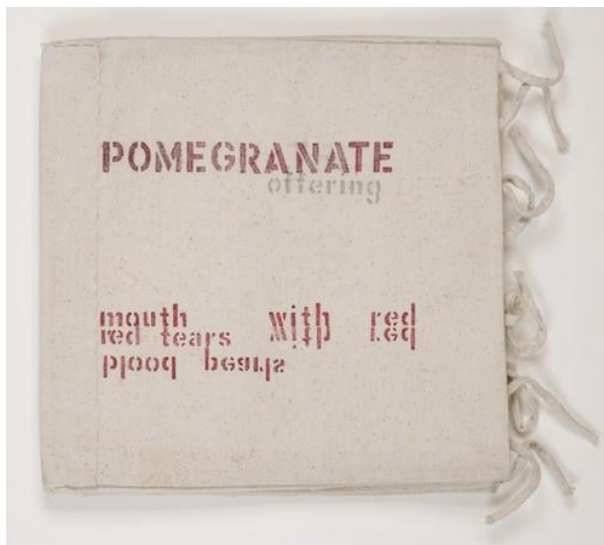


Image from 'Pomegranate Offering' (1975) by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha