



Home and Hope for a Family in Exile:

Jessie's Diary as a Source of Wartime Refuge and Resilience (1938–1946)

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Abstract

This article examines Jessie's Diary, a unique parenting diary co-written by Korean Provisional Government (KPG) member Yang U-jo and his wife Choe Seon-hwa from 1938 to 1946. As intellectuals doubly displaced by Japanese colonial rule and wartime violence, their diary provides an intimate account of exile, family life, and survival. While existing scholarship has largely emphasized the diary's historical significance in documenting the KPG's experiences, this study foregrounds its literary dimensions, analyzing the form, conditions, and effects of writing. Placing Jessie's Diary within broader literary discourse on modern diaries, this article identifies it as a diary of situation, sharing characteristics with late Joseon exile diaries and early Holocaust diaries of World War II. Through close textual analysis, this study explores how the diary functioned as a textual and material home, stabilizing the family amid displacement, reinforcing notions of modern familyhood, and preserving visions of the Korean homeland. Additionally, it demonstrates how the act of co-writing a parenting diary sustained both abstract and concrete hope during wartime upheaval. Bridging history and literary studies in its approach, this article highlights the significance of Jessie's Diary for transnational scholarship on the meaning of self-writing under extreme conditions of war and exile.

Keywords: exile, diary writing, Korean Provisional Government, parenting, Second Sino-Japanese War

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Introduction

May 27, 1940. Monday. Qijiang.

The weather has become sunny. Having been two to three days since the rain stopped, there was an air raid warning in the morning today and enemy planes flew over Qijiang four to five times. The enemy planes were flying by 27 to 35 planes at a time, so there were quite a lot of people crossing over the river to where we were living to find refuge. Perhaps because of that, Jessie has been running to-and-fro, excited and having fun, playing well. . . I bought Jessie, who always seems hungry, *hotteok* [pancakes with brown sugar filling] the past few days. She loved it so much that she keeps saying, “Let’s go on the boat to buy *tteok* over there,” and at night, she won’t go to sleep until we promise her we will go buy some tomorrow. (Yang and Choe 1999, 120)¹

During the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945), a group of about 100 Koreans moved from place to place across China seeking refuge. This diasporic community was formed by the dual forces of colonialism and war. On the one hand, they were intellectual and political exiles who had escaped the throes of colonial oppression in their homeland, while on the other, they were part of the tens of millions of refugees in China who had been displaced by the war. These were the members and families of the Korean Provisional Government (hereinafter, KPG), a government-in-exile based in China that sought to organize and oversee the Korean national liberation movement from abroad during the period of Japanese colonization. Kim Gu, who led the KPG for most of the Second Sino-Japanese War, repeatedly refers to this community as an “extended family” (*daegajok*, literally ‘large family’) in his famous autobiography *Baekbeom ilgi*.²

This article focuses on a lesser-known yet incredibly valuable autobiographical text from this period: *Jesi-ui ilgi*, or *Jessie’s Diary*, a parenting

1. Hereinafter, all translations from *Jesi-ui ilgi* (Jessie’s Diary) are my own.

2. See Hwang Hoduk (2007) for critical insight on why *Baekbeom ilgi* has taken up such a central part of the South Korean imaginary in remembering the Japanese colonial period.

diary co-written by KPG member Yang U-jo and his wife Choe Seon-hwa.³ Born in Pyongyang in 1897, Yang U-jo left Korea for the United States via Shanghai in 1915 at the age of eighteen. He began his education from elementary school and worked as a laborer during winter and summer breaks to pay for his tuition and living expenses. After attending an American missionary's talk on the poor living conditions in Korea, Yang became determined to do something for his countrymen (Yang and Choe 1999, 15). He decided to study textile engineering to revive the textile industry in Korea. In 1928, upon graduating from the Bradford Durfee Textile School in Massachusetts, he finally returned to Korea—only to face intense suspicion from the Japanese police, who were aware of Yang's involvement in the US-based independence group Young Korean Academy, or Heungsadan.⁴ Met with constant surveillance and restrictions on his mobility, Yang realized there was little he could do in Korea and decided to join the KPG in China to work first for Korea's liberation (Yang 2015).

Choe Seon-hwa was born in 1911, fourteen years later than Yang, and by the standards of her time, was a “New Woman.” She not only studied English literature at Ewha Womans College, one of the few modern educational institutions that offered advanced studies for women, but also taught there after graduating. A senior colleague introduced her to Yang, and following

3. Kim Hyeon-ju, the granddaughter of Choe and Yang and the daughter of Jessie, compiled and arranged the original manuscript into its first published edition in 1999 through Hyeyum Publishing. After this edition went out of print, the diary was republished by Woorinabi Publishing Company in 2019; it was also adapted into a graphic novel by Park Geon-woong in 2016. Since submitting this article, I learned that the previously unavailable original manuscript of *Jessie's Diary* was published by the National Memorial of the Korean Provisional Government in 2024. While this article still relies primarily on the 1999 edition, I have cross-checked all cited entries against the original manuscript to ensure there are no major discrepancies. I look forward to the new lines of inquiry made possible by the original manuscript's recent publication, as illustrated, for example, in Ye Jisuk's paper presented at the Association for Korean Historical Studies Symposium (Ye 2025).

4. One can find references to Yang's education in the *New Bedford Textile School Catalogue* (1927), University of Massachusetts Dartmouth Collection, Claire T. Carney Library, and *The Fabricator: New Bedford Textile School Yearbook* (1926), University of Massachusetts Dartmouth Collection, Claire T. Carney Library. Yang went by the name James D. Young during his time in the United States.

a period of courtship correspondence, Choe decided to move to China and marry him. In order to obtain a valid identification, she applied for admission to the Shanghai Nursing College (Yang and Choe 1999, 20). She was admitted, and she moved to China in 1936. The couple was officially married the next year, with the blessing of Kim Gu and other families in the KPG. The diary begins in 1938 when Jessie, their first child, is born and ends in 1946 when the family returns to Korea after the war.

Jessie's Diary is valuable in that it offers a first-hand account of life in China during the Second Sino-Japanese War from the perspective of two Korean intellectuals doubly displaced by colonialism and war; it is also remarkably unique in that it is a modern parenting diary co-written by a Korean couple during a period of extreme instability and violence. While *Jessie's Diary* has gained some attention among scholars and the general public in Korea over the past decade or so, the focus has been on the diary as a window into the everyday life of the KPG in China (such as women's involvement in the movement or anecdotes of high-profile Korean independence activists), rather than on the significance of what it means to co-write a parenting diary as wartime refugees in a foreign land (S. Kim 2013; Yang 2015). In other words, the existing literature is interested in the diary mainly for "its referential value—what it tells us about a place and time," instead of what it reveals about "the politics of self-writing...the social and political conditions that structure the narrative of the self" (Zur 2023, 275). If the former is a more conventionally historical approach, the latter takes its cue from literary criticism. Even though the disciplines of history and literature often work with the same kind of sources when studying autobiographical texts or ego-documents, there has been a lack of engagement between the two fields (Ulbrich 2013, 17). Only in the past two decades have we seen among historians a growing methodological interest to complement and counter the conventional empirical-microhistorical approach with a literary-discursive approach.⁵

5. In her 2004 essay "What Can Be Done with Diaries?" literary historian Irina Paperno called for historians to consider how the message is tied to the form of the diary—to read it as a process rather than a book. Windschrift (2021a) has expressed similar viewpoints in her

This study seeks to contribute to this interdisciplinary line of inquiry by examining *Jessie's Diary*—a historically rare and valuable source—through a literary-analytical framework that foregrounds the form/genre, conditions, and effects of diary writing. Specifically, this article will: 1) interrogate the theorization of the *modern* in Western and East Asian scholarship on modern diaries, proposing a broader understanding of the modern personal diary; 2) suggest that *Jessie's Diary* is a *diary of situation* that shares characteristics with exile diaries from the late Joseon period and with Holocaust diaries of World War II; 3) examine how *Jessie's Diary* became a textual and material *home-space* for Choe and Yang that anchored and connected the family amidst continuous displacement, that reflected and reinforced their progressive notions of the family, and that carried their longings for the homeland; and 4) demonstrate how the act of co-writing a parenting diary produced not just concrete hopes but abstract hope for Choe and Yang to persevere in a time of war and chaos. Ultimately, I hope to shed light on the unique place of *Jessie's Diary* in literary history as a parenting diary co-authored by wife and husband under extreme circumstances, not just within Korean studies but also in Euro-American scholarship, inviting further research on diaries as historical and literary texts.

Theorizing the Modern Personal Diary

Philippe Lejeune describes “two waves of internalization” in the Western tradition of the personal diary: the first was “self-surveillance,” or an internalized “repressive gaze,” which was encouraged as early as the 4th century by Christian thinkers for the purpose of discipline and education; the second was a “friendly gaze”—that of a “confidante” instead of a prosecuting attorney or confessor—which emerged around the second half of the 18th

discussion of reading Mao-era diaries, while Stowe (2018), Moore (2013), and Hellbeck (2009) have each utilized literary-discursive approaches in their respective historical monographs on diaries of Southern women in the American Civil War, soldiers in the Japanese Empire, and Soviet citizens under Stalin. Suzy Kim (2013) does a similar kind of work in her chapter on autobiographies in the North Korean revolution.

century (Lejeune 2009, 335). The diarist would write to express themselves, releasing and communicating their emotions and thoughts on paper when “unable to pour it out to a friendly ear,” to reflect, to prevent forgetting, and/or to take pleasure in writing (Lejeune 2009, 194–195). This latter form of the diary, the personal diary as we know it today, gained increasing popularity during the 19th and 20th-centuries.

According to scholars of East Asian diaries, the mark of the emergence of the modern diary was a change—not necessarily in the friendliness of the writer’s gaze but—in the intended audience of the text. For centuries, the diary was that of a *collective*, expected to be read by members of the family or future generations, even if was written by a single author. In Japan, for instance, there was a long tradition of private house diaries, or family diaries that were kept and preserved by successive generations of male heads of the household (*ie*) (Nishikawa 1999, 2013). The *personal*, or rather *private*, diary, in the sense that the sole intended reader is the author of the diary, appeared among a small number of intellectuals in the late 19th century and then became widespread with the development of standardized, printed, and bound diaries in the 20th century (Jung 2013, 272; Nishikawa 1999).

Considered together, these discussions reveal the complexity and contradictions of notions of *modernity* in Euro-American and East Asian literary traditions of the diary. In the table below, I have mapped out the two main directions of *modernization* that are suggested in the abovementioned discourse of the history of the personal diary.

While Category D would be the narrow definition of the modern diary—an “expression of the self in an age of modern individualism” to be kept “in a

Table 1. Directions of “Modernization” in the Discourse on the Personal Diary

	Repressive gaze (<i>confessor</i>)	Friendly gaze (<i>confidante</i>)
Intended to share (collective/public)	Category A	Category C
Not intended to share (individual/private)	Category B	Category D

Source: Author.

locked drawer in one's own room" (Nishikawa 1999, 244)—there are several insights we can gain by considering each of the other categories. A notably large body of scholarship on East Asian diaries deals with the personal diary form used in *collective, public* contexts as a tool for ideological education in imperial Japan and its colonies, as well as in Maoist China (Nishikawa 2013; Park 2016; Piel 2019; Windscrip 2021b; Schoenhals and King 1989). This type of diary would be in Category A, written with 1) a *repressive gaze* that self-interrogates and disciplines, and 2) the assumption of an audience other than oneself. The abundance of examples in Category A—particularly in contrast to the small number of sources that would fit in Category B (private diaries written for self-surveillance and not intended for any other reader)—seems to reflect the longstanding East Asian literary tradition of the diary as a shared form of writing. Yet, instead of writing off this group of diaries as *non-modern* or *less-modern* (if not *pre-modern*) for their self-examining nature, it would be more accurate to view these diaries as revealing a cultural shift in the intended readership: from the traditional scope of the household to larger institutions of the modern nation-state.

I also want to pay attention to Category C, in which the diary would be written with a *friendly gaze* and intended for readers beyond oneself. While a narrow definition of the modern diary would emphasize the diary's individual and usually private aspect of self-reflection and self-discovery, the consideration of Category C brings to light the existence of modern practices of diary sharing among friends and family. It was quite common for diarists to share their diaries with their close circles as a means of connection in 19th-century Europe and America, while "exchange diaries" (交換日記) were popular among schoolgirls in Japan and South Korea during the 1990s and 2000s. As a parenting diary co-authored by husband and wife, *Jessie's Diary* is an exemplary case in this category: a diary intended for immediate members of the family as well as future descendants, written with a loving gaze.

Examining the four different categories makes clear the inadequacy of delineating the modern diary based primarily on the friendliness of the writer's gaze or its private, individual readership. I propose that a more productive approach would be to focus on the motives, conditions, and effects of writing the diary. Here I find useful Steven Kagle's conceptualization

of the “diary of situation.” In his work on 17th-to 19th-century American diary literature, Kagle observes that diaries often begin in the face of life transitions, moments of crisis, or events that are out of the ordinary such as the onset of a war or an arduous journey. It was common for diarists to take up their pen “as a response to some tension or dislocation in the [their] life” or “to adjust to an unhappy external situation” (Kagle and Gramegna 1996, 43, 51). Diarists would write in such circumstances in order to “give life the consistency and continuity it lack[ed]” (Lejeune 2009, 195). These “diaries of situation,” as Kagle calls them, are born of “disequilibrium in the life of its author” and typically end when the situation resolves (Kagle 1979, 17; Kagle 1986, 3). In the following section, I will situate *Jessie’s Diary* in relation to two different groups of such “diaries of situation.” I first place *Jessie’s Diary* within the literary tradition of exile diaries from the late Joseon era, pointing out continuities between the premodern and modern periods, then discuss *Jessie’s Diary* in light of scholarship on Holocaust diaries and the meaning of self-writing in extreme situations of war and violence.

“Diaries of Situation”

Exile Diaries of the Late Joseon Period

Recent studies of the Joseon period confirm that there was a steady growth of personal diaries from the 16th century, with a dramatic increase in the 19th century (J. Lee 2019; M. Kim 2016). One particular type of diary that has been established as a category of its own is the “exile diary”—diaries written by scholar-officials during their sentence in exile (J. Kim 2020; Hwang et al. 2007; Choi 2009). According to Cho Su-mi’s in-depth study of late Joseon-era exile diaries, especially those written in hangeul, the vernacular Korean script, there are several interesting characteristics of the exile diary.

Firstly, despite a wide variance in the difficulty of the conditions of exile, exile diaries usually were written from “a heightened emotional and psychological state of urgent sincerity” in response to the exilic situation (Cho 2016, 17). The diarists freely expressed their fears, feelings of isolation, and

painful longings in a language that was personal. It was common for scholar-officials sentenced to exile to experience shock as well as a sudden increase in free time, which then led to an active embrace of writing in various forms (Choi 2012). Writing was an important way for those in exile to cope with the uncertainty of when or whether their exile would end.

Secondly, exile diaries assumed a *private* readership of family members, close friends, and future descendants, rather than a *public* or social one of ex-colleagues and other scholar-officials (Cho 2016, 63). Cho argues that the primary intended audience for the diaries written in hangeul was in fact female members of the family so that they could pass on important family stories to the next generation (Cho 2016, 226–227). In some ways, the exile diary functioned as a type of last will and testament literature (Cho 2012).

Thirdly, exile diaries typically described a journey to and everyday life in a foreign place, which forcibly expanded the author's world of experience (Cho 2016, 14). Places of exile were typically located on the geographical margins of the national territory. As they traveled to these remote and unfamiliar regions, diarists described the natural landscape as well as the customs and culture of the local people, which they often perceived as "inferior" (Cho 2016, 162). This latter characteristic—of the diarist placing oneself above the local culture—differentiates the exile diary from other types of travel writing in the Joseon era, such as envoy diaries of diplomatic missions to China and Japan, or travelogues of natural, cultural, and religious sites (e.g., beautiful mountains, old cities, and famous Buddhist temples).

It is useful to consider *Jessie's Diary* within the tradition of the exile diary because the conditions and characteristics of writing share more common ground with those of late Joseon exile diaries than with those of other colonial-era diaries that have been studied. For example, the *Diaries of Yun Chi-ho* (*Yun Chi-ho ilgi*), by the Korean intellectual Yun Chi-ho (1865–1945), is one of the most well-known diaries from the modern Korean period, spanning the period from the 1880s to 1940s. Perhaps because of the impressive longitudinal nature of the diary, the author's status as a high-ranking intellectual, and the majority of the diary being written in English, the *Diaries of Yun Chi-ho* have been considered a valuable source in South Korean scholarship as well as US-based scholarship that reveal much about the final

decades of the Joseon dynasty and the processes of Japanese colonization.⁶ Studies of other diaries written by middle- to lower-class Koreans—mostly students and young men—during the colonial period, especially during the total mobilization period that emerged after the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War, examine how imperialist policies affected the everyday life of colonized Koreans within the empire (Itagaki 2013; Jung 2013; Park 2016).⁷

Unlike these diaries, *Jessie's Diary* is written by two intellectuals living in exile, geographically outside of the Japanese Empire. Because they had left Korea to join the independence movement, the authors experienced the pain of not knowing when they might return to their homeland and fearing for their life, similar to Joseon scholar-officials in exile who waited for their sentence to end in release not in death. Additionally, the typical hangeul exile diary was co-written by and for members of the family, intended for the women to pass it on to the next generation as a record of family history; similarly, *Jessie's Diary* was co-written by husband and wife for their daughter Jessie, and later their granddaughter Hyeon-ju (daughter of Jessie) became an important keeper of the document, publishing it for the benefit of not just direct descendants but also future generations of Koreans in general. Lastly, resembling the element of travel writing in the exile diary, *Jessie's Diary* records detailed impressions of the places in China that the KPG passes through, along with observations of the Chinese people.

Here, it may be useful to take a look at the categorization of Choe and Yang's diary entries by subject matter or theme in the following table.

In the 1999 edition of *Jessie's Diary*, there are a total of 260 entries written

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6. The extent of scholarly interest sparked by this diary is reflected by the fact that there is a separate section on research about the *Diaries of Yun Chi-ho* in the bibliography of modern and contemporary Korean diary sources and studies appended to Jung and Itagaki's *In Search of Tradition, Modernity, Colony and Nation in Diaries* (2013). See also Hannah Amaris Roh (2022), Chris Suh (2017), and Mark E. Caprio (2007) for English-language scholarship on Yun's diaries. While beyond the scope of this article, it would be interesting to closely compare *Jessie's Diary* and the *Diaries of Yun Chi-ho*, examining entries written during the diaries' overlapping years from 1938 to 1943.
 7. Yang Ji-hye has brought forth the issue of gender through groundbreaking work on the diary of a young Korean woman living in Daegu (Yang 2017; Yang 2018).

Table 2. Percentage of Entries by Subject/Theme in *Jessie's Diary*

Subject/Theme	Percentage of entries of total entries (%)
Exile	62.3
KPG trajectory	40.0
KPG community	33.8
Observations of China	25.0
Parenthood	23.5
Visions for Korea	11.9
Mom's difficulty	8.1
Modern individualism	7.7
Historical consciousness	3.1
KPG division	2.7

Source: Author, based on Yang and Choe (1999).

by Yang and Choe across eight years.⁸ The themes or subject matters that appeared most often in the diary were “Exile,” “KPG trajectory,” and “KPG community,” followed by “Observations of China” and “Parenthood.” The first three are not surprising as many of the entries were reflections on their displaced situation as refugees and their desire to return home. Entries were also written to record each time the family and the KPG were on the move to a new location. It is natural for a sense of comradeship and kinship to have developed among members and families of the KPG in such an unstable situation. What I did not expect was the extent of Choe and Yang’s observations of China and the Chinese people during their journey of exile—outnumbering entries on the subject of parenthood, which one might expect to be the main theme of the diary. Even as Choe and Yang express their appreciation of the resilience of the local people and the assistance from local government officials, they also frequently attempt to differentiate themselves from the Chinese and assert a kind of Korean identity that is ultimately superior from the local culture—a characteristic of the exile diary (akin to

8. In the original manuscript, Yang and Choe wrote 740 entries from 1938 to 1946; about 79.7 percent of the entries were written by Yang, 19.6 percent were written by Choe, and the remaining 0.7 percent were unidentifiable (Ye 2025, 64).

Western colonial travelogues).⁹

Obviously, the exile reflected in *Jessie's Diary* is not the same kind of court-ordered penal banishment that Joseon-era scholar-officials experienced during political strife. Yet, the pain of impossible return, the family as intended audience, and the aspect of the travelogue differentiate *Jessie's Diary* from other diaries from the colonial Korean period and place it within the older exile diary tradition. In the following section, I will draw on the extensive research and theorization around Holocaust diaries to shed light on the meaning of writing *Jessie's Diary* under the extreme conditions of war and violence.

Holocaust Diaries of World War II

While war diaries have existed for centuries in both East and West, typically as first-hand accounts of war recorded by military personnel, the phenomenon of civilians—especially vulnerable victims of war—keeping wartime diaries is much more recent and notably prominent during World War II. The most famous diary from this period would be Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl*, which not only captivated readers around the world but also sparked huge interest in discovering, publishing, and studying diaries of the Holocaust.

Alexandra Garbarini sees the significance of Holocaust diaries in the diarists' various strategies of interpreting wartime experiences—in their “meaning-making struggles”—alongside a “keen awareness that annihilation is incomplete when memory is preserved” (Garbarini 2006, 2–3). She finds that for the Jews during the Holocaust the “imperative to document” was inseparable from the “imperative to live”; “writing themselves into the future”

9. One notable entry by Choe for April 22, 1939, concerns her perceptions of Chinese women. Kim San, a Korean revolutionary who was living in exile in China in the 1930s, also noted the different characteristics of the Chinese and the Koreans (and also the Japanese), according to *Notes on Korea and the Life of Kim San*, compiled by Helen Foster Snow (also known as Nym Wales) from her interviews of Kim San in the summer of 1937, which resulted in the publication, *Song of Ariran*, in 1941. The notes include Kim San's analysis of “Chinese characteristics” and “comparative civilizations,” which was cut from the published book. See also Ji-Eun Lee's work (2023) on Paek Sinae's colonial-era travel writing for a comparable account of late 1930s China written by a woman intellectual.

was one of the “last threads of life available to them” (Garbarini 2006, 5). Even as they were victimized, Jewish diarists attempted to empower themselves by recording and transmitting their experiences to future readers. In other words, diary writing was a means of self-preservation or self-legitimization in the midst of dehumanizing conditions (Garbarini 2006, 163). Brenner (1997) even goes on to say that by virtue of its existence, the diary generated a “tension that upholds life”—a creative impetus to write and therefore to continue to live (138). This notion takes its cue from Michel de Certeau, for whom writing was the “concrete activity that consists in constructing... a text that has power over the exteriority from which it has first been isolated” (de Certeau 1984, 134).

Yet simultaneously, scholars of Holocaust diaries also acknowledged the “self-effacing” that occurred toward the later years of the Holocaust, with the progression of extermination and the undeniability of genocide (Garbarini 2006, 163). Goldberg (2017) distinguishes *trauma* from *crisis*, pointing out that the latter denotes a turning point with the potential for recovery and resolution, while the former precludes complete redemption. He argues that a traumatic situation like the Holocaust was impactful enough to cause personal disintegration, the disappearance or radical reduction, of the “self,” in the self-writing of diaries (Goldberg 2017, 7).

As a diary written by a refugee family trying to render their wartime experiences meaningful under the constant threat of bombing, *Jessie's Diary* shares with Holocaust diaries the strong motivation to preserve one's identity and memory through writing under extreme circumstances. Of course, the authors of *Jessie's Diary*, as members of the KPG community, were privileged in their means of transportation; train cars, boats, and buses were arranged by agreements between the Chinese Nationalist government and the KPG during the long retreat from Guangzhou to Chongqing. Choe and Yang's situation is different from the context of state-enforced ghettos or concentration camps during the Holocaust in completely helpless isolation from the outside world. Yet, having fled from the cultural genocide and oppression of Japanese colonization in Korea and finding themselves in the violent throes of war in China, Choe and Yang began their diary as a means of self-preservation and to make meaning of their unstable reality, similar to Jewish diarists of the earlier years of the Holocaust.

Perhaps the insight we might gain from this comparison of *Jessie's Diary* with Holocaust diaries is that *Jessie's Diary* can be read as a diary of crisis, as opposed to a diary of trauma. In Goldberg's study of trauma and the self in Holocaust diaries, he finds that diaries kept by women with children were extremely rare, and that to his knowledge, no diaries were kept during the death marches (Goldberg 2017, 8). It is significant, then, that *Jessie's Diary* is was written by a mother and father recording their family life and their children's growth during wartime retreat. I suggest that the *co-written* or collective nature of *Jessie's Diary* and the diarists' freedom to move and communicate with the outside world (even if limited by colonialism and war) allowed *Jessie's Diary* to become a diary of crisis that assumes an optimistic arc of redemption rather than destruction despite very real hardships. In the next section, I will closely examine how *Jessie's Diary* provided a textual and material space of *home* for its authors, stabilizing the family amid displacement, reinforcing their modern notions of the family, and carrying their longings for the homeland.

Writing *Home* through *Jessie's Diary*

A Consistent Source of Connection

Through their writing of a parenting diary, Choe and Yang firstly constructed a space of *home* that anchored and connected the family amidst instability and multiple layers of displacement. During the roughly eight-year period Choe and Yang wrote *Jessie's Diary*, there were months in which they wrote almost every day, while some months were entirely skipped. Yet, if one takes a look at the kind of occasions they wrote, one finds that Choe and Yang consistently wrote when they moved. In the 1999 edition, over 100 of the diary's 260 entries were written while on the move. They would write when they left or arrived at a place, and they would also record the address where they were staying. They also recorded moves within the same city. Thus, the diary became a record of all the places the family lived together. The diary as a physical object was one of the few constants amidst the unstable circumstances caused by colonialism,

air raids, and illness.

As a consistent source of connection, the diary also served to strengthen the marital bond between Choe and Yang. While there are no explicit addresses to each other, Choe and Yang, as co-writers, were always aware of their spouse as the first reader of their shared diary. The diary became a space for indirect communication between the couple, especially when they were separated for periods of time. For example, when Yang was away in Chongqing for a month and a half in the fall of 1940, Choe continued to keep the diary during that period. She wrote about everyday life, including air raids and Jessie's new antics, but notably, she mentions the concerns she has while "Papa isn't here." In an entry for September 13, 1940, Choe expresses her distress about a "rumor" that Qijiang would come under attack in three days (Yang and Choe 1999, 131). Choe's entry of October 1 begins with the news that some of their neighbors have died of cholera: "The doctor recommends that we move soon since there are many young children..." (Yang and Choe 1999, 132). It seems that Choe wrote what she would have discussed or consulted with her husband had he been present.

The diary also served as an indirect means for Choe and Yang to express their appreciation and affection for each other. In the entry for the day Yang returned home from Chongqing, Choe was explicitly appreciative of her husband, commenting that "Papa's absence was sorely felt" (Yang and Choe 1999, 133). She also expressed her concern and love for him via Jessie:

Papa must have had a hard time living in Chongqing; he looks very haggard...*Jessie seemed so overjoyed.* (Yang and Choe 1999, 134; emphasis added)

Reading the diary entries after his return, Yang would have felt welcomed and valued. Yang also kept the diary in a similar manner when Choe left home for a period of time in 1943 to receive follow-up treatment for a surgery, taking their second child Jennie with her on the trip. In an entry for October 6, 1943, Yang wrote:

I don't know whether the bus broke down on the way, but Mama and Jennie

must have had such a difficult time. How hard it must have been to spend two nights on the road! At least had the weather been nice, wouldn't they have felt some enjoyment even if it was an arduous trip?! (Yang and Choe 1999, 214)

Through the diary, Yang articulated his love and concern for Mama and Jennie even when they are separated. In another entry on November 23, he expressed his wish that Choe would be back soon: "...it would be good if she came back home soon, since her health is improving. When will she come!?" (Yang and Choe 1999, 216). Reading these entries upon her return, Choe would feel she had been missed. The act of co-writing a parenting diary tangibly and securely held the two authors together when they were going through multiple layers of displacement—connecting the family and pulling them close during and even after periods of separation.

Notions of a Modern Family

The familial space constructed by Choe and Yang in *Jessie's Diary* also reveals their interpretation of the modern family, which breaks significantly from the traditional family model and even other KPG families of that time. For instance, Choe's decision to move to China to marry Yang was quite radical for a "New Woman" teaching at Ewha in the 1930s. The motivations for that decision and the historical consciousness apparent in her entries deserve separate attention. However, for the purpose of this article, I want to focus on the egalitarian views of childrearing and gender expectations that are reflected in and reinforced through Choe and Yang's co-writing of *Jessie's Diary*.

The diary reveals Yang to be an incredibly involved father in caring for his two young daughters. There may be several circumstantial factors for this active involvement. As a member of the KPG, his status as a refugee amid war may have offered him a greater absolute amount of time to spend with his family, compared with having a full-time job in Seoul, for instance, during the same period.¹⁰ Also, as Choe's health declined after giving birth

10. Due to his decade-long stay in the United States and subsequent decision to join the KPG

to Jennie, Yang became the primary caregiver of the children for extended periods between 1943 and 1945, while Choe received and recovered from four different surgeries.¹¹

One's level of involvement in childrearing does not necessarily mean one has a modern or progressive notion of gender. For instance, the diarist of *Mukjae ilgi* in 16th-century Joseon records his daily experiences during exile as the primary caregiver of his grandson. The sentence of exile—and the passing of his son—gave him the time and the urgency to take the domestic matter of raising children into his own hands. Yet, his worldview was completely shaped by patriarchal values and male preference ideology; he was interested in his grandson as his only surviving male descendant who could redeem the family's honor (S. Lee 2023).

In contrast, Yang's entries reveal his egalitarian view of gender. On March 30, 1941, as Choe went into labor to deliver their second child, the elders of the KPG community such as Cho So-ang and Kim Gu were waiting anxiously in the next room, holding a clock, anticipating a baby boy. When these elders had heard news of the pregnancy, as babies were rare in the KPG community, they had gathered together to calculate the time the baby would be born and found that surprisingly the time signified “the birth of a great leader who would later save the country” (Yang and Choe 1999, 159). They had all been excited that there seemed to be hope for the currently bleak future. When the baby finally arrived and Yang told them it was a girl, the elders were greatly disappointed. While Choe felt apologetic for not being able to produce a son, Yang pointedly remarks that he thinks it is rather “the reality of today” that is “pitiful” as it “makes us wish for one more future independence fighter” more than anything else.¹²

in China, Yang had not been present during the early years of his children from his first marriage. Perhaps he wished to become a different kind of father in his second marriage with the time that was allowed.

11. The mention of air raids in the diary is most frequent from mid-1940 to mid-1941, a period coinciding with Choe's second pregnancy, delivery, and postpartum recovery. Having to constantly run to the nearest shelter to avoid bombardment most likely hindered Choe's smooth recovery.
12. This account is not included in the original manuscript but is understood as a key memory

Yang's notions of gender equality are also reflected in the co-writing act itself. Besides cases of observation diaries co-written by scientist husband and wife—such as the diaries of Charles and Emma Darwin, William and Clara Stern, or Jean Piaget and Valentine Chatenay—there are few known sources or studies in which a parenting diary, or a baby diary, was written by *both* the mother and father.¹³ In the US, typical baby diaries were solely recorded by the mother. A study of over 1200 American baby books from the late 19th through the late 20th century found all of the baby books to be written by mothers, who were considered primarily responsible for the caretaking of children (Golden and Weiner 2011). *Jessie's Diary* then is remarkable for its time in that its co-written aspect reflects and reinforces the dynamic of partnered parenting and the relatively fair share of responsibility in childrearing.

Carrying the Homeland

The *home* that Choe and Yang constructed through *Jessie's Diary* extended beyond a familial space to a *homeland*, providing a sense of rootedness and identity as a Korean, especially for their children who had never been to Korea. Throughout the diary, especially at the beginning of each year, Choe and Yang continuously reminded themselves and their children that they were in a diasporic, exilic state and were only waiting for the day to return to Korea. For instance, on January 1, 1942, Yang wrote:

This year today truly the day of hope that will fulfill our desires and the glorious path to return to our home country has come closer! The international state of affairs is going quite advantageously. The liberation and independence of our nation will surely come at the end of this great war; no, I certainly believe we will seize it. (Yang and Choe 1999, 181)

of Choe's, supplemented by Kim Hyeon-ju, the daughter of Jessie, who consulted her grandmother Choe while she was alive before publishing the 1999 edition.

13. An exceptional case would be Nathaniel and Sophia Hawthorne's marriage diary, a joint diary they began in 1842 as newlyweds and wrote in periodically as their family grew.

Even as Jessie was naturally picking up the local Chinese language at a level and speed that surprised her parents, Choe and Yang put in educational efforts to prepare for the day they would all return home to Korea. For example, on June 1, 1942, Choe wrote that she was “worried about Jessie’s education” but had been unable to actively pursue anything beyond Korean songs and some homeschooling (Yang and Choe 1999, 188). From other entries, we also see that Jessie participated in March First Independence Movement rallies from a very young age (Yang and Choe 1999, 182). Even though Jessie and Jennie were born in China and had never been to Korea, it is evident their parents wanted them to see Korea as their ultimate *home*. As a diary meant for the children to later read, *Jessie’s Diary* thus was an important space where Choe and Yang expressed their desires for their homeland and for their children to remember their identity as Koreans.

Writing *Hope* through *Jessie’s Diary*

Concrete Hopes and Abstract Hope

At the same time Choe and Yang’s act of co-writing *Jessie’s Diary* created a space of *home* for the diasporic family, the same act of writing also crystalized a sense of *hope*. Vincent Crapanzano (2003) distinguishes between two uses of hope in American English: the former (usually the verb) has a specific and concrete object, while the latter (usually the noun) has one that is vague and abstract. When its object is concrete, “hope resembles desire and may be confused with it”; when its object is abstract, it suggests “a philosophical perspective on life, a sort of positive resignation” (Crapanzano 2003, 26–27). I suggest that for Yang and Choe, the act of co-writing a parenting diary served to not only articulate *concrete* hopes but—perhaps more importantly—produce *abstract* hope during a time of war and chaos.

Choe and Yang certainly expressed concrete hopes in their diary, such as to be able to return to a liberated homeland or to see the recovery of a family member’s health; yet I believe the more interesting aspect of *Jessie’s Diary* is how its genre-specific focus as a parenting diary—the recording of one’s

children's growth—provided abstract hope for Choe and Yang to persevere amidst dire circumstances. On December 5, 1938, in Yuzhou, Choe wrote:

The air raid alarm went off around 10 a.m. . . . The moment we went in [the cave shelter] the Japanese planes must have dropped countless bombs. The cave shook immensely as if it would collapse, and lights flashed as if there was thunder and lightning. . . . It was a devastating scene when we came out of the cave. The front, back, and two sides of the house that we were just in were being swallowed in a sea of fire. . . . one could also see many bodies in a terrible state. (Yang and Choe 1999, 53)

In a situation that seemed so helpless and devastating, the genre conventions of the parenting diary—the documentation of the development of the child and reflections on parenthood—generated a sense of tangible hope for Choe and Yang. For example, *Jessie's Diary*, as with most parenting diaries, records Jessie's "firsts," such as her first tooth, first steps, first "Mama," first motion picture, etc. Regularly celebrating and remembering Jessie's milestones through the act of writing is likely to have encouraged Choe and Yang to look forward to other milestones to come. A typical diary entry in *Jessie's Diary* starts with the difficult situation they are in and ends with an observation of Jessie doing well amid such circumstances, such as "At least Jessie is enjoying Christmas through running and singing," or "She's playing well today too" (Yang and Choe 1999, 100). On August 22, 1940, Choe described hearing the devastating news that two-thirds of Chongqing had been destroyed by air raids. Yet, the following sentence concluded the entry:

Since I've made her some dishes from the fish and chicken we recently bought, Jessie seems to be eating quite a lot and well. (Yang and Choe 1999, 127)

By focusing on Jessie's well-being, despite disheartening news, Choe was able to end on a thankful and hopeful note. If this diary had not been a parenting diary—if the main purpose of the diary had not been to keep a record of Jessie's growth—I believe the contents would not have been so consistently

hopeful. Because the subject matter was precisely Jessie (and later also Jennie), writing the diary offered Choe and Yang courage to go on. Of course, children can be a source of hope for their parents with or without a parenting diary. However, for Choe and Yang, the act of writing regularly and together about their children's growth and reflecting on the small moments of joy in raising their young children, I believe, significantly amplified a kind of hope that allowed them to remain resilient amidst such life-and-death situations.

Conclusion

This article has explored *Jessie's Diary* as a unique parenting diary co-written by Korean Provisional Government (KPG) member Yang U-jo and his wife Choe Seon-hwa—two intellectuals doubly displaced by Japanese colonial rule and wartime violence—between 1938 and 1946. While existing scholarship has largely emphasized the historical value of *Jessie's Diary* in documenting the KPG's experiences and political activities, the present study has foregrounded its literary dimensions, paying close attention to the form/genre, conditions, and effects of writing. By situating *Jessie's Diary* within the broader literary discourse on the modern diary, I found *Jessie's Diary* to be a *diary of situation* that shares characteristics with exile diaries of late Joseon Korea and early Holocaust diaries of World War II. Through close readings of the text, this article examined how *Jessie's Diary* served as a textual and material *home* that stabilized the family amid continuous displacement, reflected and reinforced the authors' notions of a modern family, and kept alive visions of the Korean homeland. Additionally, this article demonstrated how the act of co-writing a parenting diary provided a means of sustaining hope to persevere during a time of war and chaos.

Through an interdisciplinary lens that bridges history and literary studies, I argued for the significance of *Jessie's Diary* within transnational scholarship on diary writing in situations of crisis. At the same time, by highlighting the remarkable and rare nature of *Jessie's Diary* as a historical and literary text, I seek to point out the absence or lack of other surviving diaries of the Second Sino-Japanese War. The *happy ending* of *Jessie's Diary*, whose final

entries depict the family's safe return to a liberated Korea—the long-awaited resolution of their *situation*—should not distract us from the fact that many people did not survive the same period due to violent warfare, as well as forced mobilization as comfort women or laborers in dangerous conditions. In this sense, I hope to present *Jessie's Diary* not necessarily as a historically representative case of its time, but as a historically exceptional text that offered a sense of refuge and resilience for the authors under extreme circumstances.

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