

The Korean Literature Translation Project Planned by Hungarians during the Korean War

—A Study Based on MNL Materials—

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1. Introduction

This paper describes and analyses the translation activities of literary works attempted by Hungarian diplomatic authorities during the Korean War (1950–1953), based on diplomatic documents in the National Archives of Hungary (Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár = MNL).¹

Hungary was one of the countries that immediately recognised the DPRK (Democratic People's Republic of Korea). Soon after the establishment of the DPRK government on 9 September 1948, the Second Hungarian Republic recognised the DPRK on 11 November 1948 as the sole legal sovereign entity of the entirety of Korea.

There is a general perception that the DPRK is a strictly closed regime, and the DPRK's international cultural relations in those early years have been reported only in fragments. However, today, the DPRK maintains diplomatic relations with about 160 countries, and this fact requires researchers to seek more information without bias. To date, there has been little information on how the DPRK's cultural relations with other countries might be known generally, especially from the early days of the nation's establishment to the Korean War period (1945–1953). The DPRK side's materials are often regime—and propaganda-oriented, and it may be difficult to accurately capture the real picture of DPRK's cultural exchanges. However, Hungarian diplomatic documents show a more continuous and intense cultural relationship with the DPRK.

Simultaneously, there is significantly less knowledge about the DPRK's language policy and language communication with the DPRK than that of other countries. Needless to say, this is partly due to the closed nature of the regime; however, it may also result from a shortage of interest in the language policy of other countries towards the DPRK. This may also result in biased knowledge about the DPRK's linguistic culture, and here, researchers also must attempt to reveal an accurate picture of the country's linguistic culture by making full use of a variety of sources.

2. Survey of MNL Materials

Hungary, as a nation, had a well-developed archival system early on. According to Kim (2014),

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the history of the MNL dates back to the late 12th century, although some documents were lost due to World War II and the Hungarian Revolution of 1956: "From a geo-political viewpoint, the MNL is the largest of all countries' archives in the Carpathian basin, containing nearly 73 linear kilometres. It also has 63,500,000 microfilms and a large number of stamps, photos, maps, bonds and certificates".² However, unlike (for example) the materials in the U.S. National Archives, there is little use for the archives in the research of East Asian contemporary history. Regarding Korean-related materials in the MNL after World War II, Kim (2014) explained:

The documents presently available in the archive can be divided into two general types: 1) official documents on South Korea and North Korea regarding general foreign affairs and administrations and 2) documents regarding overseas Hungarian officials, especially the contents of reports from diplomats who dealt with pieces of information in the Hungarian embassies located in Seoul and Pyongyang. In particular, the documents of the latter are treated as confidential documents (*titkos ügykezelésű iratok* as abbreviated as TÜK, and translated as "confidential information management"), and the materials from 1949 to 1989 amount to more than 50,000 pages. This does not mean that the former official documents on South Korea and North Korea regarding general foreign affairs and administration are less valuable than the latter. These two sections are closely connected and provide us with another paradigm on the modern history of South Korea and North Korea and the history of diplomacy.³

The MNL's materials are distributed among three locations, and post-1945 materials are housed at Daróczi út 3, Budapest. As a point of reference, the use of this archive should be mentioned as follows:

The process of requesting materials is common to all three facilities. Since it takes time to receive and retrieve materials, applications must be submitted at least three business days in advance. Users may enquire about the locations and the method of obtaining materials by e-mailing the Information Office. If users contact the Information Office with questions about the topic they wish to research, the office will answer questions concerning how to conduct this research. However, this enquiry might take a long time. In the case of the author, it took more than a month, and he needed to ask twice for a reply.

When users request material, material reference codes must be provided. As Hashimoto (2019) indicates and a figure from the actual MNL website shows, the search system was constructed according to the General International Standard Archival Description (ISAD(G)) established by the International Committee on Archives (ICA).

ISAD(G) is an international standard for the description of historical materials created by the ICA in 1994. 'Description' here refers to the provision of information on a group of materials needed by users. This international standard is characterised by the fact that it attempts to understand groups of materials by dividing them into each of the following hierarchical levels: Fonds (Groups)—Series—Items. The keywords assigned to each level according to the

characteristics of the material group were used as classification items. This process makes it possible for the user to search for individual historical materials based on the characteristics of the material group when he or she picks up the catalogue. Thus, the series of documents used in this paper were located in the hierarchical structure shown in Figure 1, with the code HU-MNL-OL-XIX-J-1-k-(1945-1964)-81.

Levéltári hierarchia

Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár (1000-2100)
OL Országos Levéltár (1000-21. sz.)
XIX Az államigazgatás felsőbb szervei (1862-2014)
XIX-J Külügy (1862-1995)
XIX-J-1 Külügyminisztérium (1862-1995)
XIX-J-1-k Általános iratok (1945-1995)
1945-1964 1945-1964 közötti, országonként rendezett iratok (1945-1964)
81 Korea (1945-1964)

Figure 1 Locations of Korean Peninsula-Related Materials in the MNL Inventory of (De) Classified Administrative Documents of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1945–1964

Let us also mention a few considerations for when one visits the archives (as of 2022). The capacity in the reading room is limited to four to five people and is managed by a staff member using a handwritten notebook. Upon entering the archives, users must make a user card. Unlike the National Archives Records Administration (NARA) in the United States, there seem to be no restrictions on clothing (NARA does not allow clothing with zippers). Taking photographs of materials is available for a fee. Charging electricity is available, but the registration of equipment is not required.

Regarding previous studies on the topic, as far as the author has ascertained thus far, there are two traces of previous research on the DPRK using MNL documents. One is a series of the works of Kim Bogook. Kim (2016a) is especially useful due to photographs and Korean translations of some of the materials related to the author's study. However, if one may be forgiven for saying so, the photographs, themselves, are not very clear, and some materials have only a part of the whole set.

The other effort is Inooka Hiroshi's 'Research and Survey of North Korea-Related Materials in Eastern European Archives' (a research project supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number 24730144). Inooka wrote about the project in his final report:

This study aims to contribute to the development of Cold War history and North Korean studies in Japan through surveys of North Korean materials held in archives in Eastern European countries. Since the end of the Cold War, a considerable number of North Korea-related materials have been newly disclosed in the archives of former socialist countries, but research using these materials has only just begun. [...] Research on Hungarian materials generally progressed smoothly. Fortunately, in June 2012, a catalogue of classified diplomatic documents from the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was published in South Korea, which greatly reduced the time required to search through the catalogue.⁴

This interesting research project was originally to be conducted over a two-year period from 2012 to 2013, but unfortunately was terminated in 2012. The research achievements for that year were reported in one journal article and two conference presentations, which did not seem to include research using MNL documents.

This paper is based on the previous studies (or traces) and actual materials collected by the author at the MNL. Needless to say, in research on archival materials, it is important to confirm that the actual materials are there, that is, not only the individual documents but also the connections between them.

3. The Documents Tell Us ...

3.1 What They Tried to Do

Hungary's translation projects concerning Korea during the Korean War had a two-way plan: 1) to translate Hungarian literature into Korean and introduce it to Korea and 2) to introduce Korean literature to Hungary.

The former, which the author would like to discuss in detail in another paper, was primarily intended to produce a collection of selected Hungarian poetry. Although a detailed examination should be reserved for the future, the following document (dated 9 August 1952, sent to MOFA (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) from the diplomatic mission in Korea) states that 1) this translation project was initiated at the request of the DPRK, 2) since Hungarian poetry is not well known in Korea, it is desirable to create a poetry anthology rather than a collection of poems by a specific Hungarian poet (Petőfi Sándó) and 3) the struggle of the Hungarians for peace should be introduced to the Korean people.

Ebben a kérdésben beszélgetést folytattam a Kultur és Propaganda Minisztériumban, ahol már a Petőfi összes költeményei orosznyelvű kiadásából megkezdték egyes költemények fordítását. Az akció koreai részről indult el. Erről a kérdéssel véleményem, hogy nem egy Petőfi válogatottra van itt Koreában szükség, mivel itt kevés kivétellel nem igen ismerik költészetünket, hanem egy válogatott agyar költemények kiadását tartom jobbnak. Petőfi kötettel megmutatnánk legnagyobb költőnk munkáját, de nem ismerné meg ezen keresztül a koreai nép pl. a mai költők harcát a békéért, ami koreai viszonylatban igen fontos lenne.

(I had a discussion on this issue at the Ministry of Culture and Propaganda [文化宣传省 / 문화선전성], where they have already started translating some of the poems from the Russian edition of Petőfi's poems. The action started on the Korean side. My opinion on this issue is that what is needed here in Korea is not a selection of Petőfi, since with a few exceptions, our poetry is not very well known here, but a selection of Hungarian poems. With Petőfi, we would be showing the work of our greatest poet, but the Korean people would not get to know, for example, the struggle for peace of today's poets, which would be very important in the Korean context.)⁵

It is mainly the latter that will be discussed in this paper. The project's objective was to translate literary works written in Korean into Russian and other languages, with support from Hungary. In MNL materials, the commitment to this project can be observed for the first time in a document dated 9 August 1952. The last was dated 27 April 1953. If only referred to in the conclusion of this project, it was ultimately abandoned due to various circumstances, which will be discussed below. However, what is considered important here is not the result of the 'lost project' but its process, some perspectives of which are described below.

3.2 Significance of the Translation Project

The significance of the translation project is not clearly explained in MNL materials, however, it is presumed to be for understanding Korean culture in general. The author found only a brief sentence fragment: *A kulturmunkának az újsághirekből vett jelentés formájától, egy komolyabb információkra ... from the form of newspaper reports to more serious information ...*.⁶

However, as noted above, the project was conceived in a documented period of approximately nine months, from 9 August 1952 to 27 April 1953, a period that was not necessarily transitory, and there were concrete developments in terms of budgetary measures. Therefore, it would be natural for one to think that this project could not be implemented with its vague objectives. Further investigation is needed to determine its specific purposes and plans.

3.3 Challenges in the Project

3.3.1 Challenges in Securing Translators

There were some challenges in the project. First, there were challenges in securing translators. There was no Hungarian translator on the Korean side and few professional literary translators at all. The MNL materials reveal that, at the time, it was extremely rare to find personnel who could translate directly between Korean and Hungarian, so the project was conceived first to translate into Russian and/or other languages and then into Hungarian. One document demonstrates how one attaché went to great pains to gather translators.

(...) és azt elérte, hogy a következő fordítók vállalkoztak esetleges fordításokra:

1. / orosz fordító, aki állandóan a követségen tartózkodhat
2. / egy orosz anyanyelvű fordítónő, szindarabok, regények fordítására
3. / költeményeket fordító író, aki a Koreai Írószövetség tagja, és ismert műfordító
4. / angol nyelvre szindarabokat fordító elvtársat
5. / francia nyelvű fordítót, regény és szindarab fordítására –.

(... managed to get the following translators to undertake possible translations:

1. Russian translator, who is allowed to stay permanently at the embassy.
2. Russian mother-tongue translator for the translation of syndicates and novels.
3. Poetry translator, member of the Korean Writers' Union (朝鮮作家同盟 / 조선작가동맹). He is a famous literary translator.

4. Translator of plays in English.
5. French translator of novels and plays.)⁷

(...) Ez volt a cél, megvalósítva belőle kevés lett. Ez részben a Központ táviratának, részben a háborús körülményeknek köszönhető. A fordítók közül ma már csak kettővel van kapcsolat. Egy állandó, új fordítóval / jelenleg tífuszos/ és egy francia /nagyon elfoglalt/ fordítóval, aki az "Ő neve Rákosi" c. színdarabot fordítja, melyet azt hiszem a Központ -, előzetes engedély nélkül is – engedélyez.

(... It was not achieved. This is partly due to the Centre's telegram and partly to the circumstances of the war. Only two translators are now in contact. A permanent new translator/ currently suffering from typhoid/and a French/very busy/translator of the play *His Name is Rákosi*, which I believe the Centre allows, even without prior permission.)⁸

As can be seen from the above text, it appears very difficult to gather such a large number of translators in Korea, especially considering that it was wartime. It was not easy for the Hungarian diplomatic mission in Korea to maintain this group of translators, and it was also a challenge to communicate with the Hungarian MOFA about it.

3.3.2 Different Attitudes between the MOFA and Diplomatic Missions in Korea

The challenges derived from the different attitudes between the Hungarian MOFA and diplomatic missions in Korea was even more extensive. The MOFA always required prior permission by submitting a synopsis of each literary work to be translated. Conversely, the diplomatic missions' position was that the details of the translation could not be known well until after the translation had begun.

(...) Ismételten az az álláspontom, hogy a szinopszisok kérése a fordítások akadályozását jelenti. Ha egy hónap leforgása után jönnek meg csak az engedélyek, akkor új fordítógárdát kell ismét keresnem.

(... once again, my position is that asking for synopses is an obstacle to translations. I maintain that the request for synopses is a violation of the right to translation.)⁹

Finally, this was the main reason the project failed. Financial reasons were not an issue at this time. It was informally agreed that the Hungarian Institute for Cultural Relations (Kultúrkapcsolatok Intézete¹⁰) would disburse the funds, which is stated by a document that MOFA issued to local diplomatic missions. Following is the entire text of the document, although it is a little long.

Hivatkozva fenti számú jelentésére, valamint saját rendeletünkre közöljük, hogy a jelentés

alapján nem tudjuk miről van szó. Fenti számú rendeletünkben megírtuk, hogy egyes művek fordításánál általánosságban nem tudunk dönteni. Kértük, hozzávetőlegesen közölje, hogy a mű tartalma ez és ez, fordítási költsége kb. ennyi és ennyi. Enélkül nem tudunk dönteni.

Fenti rendeletünk ellenére a követség nem közölte a fenti jelentésében, hogy melyik művet akarja lefordíttatni, – ugyanis előző 57/biz. számú jelentésében szó van a Farkas c. regényről és egy színdarabról. – hanem csak általánosságban ír arról, hogy a “mű” fordítási költségét csak fordítás közben tudja meg. Ezt persze nem értjük. Hozzávetőlegesen a fordítónak meg kell tudni mondani, mennyiért vállalja el az adott anyag fordítását. A közölt összeg között iggn nagy a különbség, úgy hogy arra nem lehet támaszkodni.

Amennyiben fordításra javasol valamilyen anyagot feltétlen közölje – megismételjük –, mi az anyag tartalma, és hozzávetőlegesen mennyibe kerül a fordítás. A fordítási munkálatot csak azután kezdheti meg, ha arra megadtuk az engedélyt.

A fordításokat egyébként a jelenlegi helyzetet figyelembe véve (figyelembé véve) egy időre le kell állítani. Később közölje, mikor lehet újból a fordítási kérdést napirendre tűzni.

(With reference to the report number above and our own regulations, we do not know what the report is about. In our regulation above, we wrote that we cannot make a general decision on the translation of certain works. We have asked you to give us an approximate estimate of the content of such and such a work and the cost of translating it. Without this, we cannot decide.

Despite our order, the Embassy did not state in its above report which work it wanted translated, since in its previous report No. 57/biz. it refers to the novel *The Wolf and a Play*—but only states in general terms that he will only know the cost of translating the ‘work’ when he translates it. We do not understand this, of course. In approximate terms, the translator should be able to say how much he or she expects to be paid for the translation of the material. There is big differences among the quoted amounts and those cannot be believed.

If you are proposing material for translation, please be sure to specify—we repeat—the content of the material and the approximate cost of the translation. You may only start translation work once you have received our permission to do so.

Otherwise, translations should be stopped for a period of time, taking into account the current situation. Let us know later when the translation issue can be put back on the agenda.)¹¹

3.4 Discovery and Exchange of Literary and Translation Talent

Although the translation project was unsuccessful, it was not meaningless. Through this project, Hungarians encountered some Korean intellectuals.

The author would like to pay particular attention to the case of Seol Jongshik (薛貞植 / 설정식, 1912–1953). He studied English literature in the United States during the Japanese colonial period and returned to South Korea after the end of Japanese rule to become a senior official of the U.S. Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK). Soon, however, he became disappointed in the U.S. occupation and immersed himself in literature, after which he moved to North Korea during

the Korean War. In North Korea, he also served in senior positions in cultural affairs but was sentenced to 'death for espionage' in August 1953 in the aftermath of an internal power struggle in the DPRK.

Hungarian documents show that he expressed his willingness to participate in the Hungarian translation project until about six months before his execution, and he shows his pride as a literary intellectual.

When Hungary planned a project to translate Korean literature, Seol offered to participate. He wanted to translate *Chunhyang Jeon* (春香伝), a famous traditional Korean opera about a love story between the social classes, that is a poor girl and a son of Yangban (the traditional Korean elites). Indeed, he expressed his willingness to do so without compensation.

A fordítók között a jánlkozik Szol Cson Szik is. Ő, a Csun Han Cson c. operát akarja fordítani.

(One of the translators is Seol Jongshik. He wants to translate the opera *Chun Hyang Jeon*.)

A fordí tók honorárium fejében cigarettát kértek. Csak erre van szükségük. Én ruhanemut javasolok számukra. Nehezebb ügy Szol elvtárs honoráriumá. Ő katona, s így ruhára nincs szüksége. Különben is kijelentette, hogy nekünk szívesen fordít, minden ellenszolgáltatás nélkül. Ezt nem fogadhatjuk el tőle.

(The translators asked for cigarettes in exchange for a fee. It is all they need. I propose giving them clothes. Comrade Seol's fee is more difficult. He is a soldier, so he does not need clothes. Besides, he said he would be glad to do the work without any compensation. We cannot accept this from him.)¹²

According to the same document, Seol was apparently a special case and could not be considered in the same category as the other translators. Therefore, the Hungarian side decided to reward him with a camera, which he seemed to have wanted.

In the end, the translation project fell through, and Seol was executed, so the camera was never given to him. However, the fact that the poet Seol, who went to the North because of his disappointment with the state of the South, hoped to translate *Chunhyang Jeon* for free shows that he was still proud to be a man of literature even after serving in the military and months before he was executed for being involved in political strife.

In fact, Hungarian military reporter Tibol Méray (1924–2020), who collaborated on this translation project and appears in relevant MNL materials, was a friend of Seol and met Seol's children in the ROK (Republic of Korea) in 2005, who "do not even remember father's face" and shared his memories.¹³ The fact that the Hungarian archives show that Seol lived on in literature even after he moved to North Korea has significance beyond the realm of hearsay.

4. Findings

Finally, the author would like to mention three findings. First, there is a movement towards a more active cultural understanding between Hungary and the DPRK, not merely a political and diplomatic ‘association’ as socialist camps, and it was not a piecemeal one.

Second, there were a great many challenges in the project. Neither Hungary nor the DPRK had specialists in each other’s languages. Mutual understandings had to be achieved through the Russian language. In addition, the project was eventually suspended due to deep-rooted differences in thinking between the Hungarian MOFA and local diplomatic missions.

Third, the translation project finally failed as a result; however, its process contributed to intellectual exchange between Hungary and Korea.

These things cannot be seen by examining only the ‘results’ or ‘outcomes’ of policies. Moreover, in the study of official documents, the ‘effectiveness’ of policy can be clarified by specifically interpreting the relationship not only with the central ministries and agencies, but also with local diplomatic missions and organisations.

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Notes

- 1 This paper is a reconstruction of the manuscript ‘Review of Diplomatic Documents on Hungary’s Korean Literature Translation Activities during the Korean War’, presented at the 2022 BUDAPEST 35th International Conference on Studies in Literature, Languages, Humanities & Social Sciences (organized by EIRAI) on 12–14 September 2022 in Budapest (Hungary). This study is ongoing and will be elaborated upon as more information become available. The reason that the author is writing this paper at this stage is to reconstruct the history of European countries on the Korean Peninsula based on materials available to the author. Although this paper might be incomplete, it will serve as a reference in preparation for such future research. In this paper, MNL materials in general are referred to as ‘documents’ for consistency with previous studies (e.g. Kim, 2016a, 2016b). As a point of reference, international standard definitions of records management (e.g. ISO 15489) define generally as follows: A document is a content file that has information in a structured or unstructured format. This editable file can be stored on paper or digitally, and documents can be changed and revised as needed. Conversely, records are historical files that provide ‘proof of existence’. They are used to prove the state of existence of the business.
- 2 Kim (2014, p. 153).
- 3 Kim (2014, pp. 154–155).
- 4 The Annual Project Report. (2012). <https://kaken.nii.ac.jp/ja/report/KAKENHI-PROJECT-24730144/247301442012jisseki/>.
- 5 Document No. 250/biz./1952 (9 August 1952), in Box 9, 09784.1-4. 1952, at MNL-OL-XIX-J-

- 1-k-(1945-1964)-81.
- 6 Document No. 317/biz./1952 (22 September 1952), in Box 9, 09784.1-4. 1952, at MNL-OL-XIX-J-1-k-(1945-1964)-81.
- 7 Document No. 317/biz./1952 (22 September 1952), in Box 9, 09784.1-4. 1952, at MNL-OL-XIX-J-1-k-(1945-1964)-81.
- 8 Document No. 317/biz./1952 (22 September 1952), in Box 9, 09784.1-4. 1952, at MNL-OL-XIX-J-1-k-(1945-1964)-81.
- 9 Document No. 370/biz/1952 (26 October 1952), in Box 9, 09784.1-4. 1952, at MNL-OL-XIX-J-1-k-(1945-1964)-81.
- 10 Predecessor of Balassi Intézet. The institute had allocated 15 000 forints in the 1953 budget for the project. Document No. 9784/3/biz (18 November 1952), in Box 9, 09784.1-4. 1952, at MNL-OL-XIX-J-1-k-(1945-1964)-81.
- 11 Document No. 2209/1/1953.-I. (27 April 1953), in Box 9, 09784.1-4. 1952, at MNL-OL-XIX-J-1-k-(1945-1964)-81.
- 12 Document No. 57/biz./1953 (23 January 1953), in Box 9, 09784.1-4. 1952, at MNL-OL-XIX-J-1-k-(1945-1964)-81.
- 13 Chungang Ilbo (25 May 2005). In 1952, he stopped in Kaesong to cover the armistice negotiations and met Seoul, who came out as the interpreter from the DPRK side. The two soon became friends.

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