

SZANDRA ÉSIK

(Eötvös Loránd University, Chinese Department)

Interview with the editors of the Chinese–Hungarian and Hungarian–Chinese Dictionary (*Kínai–magyar és Magyar–kínai szótár*)

In 2024, Hungary and China celebrated the 75th anniversary of diplomatic relations, while 2023 marked the centenary of the Chinese Department at Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), commemorating a hundred years of Chinese language and culture education in Hungary. Over the decades, the department has played a pivotal role in advancing Chinese studies by training language experts, conducting significant research, and publishing essential teaching materials.

Among its most notable achievements is the compilation of dictionaries, which continues to serve as a cornerstone of its scholarly contributions. The first professionally compiled Chinese–Hungarian dictionary was edited by Huba Bartos, PhD, and Imre Hamar, DSc. The inaugural edition appeared in 1998, followed by a revised second edition in 2001 and a third edition in 2013. Work on the new, two-volume *Kínai–magyar szótár* (Chinese–Hungarian Dictionary) began in 2014. Commemorative copies were presented to Chinese Premier Li Keqiang and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán during the 16+1 Summit in Budapest in November 2017. The dictionary became commercially available at the end of 2018.

The editors-in-chief, Huba Bartos, PhD, and Imre Hamar, DSc, are leading figures in Hungarian sinology. Bartos is deputy director-general of the Hungarian Research Centre for Linguistics at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and an associate professor in ELTE's Department of Chinese Studies, specializing in Chinese syntax. Hamar serves as head of the Department of Chinese Studies and the Confucius Institute, and as director of the Institute of East Asian Studies. His research focuses on Chinese religions and philosophies, particularly Buddhism. He teaches Classical Chinese text reading and Chinese Buddhism at both the master's and doctoral levels in Chinese studies.

For the compilation of the *Magyar–kínai szótár* (Hungarian–Chinese Dictionary), which contains 57,000 headwords and was published in 2024, Melinda Pap, PhD, assistant professor at Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), joined the editorial team. A specialist in Chinese Buddhism, she has been teaching under-

graduate and doctoral courses in the Department of Chinese Studies since 2008 and is a member of the ELTE Roman World and the Far East Research Group.

Editors-in-chief Huba Bartos, PhD, and Melinda Pap, PhD, share their insights on the dictionary compilation project.

Huba Bartos, PhD

– *What were the biggest challenges in compiling the first edition of the Chinese–Hungarian dictionary, and how did those challenges evolve over the years?*

– The first edition of the current Chinese–Hungarian dictionary was the one we authored with Prof. Hamar back in the 1990s. The biggest challenge at that time was that neither of us had ever tried to write dictionary entries or compile dictionaries, so we lacked the ‘know-how’. So we just sat down with a couple of Chinese–Whatever language dictionaries and had to figure our job out. The other major challenge was the relative ineptness of contemporary computer systems at handling Chinese characters, especially in conjunction with Hungarian accented letters. Recall that it was still the ‘Dark Ages’, before Unicode conquered the world and became a ‘household name’...

Regarding the current dictionaries, clearly the biggest challenge was the plainly impossible deadline that the major funder of the project (the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Foreign Affairs) set for us: they wanted both dictionaries completed from scratch within three years. We had no choice but to treat it as a joke from the beginning, since that is what it was. Eventually, the Chinese–Hungarian dictionary took about 6 years to complete, while the Hungarian–Chinese one needed a full ten years. The other major challenge has been the fluctuation in the team that has worked on the material: people were coming and going constantly, we even had to fire a few because they were unreliable. Not to mention that no one in the team had a proper background in lexicography, so the quality of the work was rather uneven: people with more ambition and more energy to contribute to the project produced vastly more usable entries than some less enthusiastic colleagues. And (to be critical with ourselves, too) we also learned the hard way how to edit a dictionary in such teamwork, which then resulted in years of ‘post-production work’ needed to weed out random errors and problems — something that could have been avoided, had we had more experience in this job at the outset.

– *The latest editions of the dictionaries took years to develop. What were some of the key updates and improvements made compared to earlier versions?*

– These ‘latest editions’ are in fact almost entirely unrelated to the earlier ones, not derivative of them in any significant way. So we cannot speak of ‘updates’. Improvements are manifold: On the ‘quantity’ side, these dictionaries

are about an order of magnitude bigger than the earlier ones were. This means both that the number of entries is vastly larger, and that the entries are much more detailed and structured, with a lot more use examples. Also, this time we have included grammatical information (like part-of-speech labels, inflectional information), which was absent (either as part of the conception, as in the old Chinese–Hungarian dictionary, or due to an error on the publisher’s side, as in I. Galambos’s Hungarian–Chinese dictionary) from the ‘earlier editions’. And much more energy was devoted to checking and proofreading the entries, by native speakers of both languages, as well as professional proofreaders.

– *Could you share insights into the process of selecting and verifying the 57,000 headwords for the Hungarian–Chinese Dictionary? What criteria did you use? How did you decide which new words or phrases to include in the dictionary?*

– This question is easy to answer in a very concise manner: We did (almost) none of these. The publisher (Academic Publisher [Akadémiai Kiadó]) provided us with the headword list, based on two of their most recent bilingual dictionaries. All we had to do was: (i) weed out entries specific to the original target language and/or its culture; (ii) introduce the vocabulary relevant in the context of Chinese culture; (iii) add some headwords (on the basis of the contents of our Chinese–Hungarian dictionary) that were (somewhat surprisingly) missing from the ‘source dictionaries’; (iv) delete those derived headwords (esp. nominalizations and adjectivalizations of verbs) whose meaning is a transparent and predictable modification of the base word, and whose Chinese equivalent is thus systematically and predictably derivable from the equivalent of the base.

Melinda Pap, PhD

– *With advancements in digital tools and linguistic research, how did technology assist in compiling and refining these dictionaries?*

– We used Arbortext editor for compiling the entries, which proved useful and absolutely necessary to assist our work. At first, we all had to learn how to use the program; the complex system of ‘tags’, at first sight, seemed to be extremely complicated. But thanks to our informatician colleague, who helped us all through these ten years, we managed to use the program efficiently. When compiling the entries, we used a large palette of bilingual and monolingual explanatory dictionaries, both printed editions and online versions. Through the years, the continuous emergence of high-quality online dictionaries surely sped up our work.

– *What impact do you hope these dictionaries will have on Chinese language learning, academic research, and cross-cultural communication?*

– I sincerely hope that our work proves to be useful in a number of ways, for a vast audience of learners and speakers of both languages, for the decades to come. I used to recommend that our students use our Chinese–Hungarian and Hungarian–Chinese dictionaries for studying purposes, as well, for a number of reasons. Some of the reasons are: understanding and acquiring new words and expressions of a foreign language is much more efficient through one's mother tongue, and helps avoid mistakes deriving from the inclusion of a third language. Our dictionary not only gives a few equivalents, but we have continuously strived to offer all the possible meanings, listing a number of synonyms, grouped according to grammatical categories and different nuances in meaning. Furthermore, we dedicated much attention to giving some relevant and commonly used example phrases and/or sentences, which further clarify the meaning, and illustrate the usage of the headword. We paid attention to precisely define the grammatical part of speech categories of the headwords, useful information for language learners and linguists. We also included a variety of Chinese culture-related entries, in order to assist cross-cultural communication and academic research.

– *What advice would you give to writers, students, or language enthusiasts about using dictionaries effectively?*

– Besides the printed editions, our dictionaries are also available online (www.szotar.net). The online versions offer fast and efficient means to check the meaning and usage of a word or expression, showing all the occurrences in the dictionary, including example sentences, with a single search. For writers, it can also function as a source for synonyms. We included a great number of sayings and proverbs, *chengyus* in Chinese, and tried to render the meaning as closely as possible with a similar expression or proverb in the target language. Therefore, it can also function as a tool in bringing the two cultures closer.

Bibliography

- Bartos Huba – Hamar Imre (eds.) 1998. *Kínai–magyar szótár* [Chinese–Hungarian Dictionary] 汉匈词典. Budapest: Balassi Kiadó.
- Bartos Huba – Hamar Imre (eds.) 2013. *Kínai–magyar szótár* [Chinese–Hungarian Dictionary] 汉匈词典. Budapest: Balassi Kiadó.
- Bartos Huba – Hamar Imre (eds.) 2017. *Kínai–magyar szótár* [Chinese–Hungarian Dictionary] 包甫博–郝清新: 汉匈词典. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, ELTE Konfuciusz Intézet.
- Bartos Huba – Hamar Imre – Pap Melinda (eds.) 2024. *Magyar–kínai szótár* [Hungarian–Chinese Dictionary] 包甫博–郝清新–梅林达: 匈汉词典. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, ELTE Konfuciusz Intézet.
- www.szotar.net (last accessed: 20.09.2025.)