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Sarkozy criticised for loaning French manuscripts to Korea

Culture professionals fear that the items may never return to France

By Gareth Harris | Web only
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Bring 'em over: Sarkozy struck a deal with Korean officials to lend the manuscripts in November at the G20 summit

PARIS. President Nicolas Sarkozy's decision to loan long-term 297 volumes of manuscripts housed in a major French public collection to South Korea has unleashed a wave of criticism among French culture professionals who fear that the items may never return to France.

Sarkozy struck a deal with Korean officials in November at the G20 summit which involves lending the manuscripts (royal records from the Joseon Dynasty of the 17th and 18th century) for five years under a renewable agreement. The manuscripts were seized from Korean royal archives in 1867 by French soldiers and have since been housed at the the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BNF) in Paris. Sarkozy told French newspaper Le Monde that he felt a promise made by the late president François Mitterrand should now be honoured (in 1993, Mitterrand promised to return the archives in exchange for a French-backed high-speed rail link which has since opened between Seoul and Pusan).

Sarkozy is adamant that the agreement does not contravene state law which ensures that French public archive items, as inalienable state property, cannot be removed indefinitely from national collections. "We will not be moved on this point and the Koreans have decided to accept a long-term loan," said the President. Not so, according to a petition signed by over 30 BNF staff including Thierry Delcourt, the director of the manuscripts department, and Denis Bruckmann, director of collections.

"Under the cover of a loan renewable every five years, the decision is equivalent to a de facto restitution, contradicting the law. It will allow manuscripts to return to France in a manner that is at best episodic, and is sure to strengthen the increasingly sustained claims for the return of cultural property that various countries are making to the archives, museums and libraries in France, Europe, and beyond," note the signatories. French art scholar Didier Rykner goes further, calling the move "totally illegal". Ministry of Culture officials reportedly insist nonetheless that some manuscripts will return to France, notably for joint cultural festivals in 2015 and 2016.

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The BNF believes that Mitterrand's decision to return one volume in 1993 set a precedent, caustically noting on its website: "One of the volumes (identified Coréen 2495) was delivered to the Korean government on September 1993, on the occasion of a state visit by François Mitterrand, following legal conditions that are not interpreted the same way by both parties (long-term loan according to France, which is confirmed by the regular renewal of the authorization for temporary exit of the document; restitution according to Korea)." The Korean embassy in London declined to comment.

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