

Obituary: Tở Hữu

The great Vietnamese poet Tở Hữu died on 9 December 2002 at the age of 82. He was sometimes called the “poet laureate” of the anti-colonialist movement. A communist from age 17, Tở Hữu was a leader in the struggle to liberate his country from French and American imperialism. After the end of the war in 1975, Tở Hữu occupied high posts in the Vietnamese government.

Tở Hữu played a crucial role in the establishment of Kovalevskaja Fund projects in Vietnam. In 1985 Ann and I met with people in the Vietnam Women’s Union (VWU), including Nguyễn Thị Bình (who at the time was Minister of Education) and the mathematician Hoàng Xuân Sính, both of whom were VWU vice-presidents. The Kovalevskaja Prizes grew out of these discussions.

Not all male officials liked the idea of a prize for scientists administered by the Women’s Union. Powerful bureaucrats in the State Committee for Science and Technology objected for two reasons. First, they felt that any international collaboration in the sciences should be handled by the State Committee and not by the VWU. Second, they thought that the financial commitment by the foreign sponsors (between \$2000 and \$4000 per year) was too small.

Dr. Sính explained the situation to Tở Hữu, who at that time was the Deputy Prime Minister. He replied that the proposed prize for women in science, supported by American friends and named after a Russian woman mathematician and socialist, was such a “beautiful idea” that Vietnam should welcome it even if no money were being offered. And he didn’t see anything wrong with the Women’s Union coordinating such a prize. As a result of Tở Hữu’s strong support, on 21 May 1985 the Council of Ministers of Vietnam passed a resolution (of which we have a photocopy) authorizing all the projects of the Kovalevskaja Fund in Vietnam, including the prizes administered by the Women’s Union.

Sofia Kovalevskaja liked to explain her love for mathematics by quoting her thesis adviser Karl Weierstrass, who said that “a mathematician should have the soul of a poet.” In this case it was a poet who had the soul of a scientist, and understood the value for Vietnam of an annual prize named after Kovalevskaja.