

# Meeting with the Vietnam Women's Union

Neal Koblitz

After a five-year gap in my visits to Vietnam because of the pandemic, I went to Hanoi for a week in December 2023. It was a busy week. I met with old friends and colleagues, visited the Sóc Sơn temple complex with two mathematician friends, met with a journalist for *Tia Sáng* who had translated several of my articles for the magazine, gave talks at Vietnam National University and at the Vietnam Institute for Advanced Studies in Mathematics, visited the laboratories (one in chemical engineering and one in pharmacology) of both winners of the 2023 Kovalevskaia Prize, and met and had dinner with the leaders of the Vietnam Women's Union (VWU).

At the meeting with the VWU the group of about a dozen activists was headed by the new VWU President Hà Thị Nga and the chair of the Kovalevskaia Prize Committee (and former Vice-President of Vietnam) Dr. Nguyễn Thị Doan.

The updates and progress reports by President Nga and Dr. Doan were encouraging. Dr. Doan spoke about how competitive the prize competition had become, and said that the Kovalevskaia Prize had inspired other prizes for women intellectuals that would sometimes go to the runners-up for the Kovalevskaia Prize who had to be passed over. But the Kovalevskaia Prize remained the most prestigious one. She asked if we could support a third prize, but said that she'd fully understand if our resources wouldn't go that far.

President Nga discussed the significance of the personal participation of Vietnam's Prime Minister in awarding the 2023 prizes. She had told him about my visit, he asked her to give me his greetings, and said he would like to continue participating in the award ceremonies. She stressed that this is important because it signifies heightened government interest in scientific research by Vietnamese women.

President Nga and Dr. Doan invited Ann and me to come to Hanoi in 2025 for a big celebration of 40 years of the Kovalevskaia Prizes.

In my response I asked her to convey to the Prime Minister our thanks for his participation in the awarding of the prizes and said that we regarded the Kovalevskaia Fund's projects in Vietnam as the most successful we've had anywhere, largely because of the wide publicity the prizes receive, the involvement of high government officials in the Prize Committee, which before former Vice-President Doan was headed by Nguyễn Thị Bình, and the resulting high prestige the prizes enjoy.

I told some stories about the early history of the Kovalevskaia Fund in Vietnam and gave the VWU copies of the May 1985 document of the Council of Ministers approving the relationship between the VWU and the Fund (which was opposed by the then-head of the State Committee

for Science and Technology because he saw it as encroaching on his jurisdiction; this was why the matter had to come to the Council of Ministers).

I then switched from talking about the distant past to discussing the not-so-distant future. I explained that a tiny NGO managed by volunteers with no paid staff typically cannot continue after those volunteers become too old to manage it effectively. In our case, as in many others, there is no realistic possibility of finding another NGO that is willing to take on management of the Fund. We don't want the Fund to be discontinued later in a rush and so intend to start the process in 2025.

I explained that at that time we will be able to provide funding at the current level for 10 more years, ending on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Kovalevskaia Prizes. We hope this will give the VWU time to make a transition to other sources of support. They will, of course, be free to use the funds to increase the number of awards from two to three, as Dr. Doan suggested, over a shorter period of about 7 years. I said that one reason we're very happy about the Prime Minister personally presenting the awards to the women in 2023 is that it indicates the possibility of future government financial support for the prizes.

As in earlier visits, our conversations over dinner ranged over many topics. I asked about the gender difference in the legal age of retirement for people working in the state sector. They said that at least recently the difference was reduced from five to two years — 62 for men and 60 for women, with some exceptions, such as in the political leadership — and that the VWU has been trying for 20 years to get the difference removed completely.

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## **Reflections on Four Decades of the Kovalevskaia Fund in Vietnam**

Neal Koblitz

In 1983 Ann's biography of Sofia Kovalevskaia was published, and we got the idea of trying to do something concrete in Kovalevskaia's memory. That was also the year of our second visit to Vietnam. We'd become active in a group called the U.S. Committee for Scientific Cooperation with Vietnam, whose founder, the physicist Ed Cooperman, was able to arrange low-visibility activities in the years before normalization, such as visits by Vietnamese scientists, despite the U.S. embargo. During our visit we met with the rector (president) of Hanoi Polytechnical University and, among other things, asked him what the proportion was of women students there. He said 8%. This was far worse than we'd expected, especially in a country with socialist ideals. How could Vietnam fully recover from the war and realize its

potential in science and technology if it was neglecting the talents of half of its population? Doing something to address this problem would be a fitting memorial to Kovalevskaja.

In that and our next visit in 1985, we discussed the issue with some leaders of science and education in Vietnam, such as Dr. Hoàng Xuân Sính (the first woman professor of mathematics in Vietnam, the coach of Vietnam's team in the International Mathematical Olympiad, and a vice-president of the Vietnam Women's Union [VWU]), Maj. Gen. Nguyễn Đình Ngọc (a mathematics professor and top intelligence agent during the American war), and Minister of Education Nguyễn Thị Bình (who had been the top diplomat for the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam during the Paris negotiations to end the American war). The proposal that eventually emerged from our discussions and was approved by the Council of Ministers in May 1985 was quite different from what we would have come up with on our own. This was as it should be, because our Vietnamese colleagues could judge much better than us what would work best in their country. It was their judgment that a focus on prizes for accomplished women scientists would attract the most attention and have the most impact on encouraging women to enter STEM fields.

The proposal to the VWU came at the right time. Their work during the first decade or so after the end of the American war was concerned with survival issues — helping rebuild and recover after the devastation caused by the war, from which Vietnam emerged as one of the poorest countries in the world. But the VWU also realized that their mission would increasingly be to promote women's rights, women's welfare, and women's careers in the more prosperous times to come. Efforts on behalf of women scientists, intellectuals, and professionals were on the VWU's agenda. The Kovalevskaja Prizes were the first widely publicized activities in that direction, later to be followed by many others.

The Kovalevskaja Fund activities in Vietnam have been the most impactful of any of the Fund's projects anywhere. The Kovalevskaja Prizes came to be among the most prestigious prizes given in Vietnam. As mentioned in the previous article, the chair of the Prize Committee has since its inception been a (current, future, or past) Vice-President of Vietnam, first Nguyễn Thị Bình and later Dr. Nguyễn Thị Doan. Starting in 2023, the Prime Minister of Vietnam has come to the prize ceremonies in March and personally presented the awards to the women.

The prestige, publicity, and recognition by top officials — and the recognition they've given us (such as Friendship Medals in 1995 and again in 2010) — at first might seem hard to explain. It's certainly not the money. It's true that in the early years, the few thousand dollars per year that the Fund was donating might have been seen as significant on a national level. But not in recent years. Vietnam is no longer isolated from international commerce and aid programs, and tourists alone bring millions of dollars a year into the country. In monetary terms each Kovalevskaja prize is worth less than some others (such as the one sponsored by l'Oréal, which is worth about twice as much) that have gone to Vietnamese women scientists, including some who also received a Kovalevskaja Prize.

The late Prof. Hoàng Tụy, a leader of the mathematical community in Vietnam, once taught me the Vietnamese saying “cố tình cố nghĩa,” which he said roughly translates as “old friends are like family.” As mentioned in the previous article, in 1985 the head of the State Committee for Science and Technology had objected to our proposed projects with the VWU on jurisdictional grounds. He also complained that, considering that the proposal came from Americans, not much money was being offered. Hoàng Xuân Sính appealed to the Deputy Prime Minister and famous poet Tố Hữu (yes, poet!) to bring the proposal to the Council of Ministers with his support. Sính told us that, when she explained the proposal to him, Tố Hữu responded, “The project for women in science, proposed by American friends and named after a great Russian woman, is a beautiful idea that should be welcomed by Vietnam even if no money were being offered.”

The money has always been secondary. Given the increasing interest in the Kovalevskiaia Prize (and the scholarships the Fund supports at the secondary school level), symbolized by the Prime Minister of Vietnam giving out the Prize awards, we have some hope that after the Fund winds down and we’re out of the picture the Vietnamese government (perhaps supplemented by private donations) will agree to fund those activities for the VWU — probably more generously than we have.