

## External Information [Thong Tin Doi Ngoai]<sup>1</sup>

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### Professor Hoang Xuan Sinh<sup>2</sup> and “the most romantic idea of life”

*(TTDN): By now Vietnam has more than 60 popular and private universities, but in 1986 the opening of Thang Long<sup>3</sup> University (outside the public school system) was characterized by woman Professor Hoang Xuan Sinh as “the most romantic idea of my life”. Upon hearing this, a great many educators of that time shared the same thought. On the occasion of the commemoration of 36 years of Vietnam's Day of the Teacher, the TTDN Review presents the reader with an article written about the woman professor.*



[Image of Vietnam magazine, issue 269, May 1951, caption: “Girl of Cot village who loves math.” (Photo courtesy of TL)]

Upon learning that I was looking for material to write about Professor Hoang Xuan Sinh, one of her colleagues made a point of repeating: “When you write about Madam, there are four things in particular that you cannot forget or leave out. Foremost, Professor Hoang Xuan Sinh was the first woman professor of mathematics in Vietnam. She was also the first foreign woman to go to Paris and successfully defend her national doctoral dissertation in math. Besides her research and teaching in mathematics, Professor Hoang Xuan Sinh played the crucial role in bringing about the Kovalevskaya prize to be presented to outstanding women of science in

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1 Thong Tin Doi Ngoai /tohng tin doy wigh/, or TTDN.

2 Hoang Xuan Sinh /hwahng swun sing/

3 Thang Long /tahng long/, the ancient name for Hanoi.

Vietnam.”

### **The pride of Vietnamese women**

She came from Cot village, Tu Liem, Hanoi (currently in Yen Hoa ward, Cau Giay district).<sup>4</sup> It is untrue as many people believe that she was the granddaughter of mathematics professor Hoang Xuan Han<sup>5</sup>, a Vietnam scholar who drafted and promulgated the first Vietnamese secondary school program. I happen to know that Professor Hoang Xuan Han lived far off in Yen Phuc hamlet, Yen Ho village, La Son district (now Duc Tho district), Ha Tinh province.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps because they both had the name Hoang Xuan and were known for their outstanding learning, despite their home villages being more than 300 kilometers apart this lovely mistake was made.

In 1951 at the age of 18, after achieving her first-level baccalaureate from Chu Van An High School<sup>7</sup> (Hanoi), the department of modern languages in English and French, she was met in France by her maternal uncle Nguyen Van Phuc<sup>8</sup>, an airplane manufacturing engineer in Toulouse (southern France) to enter the mathematics university, afterwards taking advanced studies to earn an *agregé* degree in math. At that time in France only the descendents of the renowned Marie Curie and Langevin dared make the effort and had such an opportunity. But in the form of a petite Asian woman, the girl from Cot village astonished the whole of France by passing her *agregé* exam at the age of 26. This was an honor not only for a Vietnamese, an Indochinese, but also for the famous University of Toulouse.

Madam continued pursuing scientific research, then in 1975 she defended her doctoral dissertation in mathematics before the International Science Council in France under the guidance of the famous 20<sup>th</sup> century mathematician Alexander Grothendieck and became the first Vietnamese woman professor/Doctor of Mathematics as well as the first foreign woman to go to Paris and successfully defend her national doctoral dissertation in the subject.

Recalling those times, she said: “I became a doctor during a time of war, of bombing. At the time I taught at the University of Pedagogy in Hanoi, the school had no procedures for staff to rest while working on their doctorate. Evacuating by day to teach, at night I would write my dissertation by the light of an oil lamp. Wrote in French under the guidance of a teacher far away. When I received approval from France to

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4 Cot /kawi/, Tu Liem /tu(r) lyem/, Yen Hoa /yen hwah/, Cau Giay /kuhw zuhee/

5 Hoang Xuan Han /hwahng swun hahn/

6 Yen Phuc /yen fook/, Yen Ho /yen hoh/, La Son /lah so(r)n/, Duc Tho /du(r)k taw/, Ha Tinh /hah ting/

7 Chu Van An /choo van ahn/, outstanding high school in Hanoi named for a 14<sup>th</sup> century scholar official who resigned when the king refused to execute corrupt mandarins.

8 Nguyen Van Phuc /wen van fook/

come and defend my paper, many were not sympathetic to my departure, fearing that once I left I would not return. The one who supported me most actively at that stage was Madam Ha Thi Que<sup>9</sup>, Chairman of the Vietnamese Women's Federation. Madam Que was only a guerrilla and had little in the way of educational credentials, but she gave a persuasive argument on my behalf. She said that first of all, I was already 40 years old; in a foreign country it was hard for someone of that age to find work, and without a job how could I live? Second, my children were here and no woman would abandon her children... So they should rest assured and let me go. My dissertation had been finished since 1972, now three years later due to the arduous intervention of the Women's Federation, in 1975 I was finally allowed to go to France to defend it...”

[Image and caption: “Woman Professor Hoang Xuan Sinh, who throughout her life had an attachment to education.” (Photo courtesy of T.A.)]

### **The Mark of Thang Long University**

The idea took shape beginning with a letter from Professor Bui Trong Lieu, who was teaching at a university in France, which was sent mutually to five mathematicians in Vietnam, namely Dr. Hoang Tuy, Dr. Phan Dinh Dieu, Dr. Nguyen Dinh Chi, Dr. Bui Trong Luu and Dr. Hoang Xuan Sinh.<sup>10</sup> He wanted to create an opportunity where poor students could still attend university during the difficult economic conditions of the early 1980s. The initial plan was to open a class for 30 students without setting a goal of charging tuition. “Looking back at it,” Dr. Sinh laughed, “I see it as the most romantic idea of my life.”

She immediately drafted a letter to the Department of Education and Training to open a model school outside the public system signed by the five mathematicians. Naturally no one replied. Consequently, Professor Hoang Xuan Sinh decided to take it upon herself to go “knock on the door” of Secretary General Nguyen Van Linh<sup>11</sup>. “I simply told the Secretary General that I was only asking to open a school and not asking for money,” she said. “Then I went to General Vo Nguyen Giap<sup>12</sup> who at the time was the Deputy Chair of the Cabinet (Deputy Premier) in charge of science and education. I felt that I had done my duty.”

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9 Ha Thi Que /*hah tee kway*/, known as the “Woman General of the Viet Minh”. Contrary to Prof. Sinh's impression, Ha Thi Que came from a respectable family with a strong educational background as well as a revolutionary tradition. Hardly a mere guerrilla fighter, she was a skilled military leader and held a number of important posts in the revolutionary government, which allowed her to travel to several “fraternal” countries.

10 Bui Trong Lieu /*booe chong lyoo*/, Hoang Tuy /*hwahng twee*/, Phan Dinh Dieu /*fahn ding zyoo*/, Nguyen Dinh Chi /*wen ding chee*/, Bui Trong Luu /*booe chong lu(r)oo*/

11 Nguyen Van Linh /*wen van ling*/, Secretary General of the Vietnamese Communist Party from 1986-1991, credited with bringing about the country's version of Perestroika.

12 Vo Nguyen Giap /*vaw wen zahp* or *zhahp*/, the celebrated and controversial commander of the revolutionary army during the French and American wars. He also held political, non-military positions, including with the Department of Education.

But unexpectedly, after hearing from Secretary General Nguyen Van Linh and General Vo Nguyen Giap, in December 1988 the Central Bureau of Science and Education (now the Bureau of Propaganda and Education TW) invited her for a talk. After that the Department of Education and Training listened to Madam share her ideas about this university established outside the public system.

[Image of Professor Sinh with student and flowers with caption: “Former students present Dr. Hoang Xuan Sinh with flowers on 20/11.” (Photo courtesy T.A.)]

On 15 December 1988 the school officially came to be with the name Thang Long University Center. During Tet 1989, after requesting a small amount of money from a younger sibling from abroad who had come back to celebrate the new year, Professor Hoang Xuan Sinh organized a grand opening ceremony for the school at the Temple of Literature National College<sup>13</sup>; among the invited guests were General Vo Nguyen Giap, the current deputy chair of the People's Committee for the City of Hanoi Madam Nguyen Thi Tam Dan, and the minister of the Department of Education and Training Professor Tran Hong Quan...<sup>14</sup>

For the first three years, Madam's friends in France provided the school with “aid with no expectation of reimbursement”, afterwards she had to make do by herself. On the day the first class was to graduate they were entangled in the matter of giving out diplomas. The Education Department regulations at the time had not yet made any stipulations for a model school outside the public domain, consequently Thang Long University could not grant diplomas. “On that day I was in a situation where I could neither advance nor retreat. The Education and Training Department would not grant diplomas and the parents complained. The students were disappointed. When night came I was surprised as my phone was still ringing. Because the parents kept calling at that time to 'vex' my morale. Not only that, the school's teachers and administrative staff all quit. I was now the principal, janitor, the person who fetched water, the one who swept the classrooms” – Professor Hoang Xuan Sinh shared the difficulties of the time of “ten thousand initial challenges”.

It took another two years after the first class graduated for the Department of Education and Training to grant temporary status to a free popular university and Professor Hoang Xuan Sinh finally escaped the grievances of the students and their parents. Looking back at the road she had traveled, Professor Hoang Xuan Sinh said she could not imagine how she had gotten through it. “At that time I 'opened a way' to success because 'the opportunity, the position and the mood of the people were favorable'. I

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13 Temple of Literature, or Temple of Confucius, first built in 1070, site dedicated to the honor of successful mandarin examinees. The temple grounds include the National College, an institution of higher learning for princes and sons of high ranking officials.

14 Nguyen Thi Tam Dan /wen tee tum dahn/, Tran Hong Quan /chun hohng kwun/

had no money but still established a school. I don't know why at that time they had so much confidence in me to do it." Perhaps it was destiny that the girl from Cot village was born to reflect honor on the women of Vietnam, to distinguish those who "ferry the boat" to the shore of knowledge and so the whole universe came to her aid!

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