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What Without Grants-in-Aid

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For researchers, there is nothing quite so well appreciated as Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research. At a national university, individual research funding is calculated into budgets used to carry out research activities. Many private universities are unable to allocate enough, if any, individual funding, making it difficult without a Grant-in-Aid to conduct individual research let alone joint research projects. This painful awareness comes from personal experience. Unfortunately, it has of late even become difficult to conduct research without Grants-in-Aid at national universities.

Of the various categories of Grants-in-Aid, the one to which I'm most indebted is the category "Publication of Research Results." Over a period of 20 years, I worked together with Japanese and overseas colleagues in an undertaking to compile by computer a concordance for the ancient Thai law book *The Law of the Three Seals*. From a profit-making perspective, it was only natural that no publishing company would want to take on such a specialized book. Thanks, however, to a publishing Grant-in-Aid that we were able to receive from the Ministry of Education and Science, a Thai publisher accepted the job. The published 5-volume computerized concordance of *The Law of the Three Seals* was very highly appraised in Thailand. We were greatly honored that a long preface for the book was written by Her Majesty the Queen Sirikit, whom I knew as an historian. Resonating strongly in Thailand, the Thai Agency for Cultural Affairs held a symposium to commemorate the book's publication. What might be called a definitive edition of *The Law of the Three Seals*, the previously unknown the Royal Version was published last year. One of its editors expressed a strong desire to issue a revised edition of the concordance based on this new text. As before, finding a publisher would be difficult. Fortunately, a member of our joint research team let us use part of his Grant-in-Aid to publish the revised version. With the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, as the publisher, a Thai company printed the new concordance. No matter how weighty an academic achievement, this publication would not have been handled by a commercial publishing company. That it could be disseminated to the world and win high international appraisal is a significant achievement, one that could not have been possible without a Grant-in-Aid. For the program's instrumental assistance, I am sincerely grateful.

It was some 40 years ago when I and my colleagues mostly at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies began an interdisciplinary research project on Thai society from the perspective of its rice-growing culture. Back then, our method of combining literature and science was a forerunner to what has become a popular research approach of late. Focusing on one agrarian village, our research integrated a variety of disciplines, from agriculture, irrigation and drainage science, geology, and soil science to history, anthropology, and political science. Our findings were compiled and published in a book titled *Tai-koku: Hitotsuno Inasaku Shakai* also funded under the publishing Grant-in-Aid. A couple of years later, an English translation, titled *Thailand, A Rice-Growing Society* was published in the United States. The multidisciplinary issue analysis contained in the volume has been highly assessed internationally. In America, the book is said to be a “must” when studying Thai society. This is yet another example of a comprehensive research program that has enjoyed success that wouldn’t have been possible without the help of the Grants-in-Aid program.

Another issue of which I’ve become painfully aware through later experience as an examiner of Grant-in-Aid applications is how the Grants-in-Aid program’s orientation to the natural sciences affects funding distribution. As a historian, I wouldn’t, for example, know how to use a ¥100 million grant if I were to receive one. For that matter, even ¥10 million would be too much. In areas of the natural sciences, on the other hand, there are cases where even if one received several hundred million yen it would still not be enough to build an experimental facility. In terms of the amount of funding required to advance research, the natural sciences and the humanities/social sciences are galaxies apart. The two categories are inherently different. Using the 21st Century COE Program as an example, funding is set from ¥100 million to ¥500 million per project. If an historian were to receive the lesser amount of ¥100 million, though it would be like realizing an unreachable dream, he would not be able to find an effective way to utilize the money. The same holds true for joint research projects in most fields of the humanities. What would happen as a result of receiving a grant of this size is that even if half of it was used productively, the other half would to one degree or another be wasted. There have been cases when this has caused the unhappy result of projects receiving overall poor assessments.

To resolve this incongruity, wouldn't it be a good idea to remodel the system by establishing grant categories for individual scientific/academic fields in such a way that in each of the categories funds would not be used wastefully. The more money the better is not necessarily the best scenario. What's needed is to optimize the budget for each research project based on its content. It is, after all, citizens who shoulder the heavy tax burden that pays for the Grants-in-Aid program. Even in these times of financial downturn, the Diet and the government's financial authorities are steadfastly increasing the Grants-in-Aid budget, as they understand how vital it is for Japan's future to advance scientific research. The more the government can allocate to Grants-in-Aid the better; at the same time, however, limited funding resources need to be allocated in a more purposive way.

In any case, Grants-in-Aid are a means of competitive funding that Japan can hold up to the world with pride. No matter how one views it, the program contributes immensely to advancing scientific and academic research in Japan. It is, therefore, with great expectation that I look forward to the continued development of this program, Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research.