

Grants-in-Aid for Research on Priority Areas and Field Work



By Takenori Inoki

Director-General, International Research Center for Japanese Studies

Looking back, my interest in research took a big twist around 40 years ago, though my style and method of doing it has evolved as I got older. After I finished preparing my doctoral thesis in the US, I returned to Japan at nearly 30. I devoted myself to reading books about the philosophies and histories of other countries until about the time I reached my mid-30s. At the university where I was employed, I taught classes in economic thought and labor economics, which occasionally required me to do some simple statistical processing.

Using my salary and bonuses, I managed to buy all of my western books, causing considerable headache for my wife. Trying to purchase and read all the books I could afford, I rarely used the library. As a result, my house was stuffed with read and yet-to-be-read books, pitting its beams, columns and floorboards into a fierce battle against gravity.

Books and periodicals purchased with even individual research funding must be returned to the university's library when one retires. Well, that does open a clean and tidy space around oneself. In my case, however, I wanted after all to possess my books, so I bought them with my own money. To me, these books were like parents or children—indeed, they could be thought of as part of my very person. Such collecting of books may be an idiosyncrasy typical of researchers in the humanities and certain areas of the social sciences.

Unlike the present, it was not a time when estimating and verifying operations required thousands, even tens of thousands, of data units to do even simple statistical computations, nor was there a need to hire a lot of assistants. Up to about 30 years ago, you would yourself take a bunch of punchcards, input to capacity with data, to the university's mainframe computer center to have them processed. It was an era in which one needed only time, not money.

Nevertheless, I remember agonizing about how nice it would be to have research funding. It was then I received an invitation from Dr. Shinichi Ichimura, Director of Kyoto University's Center for Southeast Asian Studies, to participate in a large-scale project on the theme "Cultural Friction," funded with a Grant-in-Aid for Research on High Priority Areas. As I don't have notes on the project's composition, I would guess roughly that there were about 15 research groups, each comprising about 10 researchers. Thus, the grant was used to mobilize nearly 200 researchers in the humanities and social sciences. Top-notch researchers were invited from abroad to address conferences held under the project, giving us an opportunity to enjoy discussing and fraternizing with them.

All of the meetings held under this Research in Priority Area project were indeed very beneficial both as a platform for academic and collegial communication. At them, I was able to get to know researchers in various peripheral fields whom I could not have met in my own academic society.

After the project ended, I was able to participate in other large projects that enabled face-to-face communication among researchers in cross-bridging fields. One was a Grant-in-Aid for Priority Area project on "Japan's Post-war Formation," led by Dr. Akio Watanabe at the University of Tokyo. Participating in it reconfirmed my perception of the importance of academic socializing among humanities and social science researchers in contexts that overarch universities and academic societies.

In areas of the humanities and social sciences, it can be difficult to organize joint research projects based on a shared issue interest. However, even if such joint research does not immediately lead to the finding or pioneering of new concepts, fields or issues, the mere process of carrying it out does give researchers in different fields an opportunity to engage each other in face-to-face communication, which in and of itself is of considerable value in deepening issue awareness in various fields.

Turning to the following three-and-a-half decades, they have given me the opportunity to spend a lot of time doing field work with both Japanese and overseas colleagues. One was a survey of factories in Thailand and Malaysia, led by Dr. Kazuo Koike. It began with a Grant-in-Aid for Cooperative Research, but took other external funding to finally complete. With the exception of research methods that entail quantitative analyses using massive data processing, overseas field work is probably the only area of the humanities and social sciences that requires a huge amount of research funding.

Moving into my late fifties, I once again returned to my study. It wasn't just that field work had become too physically punishing, but more stringent reporting and procedural requirements had made using Grants-in-Aid more restrictive and less comfortable. That said, I did understand how the inappropriate use of grant funds by some had necessitated more rigid supervision and control over them. At the same time, my fading affinity with Grants-in-Aid as I got older was underscored by a feeling that it was overall more advantageous for Japan if they were liberally used by talented young researchers.

I recall a researcher who had participated in the selection process of various overseas research grant programs stating that he thought Japan's Grants-in-Aid system was fairer than others. I believe the fact that Japan's program allows even modest researchers in regional universities to obtain grants if they demonstrate good potential testifies to its being an extremely fair competitive funding system.

Speaking for busy humanities researchers who cry that they would rather have more time than more money and for sluggish older researchers like myself, I have come to feel very grateful for the internal grant systems of Japanese universities and research institutes that allocate individual researchers a minimal amount of funding.