

The Importance of Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research and the JSPS to My Research Career

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A Socio-Historical Study of Pilgrimages and Migration during the Tang and Song Dynasties (Challenging Exploratory Research)



My career in academia began with a position at Bukkyo University in Kyoto that I assumed at the age of over 30. Later on, I took up a faculty position at Toyama University and then spent another 19 years working at Meiji University. However, having recently reached retirement age, I have finally capped my university career. Looking back on the research I pursued for almost 40 years, I am deeply grateful for the strong support that Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research (Kakenhi) and the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) provided to me at each stage along the way.

During my university years as a student majoring in Chinese history, China was at the height of its Cultural Revolution. Except for a small number of people that had friendly ties to the country, visits to China were not allowed. Although China opened its doors to foreign exchange students later on, by that time I was already employed and no longer eligible. Nonetheless, as someone engaged in research that focused on China, I sensed a need to visit and tread on the yellow soil of mainland China and bring myself face-to-face with its endless history. The first researcher exchange program arranged by the Chinese government and the JSPS gave me my opportunity to visit the country for exchange study and fulfill my secret yearning. Thanks to that arrangement, from September 1985 to the end of August of the following year, I spent a year at Peking University and Shaanxi Normal University (Xi'an) as an exchange researcher (long-term).

In the mid-1980s, China was still an impoverished nation. However, its universities were teeming with energy as faculty members and students endeavored to revive scholarly disciplines that had been dismantled during the Cultural Revolution. As that movement began to gather momentum, I had opportunities to meet many of the talented individuals that would lead China forward in the years ahead, and made many friends with whom I could engage in heart-to-heart discussions. These friendships have lasted to this day and I cannot quantify in words how much they have enriched my knowledge and aided my research.

The exchange program itself exposed me to a variety of research themes and materials. One had to do with over 4,000 Buddhist stone sutras, Fang-shan Shi-jing, which had been stored in caves located in a mountainous area on the outskirts of Beijing. These stone sutras dated primarily from the seventh to ninth centuries of the Sui-Tang period. Although progress was made in the preparation of literature by Chinese researchers, no research had yet been launched. Having visited that site right after China instituted its open-door policy, I recognized its significance in relation to the essence of Chinese history. Immediately upon my return to Japan, I and colleagues at Toyama University organized a research team and, with Kakenhi, pursued work that culminated with the publication of a book titled *Chugoku bukkyo sekkyou no kenkyu* (“A Study of the Buddhist Stone Sutras of China”) (Kyoto University Press). Later, we received praise for being able to conduct such joint research at a regional university, and the NHK educational broadcasting channel even put together a special program on the subject with the title, “Ishi no kyouten” (“Stone sutras”).

Afterward, I was given a faculty position at Meiji University and began living in central Tokyo. As life became more and more hectic, at some point I began to realize that my efforts in research had entered a rut and lost their energy. I accordingly applied for and earned a sabbatical that I utilized to engage in research for one year as a guest researcher (officer) at Harvard University with the objective of gaining a fresh perspective from the outside on China, Asia, and Japan. That was in 2002, the year following the terrorist attacks of 9/11. I spent my days confined primarily to the Harvard-Yenching Library that had become a center for East Asian studies and in my spare time attended graduate school classes and chatted with graduate students during the lunch breaks. I felt as if I were reliving my own days as a university student. I was invited to a variety of campus events, attended lectures, and interacted with other researchers from an array of different fields. In the process, I gained familiarity with the general structure of the US university system—something that would prove useful later on.

During my stay in the US, I began to sense a certain danger. In years past, Japan had been a leader in Sino and East Asian research. Many western researchers in those days made it a point to visit Japan, learn Japanese, and take their research to a deeper level. However, in more recent years, younger generations of researchers had shifted their focus directly toward the Chinese mainland and showed little interest in research trends in Japan. Although I occasionally heard mention of the names Naito (Konan Naito, a professor at Kyoto University before World War II) and Morohashi (Tetsuji Morohashi, chief editor of the *Dai Kanwa Jiten*, a Chinese-Japanese character dictionary, Taishukan Publishing Co., Ltd.) while I was in the US, the scholars around me included people of Chinese origin, but almost no Japanese. I thought Japan’s presence in this field had steadily declined and that we needed to become more active on the international stage and make our voices heard. Driven by

this almost desperate sense of urgency, I applied for a new Kakenhi grant while still resident in the US.

Upon my return to Japan in April 2003, I fortunately had a Kakenhi application accepted and became even busier as a result. At the time, China's economic liberalization had brought a series of discoveries of historical materials that had been buried underground (inside tombs), and research based on those materials was inevitable. Having anticipated this, I decided to systematically gather "epitaphs" and other stone-carved historical materials, and made it the main objective of my research to approach the truth of Chinese history through these documents. I established the Institute of East Asian Epigraphy and Stone Artifacts, Meiji University, in order to maintain this project for a long time and disseminate our findings to scholars in Japan and abroad. Utilizing the opportunities this provided, I took graduate students on trips to China for field surveys, encouraged them to deliver papers at international conferences of academic societies whenever opportunities arose, involved them in the reporting- and management-related affairs of international symposia, and created numerous opportunities for them to interact with researchers from other countries. Among other factors, this enabled my office to attract many grad students and cultivate young researchers with real talent. Our ability to flexibly utilize Kakenhi proved instrumental in making all of this possible.

I should mention one additional point relevant to Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research. For three years starting in April 2004, I served as Senior Principal Officer (humanities) at the Research Center for Science Systems, a new organization established by the JSPS. That center had been inaugurated only a half-year earlier. So, when I received a phone call in February from my next colleague Prof. Hiroshi Ishii (then affiliated with the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies), who had already assumed the same role, I thought I was being asked to serve on a committee of some kind. I casually replied that I was grateful for everything the JSPS had done for me thus far and pledged my cooperation to the best of my capacity.

However, much to my surprise, this new job entailed some extremely important duties including the management of competitive funding and the development of systems for that purpose as well as the provision of support for the public administration of matters relating to science and technology. To be honest, I was alarmed by the sheer gravity of these responsibilities more than once or twice. When the center had just been inaugurated, as its first order of business, it focused its attention on ways to ensure the fairness of the Kakenhi application screening process. At that time, everyone was aware that the traditional approach—that of entrusting the screening process to academic societies—did not necessarily place grant funding in the hands of researchers that actually needed it, and that the advancement of science and technology in Japan would be endangered unless this state of affairs

were somehow remedied. To that end, we completely overhauled everything from securing application referee candidates, selection of referees, grant application documents, screening methods, and verification of screening results, thus giving shape to the basic frameworks for Kakenhi application, screening, and approval that are in use today. The center also hammered out strategies for the provision of assistance to female researchers resuming work after maternity leave, assorted forms of assistance to young researchers, Kakenhi applications by emeritus professors, the expansion of special researcher (PD, DC) status, and the promotion of international exchange.

Through my job with the Research Center for Science Systems, I gained yet another huge benefit: namely, the opportunity to meet some of Japan's foremost researchers in fields ranging from the humanities to the sciences. Senior Program Officer's Meetings met on Friday mornings every other week and engaged in energetic discussions and debate. The topics on the agenda for discussion were extensive in scope and at times even difficult to follow. However, researchers are not the only ones with passionate views about research and science in Japan. Their passion is also shared by members of the JSPS Secretariat. Not only are Secretariat personnel prepared to faithfully and precisely respond to every difficult question we might hurl in their direction, but they have also demonstrated skill in processing a mountain of extremely difficult Kakenhi applications that number over 100,000 every year. Working together with these highly talented individuals as my colleagues was an experience that I now view as an irreplaceable asset.