Selection Review for FY2023 "Grant for Japan-Related Research Projects"

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The selection for the FY2023 "Grant for Japan-Related Research Projects" has ended. I read more than 100 applications at the end of the last year as usual. Conventionally, selection review report was sent only to the Board of Directors to make a final decision, but from this year, this review report has started to be disclosed for the applicants to know the selection process and criteria as well as for the future applicants to make better preparations.

1. Application Status and Selection Process

First, I would like to give an overview of the application status over the last three years, in which I have served as a selection committee member (see Table 1).

Table 1 Number of Application by Country/Region: 2021-2023

FY	2021	2022	2023
China	29	34	38
Taiwan	8	10	4
Korea	17	22	15
Thailand	17	40	31
Indonesia	78	78	254
Malaysia	293	350	426
Philippines	14	16	14
Singapore	3	3	2
Vietnam	15	15	24
Myanmar, Mongolia	3	3	6
Bangladesh	7	10	7
India, Pakistan, and others	10	19	32
Total	494	600	853

The number of applications rose from 494 in 2021 to 600 in 2022 and 853 in 2023, making 2023 1.73 times more than 2021. However, the number of applications did not increase in the same way across all countries and regions. The number has remained relatively stable in East Asia (namely China, Taiwan, and South Korea), while Southeast

Asian countries (except Singapore and the Philippines) showed a drastic increase. Particularly large increases were seen in Indonesia and Malaysia from 2022 to 2023, with these two countries alone accounting for 79.7% of the total number of applications in 2023.

The increase in the number of applications in Indonesia and Malaysia is largely due to the promotional activities by the local universities as well as by the continuous efforts of the Foundation staff. In East Asia, on the other hand, where Japanese studies are strong, the number of applications is not as large as we expected. One of the reasons for this may be that East Asia has a strong national research funding system or professors on the tenure track may be too busy to spare time to apply.

In any case, over 850 applications were selected in two stages. In the first stage, 13 expert committee members who are familiar with the local situation in various parts of Asia reviewed the applications and narrowed down the candidates. Then, information including detailed comments and assessments of the applied grant amount was transferred to the foundation secretariat. The secretariat collected all the reports from the expert committee members and sent the application documents that passed the first screening to the selection committee members. The selection committee conducted a peer review based on the opinions of the expert committee members and ranked the candidates. The results were brought to the selection committee meeting, where we made a final decision. Eventually 69 applicants got awarded, which means that only 1 application out of 12 was selected. Thus, this year's selection was more competitive than ever.

2. Selection Results and Comments

If we look more closely at each country/region, we can see differences in acceptance rates. In East Asia, where the number of applications is small, the acceptance rate is generally high, while in countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia, where the number of applications is large, the acceptance rate is relatively low (Table 2). Especially, Malaysia has an extremely low acceptance rate of 2.8%.

Table 2 Number of Awarded Applications by Country/Region: 2021-2023

	FY2021		FY2022		FY2023	
	Awarded	Not awarded	Awarded	Not awarded	Awarded	Not awarded
China	12	17	14	20	17	21
Taiwan	3	5	4	6	1	3

Korea	6	11	9	13	7	8
Thailand	5	12	6	34	7	24
Indonesia	15	63	13	65	12	242
Malaysia	13	280	9	341	12	414
Philippines	4	10	4	12	3	11
Singapore	1	2	1	2	1	1
Vietnam	5	10	4	11	4	20
Myanmar, Mongolia	2	1	1	2	2	4
Bangladesh	2	5	1	9	0	7
India, Pakistan, and others	0	10	2	17	3	29
Total	68	426	68	532	69	784

Why is it so? To explain this, I should mention about the selection criteria.

Selection committee members as well as expert committee members will check such items as the validity of the research plan, the significance of the research, and the feasibility of the research plan. To emphasize the validity of the research plan and the significance of the research, it is necessary to scrutinize related previous researches and argue how innovative and important your application is in a convincing way. Also, to claim the feasibility of research, it is necessary to specifically describe the research activities (for example, in the case of an interview survey, it is necessary to describe whom to meet when, what to ask, and how to ask them) in a concrete way. Unfortunately, many applications from Malaysia and Indonesia didn't meet these conditions.

The biggest problem is that many applications neglected or lacked in understanding the purpose of this grant program. As clearly stated on the Foundation's official website, the purpose of this grant program is to enhance "mutual understanding between Asian countries and Japan through promoting research projects in the field of the social sciences or humanities that are related to Japan (http://www.sumitomo.or.jp/e/Jare/japanrela.html)." However, we could find many applications in which the criterion of "mutual understanding" is not met, simply claiming importance of knowing Japan only for the sake of the applicant's country/region. To meet this criterion, applicants are encouraged to (1) include Japanese researchers in the research team, (2) disseminate research results to Japanese audience, or (3) pick up research topics that might lead to the mutual understanding, and so on.

I, as a selection committee member, sincerely hope that many scholars who understand the Foundation's research grant philosophy will apply in the future.