

FELLOW FOLLOW UP:

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**Recipient of The Japan Foundation
Southeast Asia Partnership (JFSEAP)
Program: Visiting Fellowship (Inbound),
FY2025**



Introduction & Background

Would you like to share about your academic journey and your current role at the Institute of Malaysian and International Studies at IKMAS, UKM?

My academic journey spans nearly 30 years at UKM, and I will soon be celebrating my 30th anniversary with the university. I began my studies at Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) in Public Administration and International Relations. Before entering academia, I worked briefly in the corporate sector, but quickly realized that my strengths and interests were more aligned with academic work.

I then joined UKM and spent 23 years at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, where my work was primarily

focused on teaching, student supervision, as well as research and publication.

In 2019, I moved to the Institute of Malaysian and International Studies (IKMAS), where I have been for about seven years. My role here is quite different, as it is less teaching-focused and more centred on research, publications, consultancy, and policy-related work, including engagement with government initiatives.

I also consider myself fortunate in my academic development. I received postgraduate training in the UK for my Master's degree under the British Chevening Award and later pursued my PhD in the United States under the Fulbright programme. These experiences, together with strong mentorship from various teachers, shaped my academic foundation and helped me grow into a more research-driven and policy-oriented scholar.

How did you discover the Japan Foundation Fellowship program, and what motivates you to pursue this opportunity at this stage of your academic career?

I discovered the Japan Foundation Fellowship through a colleague at the University of Tokyo. After nearly three decades in academia, you naturally build strong international networks, and one of my colleagues shared the opportunity with me at exactly the right time.

I was already planning my first sabbatical and looking for opportunities that could support my research abroad. Since I have about six years left before retirement, I saw this as a valuable opportunity to broaden my academic experience and strengthen my international collaborations.

I understood that competitive international fellowships are never

guaranteed. I was reasonably confident that I had a chance, but with such competitive programmes, you never really know. Fortunately, I was awarded the fellowships, which allowed six months in Japan during my sabbatical.

What was the application and selection process of the Japan Foundation from your perspective? It is easier than the other, or this one is more complex.

Every fellowship application and selection process is unique. Having previously held several international fellowships at different points of my academic journey, I would say The Japan Foundation Fellowship application was relatively straightforward and easy to follow.

The programme has a very clear objective to strengthen Japan–Southeast Asia partnerships, so the proposal needs to demonstrate how your research aligns with that mission while reflecting your own disciplinary expertise. As an international relations scholar, I focused on foreign policy and security issues, which matched both my research background and the programme's priorities.

One important aspect of the application was the requirement for two letters of recommendation. I was fortunate to receive strong recommendations from respected scholars, one Japanese and another Canadian, who were familiar with my work, and I believe that strengthened my application. My advice to future applicants is to prepare a proposal that directly addresses the programme's objectives and to secure strong recommendation letters from scholars who can genuinely speak about your research strength and its relevance to Japan and Southeast Asia. Those two elements can make a significant difference in a competitive selection process.

What drew you to go to Kyoto University?

Choosing Kyoto University was a deliberate decision. Although my research focuses on international relations, foreign policy, and security, which might naturally point to Tokyo. I had three main reasons for choosing Kyoto.

First, Kyoto University is home to one of Japan's leading Centres for Southeast Asian Studies. I wanted the opportunity to engage with its renowned multidisciplinary scholars and expand my academic perspective on Southeast Asia.

Second, I saw the fellowship as more than just a research opportunity it was also a chance to build new professional networks. I already had many academic contacts in Tokyo, but very few in Kyoto and the Kansai region. Being based in Kyoto allowed me to develop new collaborations while still maintaining connections in Tokyo.

Finally, I felt that Kyoto suited my personality. Coming from a smaller town, I prefer a quieter environment that allows more time for reflection and research. Having briefly visited Kyoto several years earlier, I was impressed by its unique blend of history, culture, and academic atmosphere. After spending six months there, I can confidently say it was the right choice, both academically and personally."

Fieldwork Experience

How has this fellowship experiences contribute to who you are today as a scholar and policy thinker?

The fellowship has had a significant impact on me, both as a scholar and as a policy analyst. It allowed me to build valuable professional networks, particularly with researchers at Kyoto University's Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, and these connections have already led to new collaborations beyond the fellowship.

Academically, the experience expanded my research agenda. Before the fellowship, my work focused primarily on Southeast Asia, China, and the United States. During my time in Japan, I began researching Japan's Official Security Assistance (OSA) policy, which has opened a new area of scholarly pursuit for me. This experience has laid the foundation for future research on Japan's role in Southeast Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific.

More importantly, the fellowship was not just a one-time experience, it created opportunities for long-term collaboration. I am now working with colleagues in Japan to explore joint research projects, ensuring that the partnerships and knowledge gained through the fellowship continue to shape my research and policy engagement in the years ahead."

How did living and conducting research in Japan influence your perspectives as a scholar in ways that remote research could not?

While online platforms are useful, face-to-face interactions provide a much deeper level of engagement, allowing for richer discussions, stronger professional relationships, and a better understanding of the local academic and policy environment.

Living in Japan for six months gave me opportunities that remote research simply could not. Beyond being based at Kyoto University, I was invited to present my research and engage with scholars and policymakers at universities and research institutes across Japan, including in Tokyo, Niigata, and Kansai. These interactions provided valuable feedback, broadened my perspectives, and helped me build lasting academic networks.

The experience reinforced my belief that meaningful international collaboration is built not only through research but also

through personal engagement and cultural immersion.



How this Japanese academic circle shape or challenge your perspective on Southeast Asia and Indo Pacific geopolitics?

The Japanese academic circle both shaped and expanded my perspectives in a very productive way. I see it as a process of constructive debate and mutual learning, where different scholarly traditions help broaden each other's understanding.

In Japan, particularly in discussions on security and alliance politics, I often became more curious about the apparent cognitive gaps between alliance-centric and alliance-allergic outlooks. After all, Japan has long embraced the alliance-first logic. At the same time, Southeast Asia, where many countries, including Malaysia, tend to prefer 'alignments without alliance' due to historical and strategic factors as well as domestic reasons.

These exchanges served to highlight different 'strategic DNA' across regions. They helped identify several areas of cooperation despite those differences. In that sense, the Japanese academic environment strengthened my ability to bridge perspectives between alliance-centric (with signs of shifting from alliance-first to alliance-plus) and alliance-allergic (with more signs of embracing

alignment-plus) approaches in Indo-Pacific geopolitics.

How, as a researcher, do balance the academic objective and then the realities of highly sensitive issues, especially in terms of geopolitical issues?

Balancing academic rigor with sensitive geopolitical realities comes down to perspective-taking and engagement beyond academia. My training in international relations, especially in Washington D.C., taught me early on to approach issues from multiple national perspectives to understand different interests and constraints.

Over time, and through interactions with both academics and policy practitioners, I learned that there is often a gap between theoretical approaches and policy realities. Academics tend to emphasize concepts and frameworks, while practitioners focus more on concrete, actionable implications.

In Southeast Asia, including Malaysia, this gap can be more visible because policy communities sometimes view academic work as too abstract, while academics may underemphasize practical constraints. My approach has been to bridge these two worlds using analytical frameworks when necessary, but always grounding them in real-world policy dynamics and examples.

Ultimately, I do not see this as a trade-off between academic and policy perspectives, but as a complementary relationship where both are essential for understanding complex and sensitive geopolitical issues.



What was the most memorable experience during your fellowship there?

One of the most memorable experiences was the series of academic talks and engagements I had during the fellowship, including at the University of Tokyo, Kyoto University, and Ritsumeikan University.

At the University of Tokyo, I delivered a well-attended seminar with both in-person and online participants, including senior scholars in the field. The discussion was very open and constructive, with both agreements and differences clearly articulated in a respectful academic spirit. What made it especially meaningful was that the dialogue did not end in the room, the presentation and the debates were later documented and shared, allowing the exchange to continue beyond the event.

Equally memorable were my engagements in Kyoto, where I interacted with non-IR colleagues, friends, and visiting scholars in a more informal but equally enriching setting. These interactions helped strengthen existing relationships and build new ones.

If I had one regret, it would be that I was so focused on research and conference trips that I did not explore Kyoto as much as I had hoped. But overall, the most memorable aspect of the fellowship was the combination of high-level academic exchange and meaningful personal connections with colleagues in Japan.

Experience with JF grant

What would you say distinguishes the Japan Foundation support from other academic grants or fellowships?

What distinguishes The Japan Foundation support, from my experience, is how responsive, accommodating, and supportive the team is throughout the entire fellowship process.

Even before the programme officially began, I experienced a high level of flexibility and responsiveness, particularly when managing changes in schedule and research-related conference invitations. There was always a willingness to consider requests on a case-by-case basis, which made the process very smooth and supportive.

During the fellowship itself, this support was also very practical and hands-on. For example, when I faced housing issues in Kyoto, The Japan Foundation team stepped in to assist where possible, exploring options and suggesting solutions, even when some issues were beyond their direct control. This kind of responsive engagement and problem-solving approach made a real difference on the ground.

Overall, what stands out is not just the funding or formal structure, but the sense of caring support and professionalism. It felt like a mutually beneficial relationship, I was supported to concentrate and carry out my work effectively, and I was able to contribute through sharing my research and engaging with wider academic and policy audiences.

In what aspect of the fellowship program do you think could be further improved for future researchers and fellows?

I think the fellowship is already very well designed, but there are a few areas that

could be further strengthened for future fellows.

One possible improvement is the development of a more structured alumni network. Since the programme is expanding, it would be valuable to maintain stronger long-term connections among fellows whether in Japan, the home countries, or through periodic regional gatherings. This would help sustain the sense of community beyond the fellowship period and encourage continued collaboration.

Another useful enhancement could be better facilitation of networking across The Japan Foundation's various fellowship programs during our stays in Japan. For example, providing a more visible overview of fellows and experts from other programmes, including their backgrounds and areas of expertise, could help participants connect more easily and expand their professional networks beyond their host institutions.

Overall, these are just suggestions for strengthening an already strong programme, with the aim of further enhancing connectivity and long-term impact among Japan Foundation fellows.

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