

A Comparative Study of Doctoral Admission Models in International Relations between Chinese and Japanese Universities

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Abstract

Against the background of China's doctoral recruitment system shifting from scale expansion to quality orientation, the institutional logic and operational effectiveness of doctoral admissions have come under continuous attention. Taking International Relations as a disciplinary entry point, this study selects Tsinghua University and Peking University in China, together with the University of Tokyo and Kyoto University in Japan, as comparative cases. Through institutional document analysis, the paper examines the organizational structure, selection procedures, and decision-making mechanisms of doctoral admissions in International Relations across these universities. The findings indicate that Chinese universities place stronger emphasis on procedural standardization and comparability, relying primarily on centralized institutional arrangements and document-based evaluation to complete the selection process. In contrast, Japanese universities depend more heavily on laboratories or research units and faculty judgment, positioning research fit at the core of admission decisions. These differences reflect institutionally embedded choices shaped by disciplinary structures, configurations of academic communities, and state-university relations.

Keywords: Doctoral Admissions, International Relations, Institutional Comparison.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of China's reform and opening-up period, the doctoral admission system has undergone several major stages: an establishment and recovery phase characterized by comprehensive reconstruction (1981–1996), a period of rapid enrollment expansion (1997–2004), and a subsequent phase emphasizing internal development and quality improvement (from 2005 onward). In the context of profound transformations in the international order and accelerated changes in modes of knowledge production, doctoral students as a key reserve force for advanced research and higher education teaching have become increasingly central to national innovation systems. Accordingly, doctoral admission policies and selection mechanisms are no longer merely technical arrangements within universities, but institutional devices closely linked to long-term academic capacity building. As policy attention has shifted from scale enlargement to quality enhancement, a pressing question has emerged: how can doctoral admission systems be refined to improve the quality of incoming doctoral cohorts? This question has become particularly salient under conditions of growing competition, diversification

of applicant backgrounds, and rising expectations regarding doctoral training outcomes.

Scholarship has already produced a relatively systematic body of research on doctoral admissions, with particular focus on the operation and reform of the "application-assessment" model. Existing studies address issues such as the proportional use of policy instruments in doctoral recruitment, hybrid assessment models, inter-institutional mobility, and the weighted responsibility of expert recommendation letters. While these contributions have generated substantial insights, most remain confined to internal analyses of China's doctoral admission system. Comparative perspectives across national contexts especially those grounded in disciplinary analysis remain relatively underdeveloped. The limited comparative literature tends to focus on Western countries, with less attention to East Asian systems and to discipline-specific institutional arrangements.

Against this background, this study selects International Relations (IR) doctoral programs at Tsinghua University and Peking University in China, and

at the University of Tokyo and Kyoto University in Japan, as comparative cases. Data for the Chinese universities consist of doctoral admission brochures, institutional guidelines, and publicly available policy documents at both university and school levels from the past five years. For the Japanese universities, the analysis draws on official entrance examination guidelines, admission requirements, program descriptions, and related FAQs published by graduate schools or divisions. Based on a unified analytical framework, the study adopts an institutional analysis approach to compare doctoral admission models in International Relations across China and Japan. It further explores the underlying factors shaping these differences, with the aim of supplementing existing research through an international and discipline-specific perspective.

2. Differences in Doctoral Admission Models in IR

2.1 Disciplinary Positioning of IR

As leading universities within their respective national higher education systems, Tsinghua University, Peking University, the University of Tokyo, and Kyoto University each occupy a representative position. Their doctoral admission practices in International Relations, to some extent, reflect broader institutional characteristics of doctoral recruitment in China and Japan.

Within China's higher education system, doctoral admissions in International Relations have long been embedded within the first-level discipline of Political Science, sharing a common admission framework and procedural design with other subfields. At Tsinghua University, International Relations is treated as a research direction under Political Science within the School of Social Sciences. Peking University, by contrast, recognizes International Relations as a relatively mature second-level discipline with an independent disciplinary code (030207), and conducts doctoral admissions directly under the International Relations label. Despite this difference, doctoral admission documents in both universities tend to display a high degree of procedural uniformity.

Japan does not operate a nationally standardized disciplinary coding system. Instead, International Relations is institutionally situated through internal arrangements involving graduate schools (*kenkyūka*), divisions (*senkō*), and curricula. Graduate schools function as the highest-level units responsible for doctoral training and degree conferral, roughly corresponding to schools or graduate schools in China. Divisions under graduate schools are responsible for specific academic fields, including curriculum design, qualification examinations, and dissertation evaluation, and are broadly comparable to first-level disciplines in China.

Doctoral education in Japan is typically divided into a two-year pre-doctoral (master's-equivalent) stage and a three-year doctoral stage. At the University of Tokyo, International Relations research is housed within the Division of International Social Sciences under the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, where a large "International Relations" course (*ōkōza*) provides an integrated educational pathway from undergraduate to doctoral levels. The *ōkōza* system, derived from German university traditions introduced to Japan in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, emphasizes collective organization, shared resources, and collaborative research across multiple faculty members and laboratories.

Kyoto University places International Relations within the Political Science field under the Division of Political and Legal Theory in the Graduate School of Law, a structure more closely resembling that of Tsinghua University. Within this framework, International Relations research encompasses theoretical and empirical studies in international politics and international political economy.

2.2 Comparison of Doctoral Admission Models

In terms of organizational structure, Chinese universities generally operate through a hierarchical arrangement of university-school-discipline, with centralized coordination at the school level. Both Tsinghua University and Peking University adopt school-centered management models: universities set overarching principles and procedures, while schools implement document screening and comprehensive assessments. Admission decisions are typically made collectively by admissions committees or expert panels. Doctoral recruitment in International Relations is conducted under the Political Science framework and uniformly adopts the application-assessment model, emphasizing procedural consistency and standardized evaluation.

Japanese universities, by contrast, lack a nationally unified disciplinary structure for International Relations. Doctoral admissions are usually organized at the level of graduate schools or individual laboratories, with greater autonomy exercised by research units. This arrangement places less emphasis on centralized procedures and more on localized academic judgment.

Differences are also evident in selection methods and evaluation priorities. Chinese universities attach considerable importance to applicants' prior academic training and demonstrated research capacity, particularly publications, writing ability, and the completeness of research proposals. By relying on comparable and verifiable materials, this approach seeks to reduce uncertainty in selection and to address concerns related to fairness and procedural legitimacy.

Japanese universities make less use of standardized indicators. Instead, evaluation focuses on the substance of the research proposal, the formation of research questions, and alignment with existing laboratory directions. At the University of Tokyo, although the formal examination process is relatively streamlined, requirements for research proposals are notably detailed. Applicants are expected to clearly articulate the positioning of their research topic, the theoretical traditions involved, engagement with existing literature, and a projected research trajectory over the next three to five years. Kyoto University repeatedly emphasizes academic ethics, social responsibility, and the applicant's role within the academic community. Modes of argumentation, problem framing, and attitudes toward prior scholarship all become salient evaluative criteria.

At the level of admission decision-making, faculty supervisors occupy markedly different positions. In Chinese universities, supervisors do not formally hold direct decision-making authority; their opinions are typically conveyed indirectly through interviews or expert evaluations. This arrangement is intended to prevent excessive influence by individual faculty members.

In Japan, by contrast, supervisors are usually involved at an early stage, often before formal applications are submitted. They assess the feasibility of research plans and compatibility with laboratory directions. Although such practices are not always explicitly codified, they are widely regarded as a natural component of doctoral admissions. This model relies heavily on faculty academic judgment and responsibility, strengthening the centrality of research fit while also introducing potential concerns regarding transparency.

Table 1: Comparison of Doctoral Admission Models in IR

Dimension	Chinese Universities	Japanese Universities
Disciplinary structure	Embedded in Political Science	No unified national discipline
Organizational unit	University–school–discipline	Graduate school–laboratory
Selection method	Application–assessment, document-based	Oral examination, limited standardized testing
Evaluation focus	Prior academic output and comparable indicators	Research fit and problem awareness
Role of supervisors	Largely <i>ex post</i>	Largely <i>ex ante</i>

Overall, China's doctoral admissions in International Relations exhibit a model centered on institutional standardization and prior academic performance, prioritizing procedural operability and fairness. Japanese admissions display a weaker centralized logic, emphasizing the sustainability of research processes and relying on stable academic units. Rather than functioning purely as a selection mechanism, doctoral admissions in Japan resemble a negotiated process embedded in academic communities. These differences reflect not only institutional design choices, but also divergent understandings of doctoral training and the role of researchers.

3.Explaining the Differences in Admission Models

The observed differences in doctoral admission models result from the long-term interaction of multiple institutional logics. Drawing on a new institutionalist perspective, doctoral admissions in International Relations can be understood as arrangements embedded within disciplinary structures, academic communities, and state–university relations.

In Chinese universities, doctoral education is situated within a highly standardized training system, and admissions naturally assume a strong screening function. Given large and diverse applicant pools, maintaining comparability becomes a central concern, making prior academic outputs and demonstrable research skills relatively secure indicators. In Japan,

where doctoral cohorts are smaller and laboratories serve as enduring cores of training and research, admissions can be organized around specific research teams. Research plans and alignment with laboratory directions are treated as prerequisites rather than outcomes of selection procedures. Consequently, institutional documents can remain concise, while critical judgments are made through partially informal mechanisms.

Disciplinary organization further shapes these models. In China, International Relations operates as a clearly bounded subfield within Political Science, facilitating the use of unified evaluation criteria. In Japan, International Relations is more diffusely embedded within political science or broader social sciences, characterized by greater theoretical plurality. The absence of uniform standards for “research fit” amplifies the practical role of supervisors.

At a macro level, these differences also reflect distinct state–university relationships. China's doctoral admissions function within a relatively unified policy framework, where centralization responds to scale and complexity. Japanese universities, while influenced by governance reforms, have retained substantial institutional autonomy and academic traditions in doctoral recruitment, resulting in gradual and localized adjustments.

Taken together, the divergence between Chinese and Japanese doctoral admission models represents different equilibria shaped by historical conditions, disciplinary configurations, and academic community structures. Recognizing these differences provides a basis for reassessing the operational logic and adjustment space of China's doctoral admission system.

4. CONCLUSION

Focusing on International Relations as a disciplinary case, this study has conducted an institutional comparison of doctoral admission models in China and Japan. Analysis of admission documents, organizational units, and operational logics indicates that differences in doctoral recruitment reflect deeper assumptions about doctoral training across higher education systems.

China's emphasis on standardization and centralization possesses clear practical rationales, closely linked to enrollment scale, governance structures, and institutional accountability. Japan's reliance on research fit and faculty judgment, by contrast, rests on stable laboratory systems and cohesive academic communities. By juxtaposing disciplinary and national perspectives, this study highlights the evaluative logics and value orientations embedded in doctoral admissions.

In fields such as International Relations, where theoretical orientations and problem awareness vary widely, early faculty involvement and careful assessment of research alignment as practiced in Japanese universities can help identify research potential and reduce friction during doctoral training. Without abandoning procedural norms, Chinese universities may consider enhancing the substantive weight of research proposals, incorporating limited and structured faculty input at earlier stages, and reducing overreliance on

formal indicators. Such adjustments could complement existing standards and address dimensions of professional judgment that standardized metrics struggle to capture.

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