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UC San Diego Historian Karl Gerth Receives Two Prestigious Fellowships

Institute for Advanced Study and American Council of Learned Societies award China scholar a combined \$145,000 to further his research

University of California San Diego Department of History professor Karl Gerth was awarded two prestigious fellowships totaling \$145,000 to further his research on the implications of Chinese consumerism.

The Institute for Advanced Study awarded Gerth a \$75,000 residency fellowship, allowing him to research and interact with scholars from around the world for one year at their location in Princeton, N.J. The residency will begin in fall 2018.



Karl Gerth (Photo by Erik Jepsen/ UC San Diego Publications)

Gerth was also selected as a 2018 American Council of Learned Societies Fellow, which includes \$70,000 to support 12 consecutive months devoted to research and writing. With this fellowship, Gerth has been named the Frederic E. Wakeman, Jr./ACLS Fellow, only the ninth to receive this distinction. As such, he has been invited to present his work at the History Institute of the Shanghai Academy of Sciences.

Both fellowships will support his ongoing work and forthcoming book “Unending Capitalism: State Consumerism and the Negation of the Chinese Socialist Revolution.”

“We are incredibly proud of Karl and the recognition he is receiving for his research on China. For academics, one fellowship is an incredible honor; that he received two in one year is no small feat, and shows the depth and importance of his work,” said UC San Diego Department of History chair Pamela Radcliff.

“Unending Capitalism” reinterprets the first three decades of the People’s Republic of China, also known as the Mao era, from 1949 to 1976. The era has been seen as explicitly anti-capitalist, hyper-regulated and anti-consumerist, Gerth says. By contrast, this project focuses on state attempts to manage consumerism and argues that many of the policies of the period — including the most “antibourgeois” ones of the Cultural Revolution — had unintended effects.

Using a wide variety of Chinese sources, from handwritten archives and internally circulated state documents to personal memoirs and internet blogs, “Unending Capitalism” demonstrates how policies often worked against the stated socialist goals and instead recreated and expanded capitalist practices and consumerism, thereby negating the socialist revolution.

The Hwei-Chih and Julia Hsiu Endowed Chair in Chinese Studies at UC San Diego, Gerth said his research has the capacity to change contemporary thought on how China, communism and capitalism are perceived.

“Until they start to ask basic questions, people often have no idea how the ways they think about the past deeply inform their understanding of the present. Why do we call China ‘communist’ and ourselves ‘capitalist?’” Gerth said. “When we question basic assumptions, we understand others — and ourselves — differently. I hope explaining China’s recent history through the lens of capitalism and consumerism will provide such challenges.”

Gerth is the author of two books on Chinese consumerism, based on more than 25 years of living, traveling in and researching China and East Asia: “As China Goes, So Goes the World: How Chinese Consumers are Transforming Everything” (2010) and “China Made: Consumer Culture and the Creating of the Nation” (2003). In addition, he has published and presented numerous papers on comparative aspects of modern Chinese and world history, including “Consumption and Consumerism in East Asia” and “The Ecological Implications of Chinese Brand Nationalism.”

After receiving his Ph.D. in modern Chinese history from Harvard in 2000, Gerth taught at the University of South Carolina and Oxford University, where he was the Dame Jessica Rawson Fellow and Tutor in Modern Asian History. In 2013, he accepted the Hwei-Chih and Julia Hsiu Chair in Chinese Studies at UC San Diego.

On campus, Gerth plays an important role in advancing scholarship on China. He is the director of the Chinese Studies Program within the Institute of Arts and Humanities, a core faculty member of the 21st Century China Center at the UC San Diego School of Global Policy and Strategy, and committee chair for multiple Ph.D. candidates, including previous American Council of Learned Societies pre-dissertation grant-winners.

“These awards are an outgrowth of teaching at UC San Diego. Our curriculum encourages me to test innovate approaches in my classes. Our students rarely assume history is a worthwhile intellectual pursuit in itself. They ask tough questions and demand convincing evidence to big questions,” Gerth said. “Along the way, I learn how to provide better explanations and they learn how to reconsider their assumptions about the world. Both teacher and students benefit from faculty research beta tested in our classrooms.”

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