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PROSPECTIVE GRADUATE STUDENTS
UCSD—MODERN CHINESE HISTORY PROGRAM
FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS & PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Below are my answers to common questions. These are not the official answers of the university or department but rather my informal responses. If you have additional questions, please contact us. For non-academic questions, please contact the Graduate Student Affairs Coordinator in the History Department. For additional information on the History Faculty and the Graduate Program generally, see the departmental website: <http://history.ucsd.edu>.

1. **Should I apply to graduate school?** Graduate school is a serious commitment that requires serious thinking. If you have doubts, consider other options first. On the other hand, I delayed applying to graduate school for the wrong reasons. I mistakenly assumed I needed a dissertation project beforehand, feared my Chinese language skills were not good enough, and worried I could not afford it.
2. **Why UCSD?** The chief reason may be practical: the Modern Chinese History program's unrivaled record of training and placing its graduate students. This record reflects the deep and long-standing commitment of the faculty, staff, and institution to our graduate students. We do many things to ensure their success, starting with admissions. We admit enough students to form supportive cohorts. However, we also limit the number so that those admitted can receive the attention necessary to achieve their potential. We foster a community so that graduate students feel connected to and stimulated by their peers.
3. **Can I afford it?** Probably. The department is committed to ensuring that admitted students, including international students, have the funding necessary to succeed in graduate school. We rarely admit students without funding packages that cover tuition and provide living stipends. These packages usually include outright grants as well as reasonable teaching obligations, which we consider part of your training. In addition, our students are very competitive at winning national and international fellowships.
4. **Will I get a job afterwards? Are the job prospects for historians as bad as everyone says?** Nearly all of our graduates in the Modern Chinese History program have chosen to become professional historians. The job markets varies by field. In recent years, there has been strong demand for PhDs in non-Western fields such as modern Chinese history. While there is no guarantee, we have one of the best records in the US for placing our graduates in leading colleges and universities across the country and around the world, including Grinnell College (listed first as it's my alma mater), University of Pittsburgh, University of Southern California, Ithaca College, George Mason, American University, University of Wisconsin, University of Washington, UC-Irvine, University of Minnesota, UC-San Barbara, University of Rochester, Simon Fraser University (Canada), Hong Kong University of Science & Technology, Sophia University (Japan), and many others.
5. **Do I have to choose an advisor?** Professor Paul Pickowicz and I co-advise all students in the Modern Chinese History graduate program. Students benefit from double the attention and need not worry about their advisor being on leave and out of the country.

6. **Does my period of interest have to match my advisors' interests?** No. See below the list of some books by graduates of the program. And our current graduate students have a wide range of interests. In your application statement, there is no advantage or disadvantage to expressing interests similar to ours. In any case, we expect your interests to evolve once here.
7. **I am unsure about pursuing a PhD. Can I start with an MA program?** We seldom admit students for terminal MA degrees in Modern Chinese History. If you have special circumstances, please contact us. Otherwise, do not apply for an MA program in Modern Chinese History.
8. **Is my Chinese good enough?** Tough to say. The stronger your skills, the better. Unlike the sciences, where students often immediately go from undergraduate to graduate study, it is common for our students to take time after graduating college to study Chinese before coming to graduate school. Yet Chinese language skills are a means to an end and not an end in itself, so you need not wait until your Chinese is "perfect" to commence graduate study. You will, of course, need to be able to read Chinese academic materials and primary sources from your first year of graduate study and Chinese language materials will be central to any dissertation. Spoken Chinese is increasingly important. It is now common for Chinese historians based in North America to participate in conferences in China conducted entirely in Chinese. So, if you have less than, say, three or four years of rigorous college-level Chinese or the equivalent, best to improve your Chinese before applying.
9. **Is my English good enough?** Assuming you wish to work in an English-speaking country, then all three of an academic's responsibilities—teaching, writing, and administrating—require excellent English. As noted, we foster a community of graduate students and, once here, you will have many opportunities to immerse yourself and improve quickly. As with those learning Chinese, learning and improving one's English is a lifelong process.
10. **Do I need to know a third language before I begin graduate study?** No. You can fulfill this requirement on campus. Note that the expectations for fluency in a third research language are significantly lower than for Chinese.
11. **Are there additional Chinese studies resources at UCSD?** Collectively, the branches of the University of California comprise the best public university system in the world. You will have access to other UC resources, most notably books. In addition, our students on occasion take courses at other branches, particularly the three that are within a few hours drive: Irvine, Los Angeles, and Riverside. More frequently, though, students from these branches attend our seminars.
12. **Do I need to have a dissertation project before I begin? Do I need to have set historical interests?** No. Learning what excites you intellectually is one of the best parts of graduate school. Through seminars and lecture series, our job is to expose you to as many different aspects of modern Chinese history as possible so that you can develop and refine your own individual interests. Some books and articles you'll enjoy and others you may not. Only through extensive reading will you learn just how wide the scope of potential research projects there are. To give you a rough idea of the range of interests, here are just a few of the books published by graduates of the Modern Chinese History program:

- *The People's Peking Man: Popular Science and Human Identity in Twentieth-Century China*
- *City Versus Countryside in Mao's China; Negotiating the Divide*
- *China's Contested Capital: Architecture, Ritual, and Response in Nanjing*
- *Panda Nation: Nature, Science, and Nationalism in the People's Republic of China*
- *Republican Beijing: The City and its Histories*
- *Marrow of the Nation: A History of Sport and Physical Culture in Republican China*
- *Drama Kings: Players and Publics in the Re-Creation of Peking Opera, 1870-1937*
- *A Court on Horseback: Imperial Touring and the Construction of Qing Rule, 1680-1785.*

13. **Exactly how much intellectual flexibility does the program provide?** Lots. Please see the fine print below. As you will see, you will have a third “minor field” to develop your interests inside or outside of the History Department.
14. **How much do grades/ GRE scores/ writing sample/ personal statement/ previous experience/ etc. matter for admissions?** Everything matters but no one single factor will gain you admission. Focus on the things you still control: your statement and writing sample. And re-take the GRE, if necessary. It's not critical to admissions but is useful in comparing students across fields.
15. **Is San Diego a nice place to live?** Yes. San Diego regularly is voted as one of the finest cities in America and one of the best climates in the world. The weather is moderate all year-round, which leads to plenty of opportunities for outdoor activities and a nice work-life balance. There are diverse living and lifestyle options. The campus itself is spectacular, with the ocean visible, and a relaxed, suburban feel. Those who prefer a more urban lifestyle (including me) choose to live in the city itself, a few miles south of campus; still others opt to live in beachfront communities to the south or north of campus. There is also limited graduate student accommodation. San Diego has many different micro-communities, each with its own character. Unlike our larger neighbor to the north, traffic is reasonable and public transportation, including free university shuttles, is decent, which makes it easy to enjoy everything from craft breweries to watersports to concerts and more. Again, living in San Diego makes it easier to have a good work-life balance.
16. **Any final advice?** My first response is a yoga cliché: “Don't forget to breathe.” A more direct way to say this is: try to relax. Deciding on a career and applying to graduate school can feel stressful. But try not to be too anxious about one or another aspect of the process. In my experience, everyone who really wants to pursue a PhD can. It might not happen on your first try; some of those admitted here had to apply twice. Some may need more language training or the additional coursework provided in MA programs to improve their applications. While others had to go or chose to go elsewhere. But those with the passion, skills, record, and patience eventually will get into a good program.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE MODERN CHINESE HISTORY PROGRAM

In their annual research papers and in their dissertation projects, students are free to explore a variety of topics in the social, cultural, economic, and political history of modern China, including the newly emerging field of the history of the People's Republic (1949-). In thematic terms, student research topics have included issues related to ethnicity, gender, border regions, environment, art history, science studies, visual culture, consumer behavior, urban studies, social movements, intellectual history, transnational dynamics, physical culture, migration, politics, material culture, urban/rural interface, media studies, maritime history, and religion.

The program is structured, including the structured exploration and development of each student's interests. In each of their first three years, students complete a year of "major field" seminars in Modern Chinese History. These seminars include a one-quarter historiography seminar (HIGR 210), which exposes students to the latest and greatest books in modern Chinese history, and a two-quarter research seminar (HIGR 215A-B), in which students develop research projects and write their first scholarly papers. All students are co-mentored by Prof. Gerth and Prof. Pickowicz, who rotate teaching these seminars.

Along with the three-term sequence in Modern Chinese History, students simultaneously work to complete one "minor field" per year in each of the first three years. A minor field is completed by taking three courses—one each in the fall, winter, and spring terms. Two of the three minor fields are required: Pre-Modern Chinese History and Modern Japanese / Korean Studies. These areas are not only essential to understanding modern Chinese history but they are also areas in which you may be expected to teach someday. Individual students determine the third minor field according to their own interests. In addition to choosing any other historical field such as global history or the history of science, past students have chosen to do their third minor field in areas outside the history department, including sociology, literature, and anthropology.

Students typically spend year four in East Asia, usually China and Taiwan, doing dissertation research. Then they spend a final two to three years on campus writing the dissertation, teaching in various capacities, and applying for permanent positions.

Please contact us if you have additional questions or would like elaborations on my answers.

Good luck!