Exchanging to Tsinghua University (Beijing, China) – Fall 2015

This report is written for Tsinghua University in Beijing, China for the Fall 2015 semester. I am writing this based on my experience as a School of Economics and Management student (which is similar to a Business major). A semester in Tsinghua is 16 weeks and 2 weeks for final. The fall semester begins after the mid-autumn festival (a Chinese holiday) and ends in mid January.

Preparation for Exchange

Tips on Packing and Preparing
When packing for Beijing, it is important to know that Beijing is very cold in the winter (with temperatures as low as -19 degrees Celsius) and polluted. Therefore, when I was preparing for the exchange, I packed mostly clothing that can be layered and brought a very thick jacket. It is important to bring layers because it can be warm sometimes due to the pollution trapping the heat. In addition, as the heating system is controlled by the government, I suggest to pack heat packs and a thermos because heat is provided starting in mid October.

In addition, I STRONGLY suggest students who are exchanging to Beijing to bring anti-diarrhea medicine as the food standards in China are not as clean compared to Canada. I also suggest bringing painkillers, cough and cold medicine and other medicines for common sicknesses because some over-the-counter medicines in Canada are considered prescription in China (ex: Ibuprofen).

Also, if you do not know any Chinese at all, I suggest learning some simple and useful phrases and downloading a translator application, as many people outside of the university campus do not understand English at all.

Travel and Transportation
Once you arrive in Beijing, you will find people asking if you want a ride to your destination for a cheaper price – do NOT talk to these people as they usually try to scam you and change the prices in the end. As stated in the package given by Tsinghua University, go to the designated taxi stand area and take the taxi to the school – it would cost approximately 150-200 RMB (CA $30-$40).

Financial Details
It is mostly a cash-based society in China; therefore, you should exchange your currency BEFORE you go to China (to avoid any communication problems). Once you arrive in China, you should set-up a debit card with Bank of China (this is recommended by
Tsinghua University). Most places accept debit card and it is much safer than carrying a lot of cash because there are a lot of thieves in this highly populated city. As for the cost of living, it would cost approximately 1000-1500 RMB per month (CA $200-$300) to live in Beijing – this excludes rent.

During Exchange

**Arrival and Orientation**

There are two main orientations separated into two days: registering and picking up your student ID, and course registration. For the first orientation, it is mostly administrative which includes purchasing health insurance from the school if you do not have one (costs about 200 RMB), picking up your student ID card, and buying a canteen card which is a rechargeable card that is used for paying when you dine at all the canteens on campus (they do not accept cash). For the first day, I suggest you to wake up early as there are a lot of students and the line gets really long if you arrive later. As for the second day, this is when you will be registering for your courses. You should plan out which courses you want to take beforehand. On this day, you will meet your buddy who will help you register for your courses and show you around campus. There is also a presentation to welcome new students in the theatre.

The registration system is very confusing to use so if you want to change or drop courses, I suggest asking your buddy for assistance.

**Accommodation and Living**

If you choose to live on campus, there are three options: single room, separate rooms and shared bathroom with another student; and double room (single room and using the public bathroom). If you want to live on campus, you should register as soon as possible because they do not have enough rooms for every student and it fills up fast.
Before deciding the live on or off campus, keep in mind that there are only three periods of the day where it has hot water and there are no visitors after 9pm or 10pm. This means that if you stay out late, you cannot shower in the middle of the night.

I choose to live off-campus as it is more convenient for my living habits. Off-campus accommodation ranges from 5000-9000 RMB per month (CA $1000-1800) and where I was renting, it costs 7300 RMB per month and did not include electricity or water fees.

**Academic Details**
Lecture formats are similar to our university: PowerPoint or handwritten notes. Schedules are a bit different as some classes are every other week, every week but ends earlier (for example, 8-week or 11-week course) or the regular once a week for the whole semester. As for grading system, it is much easier to attain a high grade in Tsinghua University than SFU. The professors in Tsinghua University are generally more lenient as they understand that the students are on exchange. The courses are not curved, but they are sometimes scaled depending on the professor and faculty requirements.

**Country Information**
The culture in Beijing is very fast-paced and lively. It is a highly populated city so I strongly suggest not to take the train during rush hour. In terms of weather, you should check the weather everyday in Beijing, especially during the winter as it is highly polluted. Depending on how polluted it is, you may need to wear a mask to protect yourself from the pollution. It is cheaper and more convenient to buy the masks online (ex: Taobao) – the masks must be suitable for PM2.5 or else it does not protect you from the pollution. I recommend buying at least 10 masks from a brand called 3M. Places to visit include: Beijing University, Summer Palace, Forbidden City, Great Wall of China, Houhai, Wangfujing area, and Taikoo Place.
Social and Extra-curricular activities
If you know how to read Chinese, you should download the mobile application called “大众点评” (the Chinese equivalent for Yelp). This application is very useful as it shows you interesting places to see, things to eat and many more. Also, I suggest you to go try the restaurants and bar near the Wudaokou station (a 10 minute walk outside Tsinghua’s Southeast gate). Those places are filled with exchange students from both Beijing and Tsinghua University; a great opportunity to meet more people.

Also, there are club days during the first month of school – this is a time where you can sign up for different clubs. There are many different clubs in Tsinghua University: ski club, musical club, Chinese calligraphy club, event-planning club, Canadian club, etc.

Reflection After Exchange
After going on exchange, I learned to be open about different cultures and activities – go explore, and try new things! I hung out with a lot of people from different countries that I barely knew, but we all had a fun time. I was very involved and joined a bunch of clubs, attended the School of Economics and Management events, went to explore the city with my new friends, etc. Despite the fun times, I also faced many challenges, especially adapting to the environment in Beijing. It is extremely cold during the winter and sometimes the pollution made me cough a lot. I also was not used to eating the food in Beijing, but I learned to embrace the uniqueness, the cultural differences. At times I did feel lonely because I was away from my family and close friends, but spending time and connecting with my new friends and their different cultural backgrounds made me very happy as well.
Advice/ Tips for Other Students
For health concerns, do NOT drink tap water in Beijing – try to drink bottled water from a reputable brand in China. Also, I strongly suggest not to eat from the random food carts on the streets as they usually are not very sanitary and you may get sick from eating them.

In Beijing, many daily activities can be done with the help of a smartphone. It is important for students to download a mobile application called “WeChat” (similar to Whatsapp) when they are in China. This is the communication platform that most Chinese people use in China. Almost everyone will add each other on Wechat in order to keep in touch. Also, if you link your Chinese debit card to this application, you can use it to pay your utility bills, food, taxi and online purchases. Also, to save money, I suggest to download another application called “Dididache” (a taxi application) or even Uber. Since canteens close early on campus (around 9pm), I suggest downloading take-out apps such as “eleme”, “Baidu Waimai”, etc. These applications usually do delivery all day long for a very reasonable price.