I had the opportunity to do an exchange in The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) over the summer 2016. I major in international studies and I did two summer sessions each being three and four weeks respectively between June 3rd and August 3rd.

Due to the price of flight ticket, I arrived in Hong Kong a day before the orientation day. I stayed overnight at my friends’ place. When I contacted them, their tip for entering the airport immensely helped me with all airport and ferry experience. We are supposed to send student visa application and attach the visa on our passport sheet once we receive it from CUHK. Student visa gives you a status as ‘resident’ of Hong Kong. This is great because you do not have to line up in the long ‘visitor’ line in the airport. Knowing this information, I never had to wait more than five minutes, but many exchange students were stuck in front of the immigration office for good forty minutes.

I went during summer so the packing was generally light, but as a person who gets cold with air conditioning, I had long pants and hoodies to survive in-door. It is necessary to have all rounded clothe selection, as temperature change between outdoor and indoor is also at its extremes (temperature feels like 40 degree the entire July with extreme humidity). There are beautiful tracking courses and beaches; hence, if you would like to participate in such activities, appropriate clothing will be necessary. Moreover, I have travelled different countries during my exchange as well, so bringing rain jacket or backpacks may be nice if you are planning to travel. My friends from exchange program decided to go to Mount Fuji in Japan, but they only had summer attires. They almost froze to death, as it is a very cold place to be all year round.

As for transportation to CUHK, there are various ways to get there. There is cab which will be about 250-280 HKD depending on the time of the day. Don’t be surprised if the taxi driver asks for more money than the machine indicates. They are asking for toll fees (about 10-20HKD). There are also two buses (A41, E42), but they do not go directly to the university. They go to Shatin station which is two stops away from the ‘University’ station (which is the name of the MTR station of CUHK). It may be quite confusing if you decide to do this, if you don’t know the way around the place. I have seen many students coming by cab and going back by bus. The information booklet CUHK sends us would suggest students to take cab in case of having a lot of luggage. However, as a person who only had one luggage, it was not a problem. There are spaces for luggage in the first floor of the bus, and there are CCTV cameras that constantly show your luggage status on the 2nd floor screen of the bus. The bus costs about 20-24 HKD so it is a lot cheaper and it takes about 35-45 minutes if you take A41. E42 takes longer, as it goes around more.

Before going on with any transportation, you must buy a transportation card called “Octopus” card. It can be used in supermarkets, all transportations, convenience store and
various other merchandises. Even if they do not receive credit card, they may receive the octopus card. Octopus card can be bought in all convenience store and MTR stations (the metro station). Along with the octopus card, you should buy a paid-phone plan. Hong Kong internet data plan is extremely affordable in comparison to Canadian standards. Depending on the data type (4G or 3G) and phone minutes, there will be different options. The airport is little bit more expensive so I suggest the convenient stores like seven eleven when you get to CUHK ‘University’ MTR station.

In terms of cash, it would be nice to have Hong Kong dollars prepared but if you have some US dollars, take them. In Shatin, there is a good rate giving exchange center (ask the orientation staffs) for the US dollar. In order to open up a bank account in Hong Kong, it takes 3 weeks. Hence, it is not worth to open up a Hong Kong account if you will be there only for 4 months. Thus, cash is necessary and use credit cards whenever they receive them (usually big malls, restaurants, and other newer places will receive credit cards). Good restaurants around Hong Kong generally only receive cash so you would need to carry a lot in cash and in octopus card.

As I was in summer program, all exchange students were asked to come to one residence building (they call it hostel); however, I heard from other exchange student who is there for a year-long exchange program, that exchange students in regular semesters will go to hostels all over the campus. Thus, I have no information of how the meet up place for orientation for regular semester. Orientation staffs will do a walking tour of the campus. Like SFU, the campus is on the mountain, but unlike our campus, the campus starts from bottom to top. So there are 4 different buses that run through the campus and the night bus ends at 11:30PM, meaning that it will be a long hike up to hostels (I mean a hike by more than 30 minutes) if you miss them (you can take a cab too – it will be about 35 HKD).

The international summer program of CUHK offers exchange students the newest and cleanest residence buildings. I heard from other local students that other hostels are not as good as our building. The two buildings I have stayed at in the two different sessions were great. It had air conditioner at each room and the rooms were larger than I anticipated. Gyms are available and cafeteria (canteen) is in the Main floor. I have very little information on what social and extra-curricular activities may be during the regular semesters, but I assume each hostel will offer different interesting activities (hostels are considered as a family and do various activities together).

Both of my professors were visiting professors from England. Thus, the class was all taught in English and in British education style. Both my courses’ midterms were on the format of writing essays based on questions given by the professors. Grading is a little tricky in CUHK as it is some sort of relative grading system. Thus, it gives only certain amount of percentage of the class As, Bs, Cs, and etc. Thus, you may be getting 80 percent but if there are only two of
you above 80 percent, you will be getting A. It is a little different from bell curves and it is quite confusing.

There are so many places to eat. Try getting to know local students in Hong Kong and let them introduce you to various restaurants. English do not work in good restaurants so you would really need help with local students. Orientation staffs are the good start and they often become really good friends. All of my really good local friends were orientation staffs and they taught me a lot about the university, the culture, and the food. It is very difficult not to hang around English speaking friends, but try being the person who does not speak Cantonese. Just nod and smile – your local friends will get the right things for you.

Living expense can vary a lot depending on what you do in Hong Kong. Within the two months, I travelled to Singapore, Macau and Bangkok, Thailand. This made my stay in Hong Kong itself quite more expensive than many students who just stayed in Hong Kong. However, some who stayed in Hong Kong spent more money than I did because of the night life. Yes, Hong Kong night life is very different from that of Canada. Clubs really start at 1 AM and you will be spending a lot of money on drinks, cabs, and clubs (Night bus ends at 11:30 PM). Please do not go there by yourself. Always have a few friends go with you. I’ve seen people talking about robbery, weird people following and etc. Hong Kong itself is a very safe place to travel at nights; however, always be careful and do not go too much if you want to save money (cab money piles – it is about 150 HKD).

Finally, Hong Kong was hit by a typhoon on our farewell dinner day so we did not get to leave the building, but it was somehow an interesting by the fact that I experienced typhoon. It was really safely guarded overnight by people who made sure nobody leave the building. It was unfortunate that we couldn’t do a hotel farewell dinner, but this was also a unique experience at Hong Kong.

As a fellow Asian, it was very interesting to try living in a different Asian society. It was also a nice experience to live outside of my comfort zone. It was also a new experience of living with a complete stranger (became a really good friend and roommate) in the same room because CUHK hostels only have duplet room instead of single room. Language barrier existed but I learned to ask for help. In general, I had an amazing time in Hong Kong and I highly recommend students going abroad.
PHOTOS

The Chinese University of Hong Kong – Pavilion of Harmony

Special visit (by the exchange program) to the Administrative Council of Hong Kong
Student Study Area in one of the Campus buildings in CUHK

The Big Buddha in Lantau Island of Hong Kong
View from residence (hostel) towards the opposite side of the Campus

View from Tsim Tsui during Hong Kong Harmony of Lights – view towards Hong Kong Island