I am a Computer Science major who participated in a 4-month exchange at the Chinese University of Hong Kong for the Fall 2018 semester. During my four months here, I have compiled some useful information for you, so your exchange will go smoothly like mine.

Before you go on an exchange, there are some things you need to prepare for when you go to Hong Kong. If you are going on a Fall semester exchange, pack some light quick dry clothes for the initial two months of your exchange in Hong Kong. It will get very humid and rainy in August/September so having that and an umbrella is a necessity! I learned this the hard way by changing clothes every half of the day from either getting hit by rain or sweating through it. Also keep in mind that August/September is in the middle of Typhoon season so check the weather often. Hong Kong got hit with a strong typhoon while I was there and ended up stuck in my dorm eating ramen for an entire day. Winter time can also get chilly too so bring some long-sleeved clothing as well.

Another thing you should know is that the school has a lot of canteens where you can eat for cheap (about 3-5 Canadian dollars at time of writing). That means you don’t have to bring kitchen utensils or worry about cooking. Not all canteens are created equal so scout out the ones you like early. I liked the coffee shop at the central campus buildings and the United College canteen.
Hong Kong is a split personality of cash and cashless societies. You can use your credit card in most malls or restaurants but some places like small restaurants or street vendors only accept cash so be prepared by having some Hong Kong Dollars on hand when you go. ATMs are plentiful in Hong Kong so you can always withdraw cash in most places. Apply for the Student Octopus card as soon as you can as it is 50% off all subway rides on top of using it in convenience stores, some restaurants and vending machines.

When you get to Hong Kong, you should take the taxi as taking the MTR, Hong Kong’s Skytrain, with checked luggage is very difficult. It costs around 50 Canadian to take the taxi from the airport to the hostel you are staying. Also, because most taxi drivers do not speak English, it is good to have your destination written down somewhere in Chinese.

Once you settle in, you should go participate in Orientation Week. This is how you can make new friends and get to know the school better. There will be a trip during that week which goes to Victoria Peak, so you should never miss orientation. After orientation, classes will begin and you will move to your permanent hostel.

I ended up in International House 1 (I-House 1) which is the oldest of the five I-Houses on campuses. It is supposed to be 1/3 International people, 1/3 mainland Chinese and 1/3 locals but I found it to be 50% International people and 50% mainland Chinese. I-House 1 is a hostel that has seen better days as the paint is peeling off, dust bunnies living in corners and the wooden floors are scarred by the years of neglect left by previous students. The flipside is that the bathrooms are clean and it is mostly double occupancy. There is a laundry room and a fitness room but the fitness room was closed when I got there because the building it is in was getting renovated. If you like going out a lot, consider having SH Ho or Chung Chi as your first choice of accommodation as they are much closer to the MTR station as I-House 1 is in the middle of the mountains. There are buses that run across campus which made it bearable but it shuts down at 11:20pm so keep that in mind if you plan to come back late.
You will also be assigned a college which will be your affiliation here. I got Chung Chi, which was at the other side of campus from I-House 1. Chung Chi had frequent social events where exchange students can participate like the English Table and Toastmasters Club. Here you can meet other exchange students or local students over dinner. Other colleges will have similar events as well. The International Exchange people at CUHK will also have some social events for exchange students going as well so there isn’t a shortage of opportunities to meet new people.

Classes at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, CUHK, are like SFU’s, right down to the same PeopleSoft course registration software they use. It’s the same three hours lecture/tutorial combo with midterm(s) and final exam structure. Full time status means three courses or more and the average course load is four or five classes. I took three because I had most of the credits I need and wanted to take it easy which may not be the case for you. The professors will have a Cantonese accent but are intelligible. The only difference is that final exam times will not be known until late October for most classes so do not book your December flights until you know your final exam dates or return on the last day of the semester.

During my off times, I explored Hong Kong and found that it has a bit of everything for everyone. There are great hiking trails away from the concrete jungle like Lion Rock, which is a short MTR ride away from campus. The view from the summit of the Lion Rock trail is amazing as you can see the sheer density of the cities below.

Doing tourist stuff in Hong Kong is easy as most major neighborhoods have something of note. You could easily spend a day exploring Mong Kok and Tsim Sha Tsui with its towering blocks of concrete and stores that sell everything from knockoff Nikes to Michelin Guide mentioned bubble waffles. Riding on
the Star Ferry from the Tsim Sha Tsui side at night is also a must as you can take in the beautiful cityscape. Browsing Sham Shui Po’s throwback neighborhood yields a much safer Mad Max’s Bartertown with street vendors selling everything. The Apliu market there will have cheap SIM cards that will last you for your term there.

Hong Kong is also foodie heaven because it has any cuisine you want. I personally prefer the local stuff like the Hong Kong style steak houses in Mong Kok and the Michelin star dim sum restaurant Tim Ho Wan. Home sick students can come to McDonalds Next or Shake Shack to experience next level burgers you didn’t know you were missing while the partiers go to Lan Kwai Fong for the nightlife and public drinking. Halloween at Lan Kwai Fong is quite big so it is worth to check it out then.

If you want to experience local culture, you have the perfect opportunity to witness two Chinese cultural events: Mid-Autumn Festival and National Day. The Mid-Autumn Festival has the fire dragon dance in Tai Hang where they did the same dance for over a century. National Day has fireworks in Victoria Harbor to celebrate the founding of the People’s Republic of China. Buddhist and Taoist temples also dot around Hong Kong where you can experience spirituality and absolute nirvana.

If you want to escape Hong Kong, there is always Macau and Shenzhen where you can experience something new altogether. Just entering Shenzhen does not require you get a visa beforehand. You can grab one at the Lo Wu border that is good for 5-days.
When I reflect on my time at Hong Kong, I at first felt alone and stressed because I did not know anyone. I then started to get to know people there and became friends with many of them, partying together and traveling together. The times together with my friends really made the most out of my experience there. My advice to you is to get out of your comfort zone and experience things you wouldn’t usually get to experience here in Vancouver. Didn’t see that food before? Try it! Never met anyone from Sweden? Chat them up! China seems awfully close from here? Go visit it! It is a never ending of firsts you could try here in Hong Kong if you choose to pursue it.