Exchange Report

Tsinghua University, China
School of Economics and Management
Spring 2016
I am writing this based on my own experience.

A semester in Tsinghua contains 16 weeks for classes and 2 weeks for exams. My semester (Spring 2016) started from Feb 22, 2016 and ended on July 15, 2016.

Preparation for exchange

Packing, what to bring

I experienced seasonal change during my stay in Beijing (since February is still very cold but started from mid-May the weather became warmer), so I brought both winter clothes and summer clothes, and also something in between. As for winter clothes, thick jacket is needed. However, like what we have in Vancouver, there are heaters indoors; so you don’t need to worry about not getting enough heat in Beijing. In Tsinghua dorms they also provide heaters in each room and you can set the temperature to whatever you feel that is the best for you.

I also suggest that you bring some medicines with you, for example, medicines for cold (since the weather is still cold for the first several months), antidiarrheal (in case you are not getting used to the foods, especially street food), painkillers and other common medicines.

Travel and transportation

I suggest that you book the flight as soon as your application is confirmed, so you have more varieties of airlines and times and the price will be cheaper.

When you arrive in Beijing, take taxi instead of other cars/vans to school, because you may have a big chance to get a black car and they may ask for higher price in the end. The estimated time from airport to Tsinghua University without traffic is 40 minutes or so and the price is around 150RMB. However, it really depends on the time. If you happen to arrive during rush hour, the traffic will be crazy.

Financial details

It’s better for you to exchange your Canadian dollar to RMB before you go to Beijing. You also need a credit card during your stay in Beijing. There are many banks in Beijing but Tsinghua will suggest you to bank with “Bank of China”. It is convenient because there are Bank of China both inside and outside (but very close to) campus.

Almost every Chinese people use WeChat in their daily life, and I highly recommend you download this app in your phone. You can also link your bank card to WeChat so you can use WeChat pay when you buy things or eat outside campus. In this way you can avoid bringing too much cash with you. The benefit of WeChat will be talked later.
During exchange

Arrival and orientation

Once you arrive in campus, you can go to zijing building 22 to register and building 19 to pay the fee for dormitory and pick up your key. Meal card can be purchased in building 15 and you can recharge your meal card there as well as in several other canteens. Remember they will charge you 20% more every time when you recharge your meal card, but if you use your student id instead, there won’t be any extra charge. However, you can’t use student id in every canteen; it is only available in a few canteens.

There will be two orientations before classes begin. The first one is for all exchange students. Contents include a welcome speech about campus life, program introduction, safety information, emergency contact, etc. There may be a second orientation which is held by your faculty, but not sure if every faculty has one. If so, that will be the fastest way for you to meet students in the same major and a good opportunity to make new friends before classes start!

Accommodation and living

Tsinghua provides accommodation to all exchange students. There are three kinds of dorm that you can choose: single room (80RMB/day), double room (also 80RMB/day but you share bathroom with another student), and AB room (40RMB/day, share facilities). You need to pay a deposit of 500RMB when you apply for it.

Some students also choose to live off campus as they think it is a better way to explore Beijing. But it is always up to you to decide. I would say that you can live on campus first, and if you don’t like it, you can move out. Tsinghua will return the money back to you (eg. You paid for 6 months but you decide to move out after 2 months, they will return the fee for 4 months to you. You will only be charged for the time you lived there).
Meals

Tsinghua University has many canteens with various favors. You need to purchase a meal card so you can use it in any canteen on campus. However, as I mentioned before, since we are exchange students, the campus charges us 20% more every time we recharge our meal card. This means if you recharge 100rmb, there is only 80rmb goes into your meal card. You can also use student id but not every canteen take it. I personally think Tsinghua canteens are really good, as price is reasonable (actually it is cheap) and food is tasty compared to other universities. Some canteens even open until late night.

Transportation inside campus

As you may know, Tsinghua University is VERY big and it may cost you at least 20 minutes walking from dorm to class. That’s why you can find MANY bikes inside campus. Almost every student in Tsinghua has a bike or motorbike. I recommend you buy one during your stay because this is another way to experience Chinese University life, which will never happen in SFU.

Academic details

You will have the chance to decide the classes that you are going to have before going to China but the list of courses may be changed/updated after you arrive. However, you still have time to review it before registering for classes. You can choose to have either English or Mandarin speaking class. My classes were all English speaking because I think it will be easier to transfer back. If you have English classes, nearly 80-90% of your classmates will be exchange students from all over the world, but if you choose Mandarin classes, your classmates will all be local students.

Class size differs from different classes. Most of my classes have 50 students per class; some classes like language classes will have smaller size – less than 20 students.

Most of the teachers allow students to use laptop to take notes, but you can also hand-write your notes. Same for assignments.

There is one thing that is different from SFU. In Tsinghua you can have classes in full semester (16 weeks), or only some weeks (eg. 12 weeks, 8 weeks). This can make your timetable more flexible and you can manage your time better, you can also take more classes under this arrangement.

The grading system is according to each faculty. Some classes have curved system, some scaled up your grade, and some do nothing. It also depends on the overall level/marks in your class.

Teachers in Tsinghua are very nice to exchange students. They normally won’t fail any one, but this doesn’t mean that you don’t need to study hard. If you have any questions about your class, you are always welcome to talk to your lecturer, or the TA. I found some TA really kind and helpful in assisting exchange students.
Country information

The weather in Beijing was much better than I thought during my stay. Sometimes we had bad weather because of the pollution, but most of the time we saw blue sky. If you are afraid of the polluted air, you can buy some masks and wear it when you go out.

Don’t drink the tap water in Beijing, they are not as clean as what we have in Canada. Also be careful with the street foods, you may feel uncomfortable after eating.

The traffic in Beijing, as I mentioned above, is crazy, especially during rush hour. For example, normally you spend 40 minutes from campus to the airport. But during rush hour, the time could be 2 hours or 3 hours. We usually take subway when we go out. Even though it is crowded, it saves you time.

Beijing has many famous attractions that you can go visit: Tiananmen Square, Temple of Heaven, Old Summer Palace, The Great Wall, Forbidden City, etc. You can find more online!
Don’t forget to leave some time to some cities nearby, such as Tianjin. It won’t take you much time, but it will be a good way to understand China more because China is a country that worth exploring!

There are some apps that I recommend. The most helpful and useful one is WeChat, which I have mentioned above. In China, people use WeChat a lot because you can do a lot of things with this app. The very basic usage is chatting with your friend; you can either talking to them privately or create a group for up to 500 people. You can also share your life with it, kind of like Facebook, but we call it moments, where you can post photos and share your thoughts. There is also a function called We Run which can count the steps you walk every day and compete with your other friends. Another useful function is WeChat pay, which you can use when paying bills. You can find out more after you download it!

Other apps that I would recommend would be 大众点评, which you can find information about food, movies, coupons etc. And 嘀嘀打车, which can help you call a taxi within a very short period of time. And also some food delivery apps.
Reflection after exchange

Although I felt a bit lonely in the beginning because of the long distance between me and my family and friends, I did enjoy my exchange life in Beijing in the end and I would never regret having this experience. I met many friends there and we had so much fun in just one semester. I learned to be open-minded to everything and to embrace different cultures. As an exchange student, you will encounter different people from all over the world; it is a very good opportunity to be connected to this university-sized global world. My exchange experience enriched me a lot and made me see my strengths and weaknesses clearer than before. After this term I found myself more willing to face and deal with the difficulties that occurred in my life, and more open to more possibilities.
Apart from studying, I also joined some clubs and went on several trips with my new friends. The one club that I will recommend is “SAEPA”, which is a volunteering club. They provide many opportunities to go to rural China to do the volunteering teaching in either primary schools or middle/high schools. I highly recommend this because you will never have this kind of opportunity when you are in Canada, and you can get to know China better in this way. You will know that there are still some people in China, or in this world, living in such poor conditions and don’t have good education quality; you can help them, encourage them and inspire them to be positive and working even harder to get themselves a better life. Of course there are also many other clubs that Tsinghua provides and you can feel free to join more than one club.

One thing that I realized during my exchange was to try new things. We go to a different country to learn and to explore, not only in class but also outside school. Image this is the only chance for you to stay in this country for several months, why not experiencing everything that have never happened in your life before (like the volunteering teaching I mentioned above) – because this is more valuable than your grades!

Some tips I would give during your stay:

1. Make as many friends as you can, especially from countries other than Canada and China! I made some friends from Korea, Japan, Australia, Spain, etc. You can learn a lot from your conversation, and you will always find it interesting when several different cultures are encountering!
2. Go to 蒙民伟音乐厅 or 新清华学堂 at least once for a performance, a show, or a movie!
3. Go to a conference or a speech that is offered by your department or the university. As considered the best university in China, Tsinghua can always invite many professionals or experts in certain fields to give a speech to the students. Don’t miss it if you have the chance!
4. Give yourself one day to explore Tsinghua campus and take some pictures!

5. Don’t forget to visit those must-visit places in Beijing before leaving!

Some tips I would give before you leave Beijing:

1. Request your transcript in teaching building three if you can (because sometimes students leave before the transcript is available). Tsinghua will mail the official transcript to SFU several months later but that one is only reachable for SFU; if you want to keep one yourself, either as souvenir or in case you will need it in the future, don’t forget to request one before you leave. You can request transcript both in Mandarin and English.

2. Make sure you have done everything you need to before you leave such as the check-out process of dormitory and cancel your bank card if you don’t need it anymore. It is not necessary to return your meal card and student id, so you can keep them as a memory.