My decision to go on exchange was totally spontaneous, and under-thought. I started studying Chinese Fall 2005, partially because I was planning on traveling to China with a friend. I wanted a break from the ordinary, and to widen my perspective before I finalized my academic path. Our travel plans fell through around the same time that an SFU International representative came to speak in one of my classes, and I thought 'hey, no harm in applying' - I could go to China AND continue my studies! I am a Canadian Studies student, hoping to get an extended minor in Asia-Canada studies. My career plan was still unclear to me, I only knew that improving my Chinese would surely prove beneficial. And so I filled out all of the required forms, and waited for the day, when those at SFU International were to tell me YES or NO. I was given a choice between two Universities in China. I was in such shock, overcome with excitement, that I just asked the staff in the office which of the two they would recommend, and they said "Jilin University". "Okay", I said. I have no regrets, but if you don't like the cold weather, Jilin University may not be the best choice for you!

Preparing for departure was exciting and busy! First step, passport. Then, visa. Both documents were painless to obtain, but in case of delays it's best to get them out of the way as soon as possible. China requires proof of good health, and so a physical examination is required, along with all of the medical documents. It's called the PHYSICAL EXAMINATION RECORD FOR FOREIGNERS, and you can just print a form off the internet and bring it to your family physician.

Jilin University is in the city of Changchun, in the North East of China. It's one of the biggest universities in China I'm told, and there are lots of International students. Changchun is about 8 train hours northeast of Beijing, and has an airport. Flying right to Changchun is common, but if you'd like to train from Beijing, it's a great experience. I spent two nights in Beijing before heading off to Changchun. To take a taxi from the Beijing Airport to the city center should cost no more than 120RMB (about $20CDN), however many foreigners, myself included, end up paying four times more just out of ignorance. The first price in China is always at least three times higher than the reasonable price, so try to bargain as much as your Chinese will allow. Buying train tickets in China is a challenge! If you are a beginner with the language, it's best to buy through a hostel or hotel, most of which offer such a service. There are 'hard' and 'soft', seats and beds. For a trip eight hours or more, I would highly recommend a bed. The trains are really crowded, like everything else in China, and sitting is really uncomfortable for long trips. Depending on the type of person you are, a 'hard sleeper' is fine; the bed is small, with little head room, but it's sufficient for sleeping the night away.
Changchun

Once in Changchun, I was greeted at the railway station by an English-speaking teacher from the University. The first few days were frustrating, because you are left to figure everything out for yourself. There was no orientation, and none of the workers in our dormitory/hotel could speak English. The first few days before school begin give a great opportunity to meet the other students, and get to know campus. There are two different campuses for foreign students. I stayed at Nanhu Huiguan, South Lake Hotel, where all beginner students both study and live. There is another campus for the more advanced language students, and those studying majors or masters. Of the two, the hotel I lived in was much more comfortable. I had requested a single room, but learnt that it is a rare luxury I was not graced with. There are two people in each room, with a TV, phone, desks, internet access for a small monthly fee, and a bathroom with a shower. Each floor has a shared kitchen, which the staff keeps clean at all times, and a washing machine. There is a very small fitness room and a ping pong room. There's a restaurant in the hotel, near-by internet access, and convenient stores all over campus where you can buy anything you need.

Life on campus is not only convenient, but also a great opportunity to make friends. However, if you are serious about learning Chinese as quickly as possible, living off of campus is the best method. Each month in the hotel costs about 750RMB(approx.$150CDN) rent, which is actually quite expensive for Changchun. Living off campus could be almost half the price of that in dorms, if you know how to bargain and live with others. Talk to
locals, and make friends that have been in China for a longer time, and then they can help you if you want to move. As for the roommate situation, the hotel staff is very flexible if later on you want to switch rooms, or move in with a friend. It is possible to spend very little money in Changchun, but of course, there are places to spend lots if you've got it. Most Western restaurants/shops are pricier than the others. There are two Wal Marts in Changchun, Pizza Hut, KFCs, and Western-influenced restaurants all over the city. I was a little disappointed to see so many McDonalds in a place so far from home, but some comfort-food is a blessing when your stomach is disagreeing with the new food, which it certainly will!

Initially, I was concerned about my language level; I had completed CHIN101, but without excelling, and so thought that I would be behind. However, there were many students who could only say 'hello' and 'thank you'. There are classes available for all levels of students. School is Monday thru Friday, from 8am to 11:20am. The teachers are very kind, and school is fun. The Chinese are very competitive, and love to bring singing and dancing into the classroom. If you have a small musical instrument, it would defiantly come in handy if you brought it. There are large events planned for foreign students, where classes perform songs or dances, or where each culture makes food or shows their traditional clothes, music, etc. Bring something 'Canadian'; photos from home, little souvenirs, your favourite CD's...all would be great to bring along as people are so eager to hear all about your culture. Before you leave, try to decide for yourself what it means to be Canadian. Remember that you will be living in a dormitory with students from all over the world, most of whom are extremely intelligent. For your own pride, and for Canada's reputation, I think it would be worthwhile to brush up on geography, world history, and current events as much as possible; the more you can contribute to the stimulating environment the better!

I would love to have some words of precaution, but the truth is that China was so much more amazing to me than I could have imagined. The people are amazingly friendly, the food is fabulous, the language is interesting...I could go on and on. But I won't. Go for yourself! Have no fear, just keep a positive outlook and cherish it while it lasts. Some advice:

* **Pack lightly**, even if your flight allows you to bring lots. Chinese goods can be up to ten times cheaper than here in Canada. You can buy winter cloths, boots (unless your feet are really big), and anything else. The extra room in your suitcase will fill up quickly with gifts and memorabilia.

* **If you're a girl**; have a good supply of bras, for even the largest size I could find was much too small, and I'm only average sized. Tampons are almost impossible to find, so stock-up if you need them. Good hair conditioner and antiperspirant are also few and far between, so pack what you'll need. Hair dryers/straighteners are forbidden on campus, so no use in bringing them.

* **Your cell phone won't work in China.** All rooms have a phone, but almost everyone has a mobile, and I couldn't imagine being without one. You can buy one for relatively inexpensive, and they read and write Chinese characters, which is good practice.
If you’re all about the good night life, consider studying elsewhere! It’s not horrible, there are a few nice places, but in general Changchun is quite boring as far as night-life goes. But, we all know that these exchanges are about studying, not having a good time...but I’m warning you, the fun will hunt you down sooner or later. There’s no escaping it.

China is developing so fast it's difficult to fathom. It's a really special time for the Chinese, and there is a world of opportunities there for native English speakers. Don't let the mystery scare you, you'll love it. China is not what it was ten years ago. It's modern, it's free, it's international!

This exchange was one of the best experiences in my life. I've made friends from all over the world. I can go to Chinatown and bargain in Chinese. I understand what it means to be Canadian, and how the world sees us. I've got gorgeous photos, interesting stories, and memories of gold. GOOD LUCK!