Exchange Report: Spring 2012- Hong Kong Baptist University

The first time I received information about my nomination to participate in the exchange studies program in Hong Kong, I was stunned. The first time the package from Fed-Ex was delivered to my front door, I was overjoyed. Needless to say I was rather overzealous when I tore apart the package and read every single detail in my information package. Being able to go on exchange was something I had dreamt and planned to do ever since I began university three years ago. Earlier that year, I had a visitation with my Communications academic advisor who informed me that due to the large amount of students applying for exchange for the spring semester, Hong Kong Baptist University only had two available spots for incoming students. Attending HKBU was always a desire for me because the school not only boasts an outstanding Communications program, but also because my friend who studied there before praised the staff, student life and classes at the university. Initially I was worried about having only two remaining spots; I had faith in my God that I would be given this amazing opportunity to study abroad. The spring of 2012, I packed my bags and embarked on a journey overseas that would be life changing to me.

Before I flew halfway around the world, I first had to mentally, physically and emotionally prepare myself from this trip. My first line of action was to inform all my family and friends in Vancouver about my good news. While most of my immediate family lives in Vancouver with me, my relatives, older sister as well as my grandmother lives in Hong Kong. My mom therefore convinced me to stay and live at my grandmother’s house in the city instead of joining the student residential program. Although I was hesitant at first, I could sense that she really wanted me to spend some time with my grandmother since I have never had a close relationship with her. I eventually agreed. It was actually a relief to not worry about my accommodations in Hong Kong, and also meant the trip overseas would cost less for my parents. For this reason, I recommend that future exchange students to also look for friends or family that they could stay with if possible. At the same time, residential life is also unique and a great experience to meet people; whatever you decide on, just make sure that the decision is something you would feel happiest and most comfortable with. In my case, I believe the time I spent with my grandmother helped me to connect and develop a new relationship with her.

Often people will ask me how long it takes for me to pack my bags for a vacation. I normally respond that it takes me about 3 hours to be completely ready; however, these trips usually last no longer than two weeks. It was somewhat daunting to me that going on exchange meant living in a
new city for almost six months! For someone who enjoys assembling different outfits each day, it was going to be difficult to select only a few pieces of clothing to bring with me on this trip. In the end, I brought more than I needed. However, from my lesson, I realized that when you pack for a trip, you should only ever bring half of the things you first intend on packing. For future exchange studies going to Hong Kong, two jackets are sufficient since the weather will get warm very quickly. Keep in mind that jackets can take a lot of space and weight in your luggage, so try to wear one on the plane and take one in the bag. However, if you go in the winter like I did, Hong Kong can still feel quite cold and windy, therefore I would recommend packing a knit hat or scarf as well. Another lesson I learned in Hong Kong is that shopping is limitless. Since this is the case, even if you run out of socks, shirts or even underwear, you can turn a street corner and buy yourself a new outfit for less than $20 CAD. To summarize, when packing for your trip, choose a few staples like shirts, a pair of jeans, and two pairs of shoes (runners and causal wear); during your stay, buy appropriate clothes according to how hot/cold the weather is. It is also useful to check how the weather is and will be in the next months you are there. Finally, although you may not have a lot of bring, try to start assembling your suitcase a week before you leave, so that you will not forget any small details such as your camera, your battery charger and your laptop cable.

One of the main reasons I chose to study in Hong Kong is because I have a Hong Kong citizenship. This means that I did not need to deal with applying for travelling visas, or worry about verifying regulations with the Embassy. Also, as I mentioned earlier, I stayed at my grandmother’s house instead of living in dorms and thus food and accommodations were accounted for! Although my grandmother normally made dinner for us at home, we occasionally ate out at restaurants as well. If there is one thing Hong Kong is known for aside from its shopping, it’s the food! The variety of food in this city is so exquisite I am certain it will satisfy any picky appetite. It is also worthwhile for incoming students to go online to trip advisor or Hong Kong’s very own “urbanspoon” website called openrice.com. The website offers many recommendations as well as allows individuals to find specific restaurants, meal types, fine dining choices and my personal favorite: local cuisine! Eating out in Hong Kong is inexpensive and a lunch is less than $10 CAD while dinner tends to be a little higher. There are also higher end and gourmet restaurants that will be more expensive. Aside from bringing enough money for food, you will also need some money for travelling around the city either by taxi, bus, MTR subways or the ferry. I recommend that any exchange student coming to Hong Kong to purchase a student Octopus card. This card allows you to put in money which you can then spend like a debit card (it simply deducts money every time you use it); the best part is that this card can be used to pay at restaurants and convenience stores.

While you are living in Hong Kong, there are two simple and local experiences you must try. First, you must ride the Star Ferry which takes you from Kowloon towards Hong Kong Island. The trip is around 15 minutes and is incredibly relaxing. Second, all visitors must enjoy a freshly baked egg tart and a steaming cup of coffee made with condensed milk at the local “cha-canting” restaurants. It is certainly something you do not want to miss out!

By far the best experience I had while living in Hong Kong was celebrating the Lunar Chinese New Year. Having been raised in Canada, the biggest celebration of the year is most likely Christmas.
Holiday jingles, sparkling lights and tall green trees are all memories of my past Christmases. No doubt the Christmas season is important to many people living in Canada, but little did I expect to see people in Hong Kong have a holiday tradition that was bigger—and better. The first day of the New Year is in early February, but the celebration and the festivities start weeks in advance. As soon as you enter the malls, you would see streamers of red and gold while store windows will be filled with posters of well wishes and blessings. When you go up to the cash register, you will notice a big bowl of candies and coin-wrapped chocolates. Don’t forget to take one—it’s for good luck! On top of everything, the highlights of this holiday are the night markets that are hosted for an entire week before the actual New Year begins. Almost every major area in Hong Kong has a night market and you will find people selling items from flowers to lanterns, from stuffed toys to hot soymilk. Though my grandmother had warned me that there would be a lot of people at these events, I was extremely excited to join the crowds and commotion. In total, I went to two night markets which offered me a unique and special experience each time. One common element at the fairs was that every person showed that they were having a genuinely great time. At night on the first day of New Year, my family and I gathered around and enjoyed a large dinner together. It was wonderful company and I am truly grateful for them and this experience in Hong Kong.

Before leaving in December 2011, I was nervous and excited about going on my exchange studies. I was also worried about how I would feel about leaving Vancouver for half a year, which is the longest time I have been away from home. Six months later, I am sitting at home with my laptop on my bed. As I scroll through each photo that I took during my trip, I am amazed at how quickly time has gone by. There is no doubt that going on exchange was a life changing experience for me, especially since it meant getting to know my family even more. I also developed new insights about myself that were never obvious to me. I appreciate all the people who supported me when I was struggling at school or feeling homesick. Overall the trip was memorable, enjoyable and probably too short. If given the opportunity, I recommend that every student should go on exchange at least once during their time in university. Not only is the exchange program a great way to learn from new teachers and meet new people, but it is an opportunity to discover more about your independence and perspective in life.