Exchange Report
Chinese University of Hong Kong
Summer 2012
My exchange took place at the Chinese University of Hong Kong during the summer semester of 2012. Although my major is Interactive Arts and Technology at SFU, I chose to study Chinese Culture and Society as an elective. The course was during their International Summer School, a condensed 6 week program for international students with all but one class taught in English. As it was only 6 weeks, there was plenty of time to make other plans over summer.

In terms of preparation, there wasn’t too much for me to do as I have a Hong Kong Identity Card meaning that I didn’t have to apply for a visa or do any extra paperwork in order to study at CUHK. After being nominated for exchange, I attended the information sessions where the advisors discussed what our next steps were. It definitely helped to give a general overview of what was to be expected in the run-up to my exchange. In addition to attending the information session to learn more, going to see the advisors during their drop-in ours also helped significantly.

I arrived in Hong Kong a month before the program started and spent most of the time with relatives. Originally, my parents were going to set up a bank account for me in Hong Kong but they eventually decided to let me use their bank account instead. From what I recall, in order to set up my own bank account, I needed to show them my Hong Kong Identity Card and another piece of identity showing my citizenship. It definitely helped to have my parents there asking all the questions since I wouldn’t have been able to communicate well with the account manager. Most places in Hong Kong are cash only so it is definitely advisable to bring cash with you. There are many places that exchange different currencies but the one I went to was in one of the plazas connected to the Sha Tin New Town Plaza.

Thankfully, my relatives offered to drive all my stuff to the campus when it came time to move into the dormitory. Many of the other students either taxied from the airport or took public transport. Some of the students arranged to share taxis prior to their arrival in Hong Kong through our Facebook group which was set up by CUHK. The Facebook group provided an environment in which all the international students and some local students could get a chance to meet each other informally online and get to know each other even before arriving in Hong Kong. The group was useful because the hosts often posted important updates for the students to read.

There were different dormitory buildings on the CUHK campus and I was put into Grace Tien. Each room had 2 people and there were about 30 rooms on each floor. There were 2 bathrooms on each floor with 6 shower stalls between the two. My dorm building was one of the older ones and it wasn’t the cleanest. People were getting bitten during the night and there were bugs in the bathrooms. Into the second week, there were ants in my dorm so I moved out and stayed at my relative’s for the remainder of the program.

Over the course of the program, there were events and activities organized by the university. Our first event was orientation which was held on campus and was essentially an introduction to the school and the program. The second part of orientation was a welcoming dinner held at a fancy restaurant off campus in which the school organized transportation for us. Most of the activities that the school organized included transportation, except for the trip to Ocean Park where they didn’t include transportation back.
Every Saturday had a cultural tour organized by the school which were optional to attend. If a student wished to skip out on a cultural tour, all they had to do was email the coordinator just so that the coordinator knew how many coaches were needed. Most of the tours that were offered were to places which would have been out of the way by transit. I found the first tour less exciting than the rest, just because it was touring Hong Kong and going to places that were accessible by transit. The photos below were taken during the cultural tours.

Getting around Hong Kong was very easy using the octopus card to board the MTR and buses. Transit was very frequent and ran late into the night. The major issue was getting back to campus because the shuttle bus back to the dorms finished at 11:30pm so if you wanted to get back later than that, you either had to hike up to the dorm (which would have taken at least 30 minutes for the Grace Tien dormitory) or take a taxi from the MTR station (which cost about $30hkd). It would be advisable to take a photo of the name of your dorm/college that you’re staying at in case you need to show it to a taxi driver. The weather during summer was hot and humid. It got progressively hotter as the program went into July and every time you stepped out the door, you ended up wet with sweat. Most places in Hong Kong
have air conditioning but places which don’t are often unbearably hot. If the sun came out, it got even hotter and sun screen was necessary for long outings because the UV rays were really strong. Throughout my stay in Hong Kong, I went through 3 typhoons which consisted of heavy rain and strong wind. With a level 8 or higher, transit was stopped and classes were cancelled.

The general culture of Hong Kong seems to enjoy doing things later in the day than a Canadian would be accustomed to. Most of the shops open later than in Canada, and close much later. If it weren’t for the shuttle bus closing so early in the night, my friends and I could have stayed out a lot later. Most of our time was spent either at Sha Tin New Town Plaza, which was only a few stops away on the MTR, or at Mong Kok, where everything stayed open really late and there was more to do there.

Classes at CUHK ran for 3 hours and they met 3 times a week (except for the language courses). Most classes were taught in English, with the exception of the Chinese Medicine class. Our course load was fair for the amount of time we were given. In my course, we had participation marks, a midterm, and a final. There wasn’t too much reading involved and since our class had no assignments, we were quite free.

Before going on exchange, I had been to Hong Kong many times but the longest I had stayed was for 2 weeks and I had always been with at least one parent. Having spent 10 weeks overall in Hong Kong and 8 weeks without my parents, I definitely experienced a new side to Hong Kong. When my parents first left, I felt very out of place and uncomfortable because I couldn’t communicate with my own relatives, let alone other people. However, I slowly gained confidence in my ability to speak Cantonese and by the end of my 10 weeks, I felt really proud of how far I had come.

In terms of the exchange itself, I can’t stress how important it is to mingle with the other students because you can expand your network into countries that you may never have been to. Some of the friends I met are from Singapore, England, and the States and we all still keep in contact. I think it’s important to keep those friendships alive because it’s something that only these people have experienced with you and if you were to reminisce in the future, you can talk to them about it. My group of friends became such good friends that we’re planning to at least do a 5 year reunion with everyone, while also hoping for smaller reunions before then.

Exchange definitely changed my life and it was an experience that I’m going to remember as one of the best periods of my life.