As a third year student doing a double major in International Studies & Psychology, I embarked on a journey to Hong Kong Baptist University in Hong Kong for the spring 2014 semester.

**Preparation**

When it came to preparing for the exchange, it’s never too early to start. There are many things that go into the preparation stage of an exchange (e.g. research, required documents, flights etc.) and the earlier you start the better. For me, I think the most helpful resource were the advisors at the ISS office. If you are ever stuck throughout your preparation (or at any point of your exchange) for your own exchange, I would definitely recommend talking to one of the advisors at the office or emailing them.

I booked my flight in advanced, but because I didn’t go directly to Hong Kong from Vancouver (went to South Korea for a few weeks before), I’m not too sure on the price from Vancouver to Hong Kong. But my flight was around $1350 round trip from Vancouver – South Korea – Hong Kong through Korean Air.

When it came to Hong Kong, I found it more useful to have cash on hand because although Hong Kong is well known for its physical exterior of high end brands and a major centre for businesses and shops, to experience the authenticity of Hong Kong such as their Cha Chaan Tengs (tea restaurant), wet markets, street markets and etc. having cash is definitely the most useful. In addition, most locals use an Octopus card which acts like a bus card and cash card and it is almost accepted as payment everywhere. The only time I really used my credit card was when I was booking flights outside of Hong Kong and using it in those countries. The cost of living is definitely lower than in Vancouver. Hong Kong is well known for being a dense city and its unbelievable housing prices because of the limited land that they have compared to the amount of people living in the city (7 million people!) but in regards to eating, shopping, and etc. in the city, spending money is relatively lower compared to Vancouver. During my exchange period, $1 CAD was about $7 HKD.

**During the Exchange**
I arrived in Hong Kong a few days before the New Year, and everything went really smoothly because I have family in Hong Kong so they were able to pick me up at the airport. From the beginning I chose to live with my family instead of the dorms at school. For me, I lost my grandmother a few years ago, and so it was really important to me to be able to spend time with my relatives that I rarely see. I knew it wouldn’t be the same as staying in the dorms with the other exchange students, but I was ok with it because there were plenty of opportunities to meet both exchange and local students through events put on by the international office at HKBU and in classes as well. Despite living off campus, I was able to make many close friends still!

Orientation

Touristy picture in Macau

When it comes to the academic details at HKBU, many things are relatively similar to SFU. This includes lecture format, grading and schedules. However, I did find that there were some notable differences. There is definitely more emphasis on group work, participation and attendance. These things are weighted more on the makeup for our grade than what we would have at SFU. The class sizes were smaller than SFU and lectures and classes were conducted more in a tutorial kind of setting as compared to the big lecture rooms at SFU.

During the time that I went to Hong Kong (January – June), the weather was relatively warm, humid and sticky. When I first arrived and walked outside of the airport, I was greeted by
the poor air quality. Coming from the clean air of Vancouver, it was a huge contrast. It may be too overwhelming at first, but the air quality depends on each day and sooner or later you will get used to it. It is very common to see local people wearing masks if they are sick or to protect themselves from the air quality of the city. When it comes to packing clothes, I would suggest to bring a lot of spring/summer clothes because that is what I basically wore for most of my time in Hong Kong. There were a couple of weeks where there was a lot of rain and rainstorms, so it would be a good idea to bring a waterproof jacket/windbreaker as well.

Hong Kong is a city where at every corner, there is always something to do. I think the places that I visited that are my favourites and must visits includes: Victoria Peak (during the day and during the night), Victoria Harbour, Avenue of Stars, Sai Kung, Dragon’s Back, Tai Mei Duk, Mong Kok, and Sham Shui Po. Some of these places (Mong Kok and Sham Shui Po) really reflects the daily lives of the local Hong Kong people, and being able to experience it first hand was an amazing feeling.

Reflection after Exchange

Going on exchange definitely opened up my eyes and I was able to learn a lot of new things: how to live in a completely different environment, how to navigate around unfamiliar surroundings, how to fit in to the local make up of the city, how to make friends from all over the world and most importantly how to be open to new and exciting experiences.

I think the most difficult challenge I went through was culture shock. Although I didn’t experience it right away when I arrived, I did experience it about a month or two into the exchange. It was a difficult experience because at the time, I didn’t know that I was going through culture shock and I couldn’t really help my feelings as I felt bored, homesick and lonesome even though there were things to do and many people to hang out with. However, after a few days I was able to snap out of it and I realized everyone goes through a phase like this during their exchange. During your own exchange, you will probably have a phase like this too,
but being able to realize that you are going through culture shock is key and that it will eventually pass.

The one thing that I wish I knew before I left is how much I would come to love Hong Kong and the whole exchange experience. I was able to travel a lot and experience a lot of the surrounding countries as well. I thought that one semester would be enough for me but after going through the whole experience, I think I would have done a 1 year exchange instead because time does fly when you’re having the time of your life. Also, I realized that the destination doesn’t really matter and what really matters is the whole experience itself and everything will naturally fall into place.

Some words of wisdom for future exchange students: Plan early, be open to new experiences (don’t be afraid to try new things), know the signs of culture shock, travel, have fun and make the most of your exchange!

Night view from Victoria Peak