

The Chinese University of Hong Kong – My best experience so far

B.Sc. Physics (5th semester)

Introduction

In this document, I will guide you through my wonderful time at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Living in a vibrant city such as Hong Kong was the most amazing experience I have had in my life so far. I was able to discover Physics from another point of view, and had a chance to truly discover Asia. On top of that, I made local and international friends, and lived the most crazy adventures. The protests of Hong Kong obviously affected my exchange, but made it, in my opinion, an even more interesting experience. Please keep on reading, if you think you are ready for such an experience. Let's start with my personal highlights:

Top 3 Highlights

University Campus:

1. Accommodation on campus is included for everyone so no need to stress about finding housing in the city with the biggest housing crisis of the world. This also means all your friends will live close to you!
2. The campus is a huge green hub located on a mountain outside of the city centre. The perfect place to escape the noise and stress of the city.
3. The 30 different canteens on campus offer you a great variety of food for a very good price around 3.50 euros.

The city

1. The city itself: an amazing skyline to be admired from rooftops or the avenue of stars and the different neighbourhoods that each have a very distinct vibe.
2. Hong Kong offers so much more than only skyscrapers. With its islands, beaches, national parks and wonderful hikes you can easily get amazed by the beauty of Asian nature.
3. The variety of activities in the city centre: museums, temples, markets, festivals, malls, restaurants, bars, shopping,... You will not have enough time to discover it all!

Highlights of student life

1. Made friends from all over the world
2. The work life balance is great
3. I am not going to lie: the night life is really amazing. You can go to horserace's, neighbourhoods like LKF and Wan Chai or go to Mister Wong with unlimited food and beer for around 9 euro's

Academic benefits

1. The classes were small, which led to more interaction and discussion. This significantly improved my understanding in Physics

2. I was able to pursue my compulsory courses imposed by the University of Heidelberg, and did not “lose” a semester (an exchange will always only make you benefit, even if it means, that you’ll have to extend your studies!)
3. Teachers were extremely helpful and motivated to convey quality content. I took solid state Physics with Prof. Swee K. Goh, who has obtained a prize for his outstanding teaching skills. It was indeed the case!

Personal benefits

1. I learned to appreciate living with limited space (rooms were shared by two people in 15 people apartments)
2. The protests helped me put things in perspective, live more in the moment without always planning ahead and to understand political partition
3. I was able to travel around Asia, see some of the most beautiful places on earth but also some of the poorest people of the planet

Special notes about the protests

In August 2019, protests and riots have rose in Hong Kong, leading to clashed between police and citizens. It started with the acceptance of the extradition bill which would allow the extradition of criminal fugitives to mainland China. Hong Kong residents would therefore become subject to China’s legal system which would undermine Hong Kong’s autonomy. Hong Kongese made five demands, which I would recommend you to google, as this report will otherwise become extremely long. In November 2019, violent clashes between police and protesters happened at several universities, including CUHK. Consequently, the remaining semester was called off and classes moved online.

Many people have asked me if I felt safe during those. I did not accept this offered as I have always felt safe in the city. Protesters and police will not target foreign people and when you use your common sense nothing will happen to you. I am not going to lie about it, I did have some friends that got teargassed while being at the wrong place at the wrong time. This is obviously not a fun experience but is also the worst that could happen to you as an exchange student. I do not think we exchange students have the right to complain about the situation as this is about the people of Hong Kong and not about us not being able to go to a party we planned to go to. The protests affected me mostly in transportation as the metro often stopped working or closed earlier. In addition, it required me to become more flexible as sometimes my plans got cancelled last minute, as the area one plans to go to can become a centre of a protest. The fact that the semester ended so abruptly made it of course a different experience than expected at first but all in all I think experiencing the protests of Hong Kong was one of the most valuable lessons of my life. If you were wondering whether it would still be safe for you to go to Hong Kong, I would generally say yes. However, I cannot predict how the situation will evaluate and how intense the clashes will be at the time you would like to go to Hong Kong. With some strong common sense, an application with life updates on the news and closed MTR stations and some flexibility you are equipped to make the best of your time in the beautiful city of Hong Kong. Do keep in mind that your exchange can turn out a bit differently than you initially expected but do not let this stop you from applying to Hong Kong. It will make you enjoy every moment of this crazy city even more.

Chapter 1: The University

The Chinese University of Hong Kong is one of the three best universities in the city together with the University of Hong Kong (HKU) and the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST). It is also the second oldest university of Hong Kong and the only one that works with a college system. This means that every student will be affiliated with and live in one of the nine different colleges. In addition, there are eight different faculties. CUHK also has the biggest campus of the city with over 30 canteens, around 10 sports centres, an outdoor swimming pool, a super market, a bar, a rooftop and way more. My first impression was that the university is massive. It lies on a hill and as the weather is so hot, you will be dependent on one of the eight bus lines on campus. I have to admit that the busses are really confusing at first and that the chances of getting lost are high. However, you can always ask help of the local students. They are very shy but will always try to help you. In general, the Hong Kongese will not approach you and you will need to make the effort to talk to them which can be frustrating sometimes. Students at CUHK study have a really competitive mindset and study extremely hard. You can see people coming with their sleeping bags to the library. Even if making local friends proved itself to be quite challenging, it wasn't impossible, and I would encourage you to try.

Application process

You will receive a first email from CUHK around the end of February where they will ask you to log in on the IASP (International Asian Study Programme) website. There you will need to fill in an online application with general information

Everything is really straightforward and well explained on the website. In March you will need to send the following documents:

- Official transcripts from all the institutions you have attended
- A photocopy of the identification and particulars page of your passport
- Print out of your completed online application form
- Completed application record sheet (signed by international office)
- Proof of English proficiency: IELTS or TOEFL or proof from the University

Once again everything is really clear. By the end of May, you will receive your application result and can start the visa application. You will need to fill in quite some documents but a lot of guidance is provided. The most complicated thing to get is a financial statement from your bank that proves you have more than 3000 euros on your account. Afterwards you will need to send those documents to the University in Hong Kong by post. Mid-July you will need to send a preliminary course schedule, however you can still change all your courses once you are in Hong Kong during the add on/ drop period. Mid-August you will receive information on the college you have been affiliated with. I experienced the application process as very clear but also quite stressful because you need to gather many documents and certainly to send out the parcel you have limited time. If you have any questions do not hesitate to send out an email to the i-Centre, Office of Academic Links (their email addresses will appear in the emails). OAL is really helpful and replies really quickly.

Accommodation

Regarding the accommodation, you have to choose between three options in the online application form. The options are (1) i-house, (2) college hostel without meals (3) college hostel with meals. I personally chose for the college hostel without a meal plan and was assigned to United college. I ended up living in i-house, one of the newer buildings solely for international students. On one hand, it was very practical for meeting the other exchange students, and it often was the spot, where everyone met. However, this also meant that contact with local students was more restricted. I-house has apartment flats shared by 15 people. Each room is shared by two or three students. There are two bathrooms and a kitchen per flat. In general, not many people truly cook, as grocery shopping is often more expensive than eating out. If you choose for the meal-plan you will have mandatory dinners with your college which can be a great way to get to know more local students but also leads to less flexibility in your plans. I did not choose that option because I knew I wanted to travel a lot and discover the most of Hong Kong possible.

Services and facilities for exchange students

As I mentioned before, CUHK has the biggest campus in Hong Kong and therefore offers a lot of facilities. There is a big library that is open 24/7 and more study centres on campus. Every college also has its own study rooms so no stress about finding a space to study! In addition, every college has a small gym and there is also one big gym for all the students. There is an outdoor swimming pool, an athletics field, tennis and squash courts and way more sports facilities. You can also join a local sports team. There are more than 30 canteens on campus mostly providing Cantonese/Chinese food but there is also a vegetarian canteen, a Japanese canteen, a canteen with Western food, one with Turkish food and way more. Every canteen has its speciality, which you will surely discover after a while. In addition, there is a doctor on campus and a supermarket. There is also a MTR (metro) stop on campus which can bring you easily to all places in the city.

Activities organised for exchange students

Starting around the 28th of August, there is an orientation week on campus which consists of a campus tour, a Cantonese class and some information sessions. This orientation week is also a great way to get to know other exchange students. The university also organizes a buddy programme for which I applied, but unfortunately I never heard anything from my buddy. During the orientation week, there was also college time organized to get to know all the students that belong to your college. A few weeks later a day trip was organized by the international office for all the exchange students, that took us to the most famous places in Hong Kong, such as the Victoria peak and Stanley market. It gives a bit of a high school trip vibe but is very fun. The international office also organizes activities every week, so make sure to sign up for them at the office itself. These activities include cooking classes, trips and martial arts classes. During the whole semester, you can also sign up for free lunches and dinners with your own or another college.

Chapter 2: Courses

As mentioned before, you will receive an email in July with the request to create your preliminary course schedule. On the website of the University you will be able to see when exactly a particular course takes place and when the examination is. It might take some time to create a nice schedule with the courses you want but take it seriously as it will reduce your

stress during the add on/ drop off period beginning of September. I managed to schedule all my courses between Monday and Wednesday, which meant I had a four day weekend to travel and discover the city. My advice would also be to apply for more courses during the preliminary course schedule as it is easier to drop than to add a course. Popular courses were not easy to enter, so make sure to choose alternatives.

Physics education

I am not sure, whether the level of Physics courses is higher or lower than in Heidelberg. In Physics, I chose solid state Physics, a mandatory course in Heidelberg and at CUHK, as well as Basic Computational Physics. In general, students were better cared for, and didactical strategies were more emphasised than in Heidelberg. On the other hand, courses at CUHK reminded me of my time at school with graded assignments and (sometimes – I only heard this from other students, and it wasn't the case for me) mandatory presence.

Solid state Physics

As I mentioned before, Prof. Swee K Goh has won a prize for his outstanding teaching skills, and I can only confirm this. I enjoyed this lecture very much, as we were at most 15 people. This amazed me, as solid-state Physics was part of the standard curriculum. You could feel Swee's fascination for the subject, and he taught in a very charismatic and didactic way. Classes were held in a quite intimate fashion, and I felt more encouraged to discuss topics and ask questions than in Heidelberg's 350 people lecture room. Assignments had to be turned in every week, which were taken into account for your final grade. The exercises were very thought through and strategically well chosen to emphasise your understanding of the topic. My only critique is the competitiveness between Physics students, which I have never felt in Heidelberg. Students all solved their assignments individually, occasionally asking questions in their whatsapp group. In the beginning, I tried to make contact with the other Physics students, and to organise joint study sessions. However, I quickly felt, that they were not willing to do so. I am not sure, if they felt intimidated by me being an exchange student, or if there was any other reason. In general, making contact felt very tedious, and I ended up studying by myself.

Basic computational Physics

This course was mainly taken by younger students, who were at the beginning of their studies. The level was quite low, and the pace slow. However, as I had never done any programming before, it was just right for me. Teachers were extremely helpful and caring, and did their best to pass on their knowledge in an understandable fashion. Therefore, I felt very much like in school. It was an overall fun course with assignments as well.

Other faculties

CUHK is especially known for business and finance. Therefore, I tried to apply for several courses in this domain. However, I did not manage to enrol, as those courses were too popular. However, if you get the opportunity, I would strongly recommend it, especially if you are studying natural sciences. In the end, I opted for Spanish, as I knew, that I would continue it in Heidelberg. CUHK also proposes Chinese and Cantonese courses. However, even beginner's levels were very demanding. It would

definitely be a good idea give them a try. Though you will need to put some effort into them, as they will otherwise be completely useless. Chinese and Cantonese are difficult to learn!

Chapter 3: Practical Information

Insurance and Visa

The visa process is taken care of by the University. You only need to fill in some documents and add a passport picture. The steps you should take will become clear in May when you will receive an email regarding your visa application. Once ready, the visa will be sent to your home address. Mine arrived mid-July so keep this in mind if you are already planning on travelling before your exchange. If this is the case you can ask to send the visa to the International office on campus. It is also important to keep in mind that the visa does not work for China. If you would like to visit China you can go to one of the many centres in Hong Kong that help you apply for a Chinese visa. Personally, I used the transfer visa to travel to Shanghai. It enables you to visit the city for five days and can also be used in other big cities in China such as Beijing. The requirements are that the Chinese city is a transfer stop. For example, I flew from Bangkok to Shanghai and then from Shanghai to Hong Kong five days later. This means that Shanghai is my transfer stop. This way I did not have to apply in advance for my Chinese visa nor did I need to pay. However, check out the details very carefully as you do not want to be stuck in China. Another special visa, is the one to Shenzhen a neighbouring city to Hong Kong. Here you can ask a visa on arrival for five days which is limited to the city of Shenzhen. Also keep in mind that for some countries in Asia even Europeans need a visa. The ones I am aware of are Vietnam and Cambodia. Remember this as it can cause a lot of extra stress (and costs) if you forget it.

Getting around and transportation

There is an MTR station on campus called University which can bring you almost everywhere in Hong Kong. To take public transport you will need to get an Octopus card (same idea as the Dutch OV chipcard). Around October you will be able to apply for a student Octopus card which gives you a discount on the MTR! The octopus card can also be used for all the other public transport methods such as the mini-busses, double-decker busses, double-decker trams and ferries. In addition, it is also used as payment method in shops and restaurants. You can add money to your card in every MTR station and in every 7/11. As the MTR stops midnight you can take mini-buses or (more convenient) cabs and Ubers to go home from clubs. If you share your cab with 4 other students prices are really affordable. For a 40min cab drive from the party areas LKF or Wan Chai to the University it is around 6 euros pp. To go to the Airport it is best to take bus 41 in Sha Tin which goes directly to Terminal 1 and Terminal 2. Sha Tin is a metro stop close to the University station. In general, google maps works really well. You should also download the MTR app for more detailed updates in case of protests. Another app that is helpful is citymapper that works like google maps but gives you information about literally all the busses, that google maps sometimes does not recognize. Lastly, for the busses on campus there is also an app: CU Bus.

Suggested items to bring

11 Suggested items to bring: I would suggest to bring an umbrella as it will rain a lot in August and September, also known as typhoon season. It is a different type of rain as in Europe, mostly

short but extremely heavy. In addition, the plugs are the same as in the UK so bring an adaptor if you have one! You can also buy some in the orientation week. Regarding clothing, it is going to be extremely hot and humid in the beginning of your exchange so take light clothes. Hong Kongese people do not follow any strict clothing rules (in contrast to more traditional Buddhist and Muslim countries, such as Malaysia and Cambodia) so both boys and girls can show as much skin as they want. However, as the air-conditioning can be strong in class, do not forget to bring a sweater. Around November/December it can become cooler, certainly at night, so long pants and a sweater would be recommended. If you are planning to travel to countries like Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam, bring light but long clothing (certainly for girls, in order to be able to visit temples). When you arrive, your rooms will be empty, so you will need to bring or buy duvets, pillows, blankets and kitchen utensils. However, during the orientation week there will be the opportunity to take the blankets and pillows of the people from the previous years, so you do not need to buy it. Colleges will also have piles with free take away kitchen utensils. During the orientation week, trips to IKEA will also be organized. It is located in the Sha Tin mall, close to our university. In general, do not bring too much as Hong Kong is a shopping paradise with a dazzling amount of malls, so in case you forget something, you will definitely be able to buy it in Hong Kong.

Chapter 4: Places to visit

Touristic spots

- Tsim sha Tsui: with the avenue of stars where you have a great view on the skyline (there is also a lightshow)
- Victoria peak: go up with the peak tram or (less expensive) hike + do not forget to check out the less known Victoria gardens
- Take the star ferry - Cat street: antique market with Chinese objects - Ladies Market: you can buy literally everything here
- Temple street night market
- Yuen Po street bird market
- Goldfish market
- Ocean park: attraction parc and zoo, better than Disneyland, but also a bit expensive
- 12-Hong Kong observation wheel: was free when I went, check it out
- Typical Instagram pictures: Choi Hung estate, Monster building, Instagram peer
- Hong Kong Parc: very big parc in centre of Hong Kong with aviary and a small zoo
- Kowloon walled city parc
- Central to mid-levels escalators
- K11 musea shopping centre: amazing design shopping centre with great food in the basement

Museums

- Museum of history of Hong Kong: super nice and free interactive museum, explaining the history of Hong Kong from the prehistorian times to the present, passing through the Chinese years, the opium wars, the British occupation and the Japanese occupation
- Tai Kwun: modern art in an old police station
- Quarrybay: lot of expositions
- Hong Kong Visual Arts center

- Sun Yat Sen museum-Hong Kong space museum: with theatre dome where they play movies related to the space, checkout the website
- Hong Kong science museum
- Hong Kong heritage museum
- Flagstaff house museum:museum about tea in Hong Kong parc

Religious sites

- Ten thousand buddhas monastery: close to university
- The Big Buddha: pretty touristic, but you still have to go
- Wong Tai sin temple
- Man Mo temple: in central-Sint John's cathedral: huge cathedral between the skyscrapers
- Chi Lin nunnery
- Tsz Shan Monastery: amazing white Buddha statue, need to book in advance (I went with the university)
- More temples in all areas of the city: Miu Fat Buddhist Monastery, Yuk Hui Temple, Tsing Shan Monastery, Ching Chung Koon, Tin Hau and Kwun Yum Statues

Restaurants

- Paradise Dynasty: great Hong Kongese food
- King's lodge: HongKongese food
- Tim Ho Wan: one of the many cheap Michelin restaurants in Hong Kong –
- King's dumpling restaurant: great dumplings
- Tequila Jack's: Taco Tuesdays with special discounts for tacos and cocktails every Tuesday
- Genki sushi: sushi chain
- Indianfoodin Chunking mansions

Bars and Clubs

- Mr Wong: famous place for exchange students, 9 euros for unlimited beer and food
- Happy Valley horseraces: horseraceson Wednesday's
- Wan Chai: Ladies night (free entrance and free drinks for girls) on Wednesday's at Devil's advocate, Typhoon, Ophelia
- 13-LKF:biggest party area
 - Popular music with a twist: Volar, levels, play, drop, dragon
 - World: mudita (reggaeton), pastis (Frenchbar)
 - Techno:drop, social room
 - Bars: Iron fairies, please don't tell
- Rooftop:
 - Expensive: Ce la Vi, Wooloomooloo, Picnic
 - Free: IFC-mall, the one at university!
 - Knutsford terrace: more local area with bars and clubs
 - This town needs: great life music, not mainstream
 - Junk boatparty

Nature

- Sai Kung: amazing waterfalls, can go camping
- Cheung Chau island: go to the beach, bike around the beautiful island
- Lamma island
- Tai O: fishing village where you can go spot pinkdolphins
- Man Cheung Chau infinity pool on Lantau Island
- Beaches: Shek O beach, Big wave beach, Stanley beach

Hikes

- Suicide cliff: amazing view, best hike in Hong Kong
- Dragon's back
- Sunset peak
- Lion's rock
- The peaktrail
- Monkey hill/ Kam Shan country parc

Special dates

- Around 15th of September: Mid-autumnfestival
- Halloween: greatest night in LKF (I could not go because of the protests)
- End of November: Clockenflap: huge music festival

Travelling

These are the trips I or friends of mine did, which I can recommend. Hong Kong is perfectly located to visit many interesting and beautiful places in Asia. You should definitely not miss out on them, as travelling in Asia is very cheap (with a few exceptions) and mindblowing.

- Day trip to Macau
- Day trip to Shenzhen (China)
- Philippines: Cebu and Palawan
- Taiwan: Taipei and Jioufen
- Shanghai
- Malaysia: Kuala Lumpur
- Singapore
- Cambodia: Phnom Penh, Kampot and Siem Reap (Angkor) Amazing!!!
- Vietnam: Hanoi, Ha Long, Ninh BinhHo Chi Minh
- Thailand: Bangkok -Sri Lanka
- South Korea: Seoul

Chapter 5: Cost estimation

Please keep in mind, that depending on your lifestyle, the costs can vary a lot. I went to the city centre very often to eat and visit, but you can also eat very cheaply on campus. Travelling is of

course expensive in total, and flight tickets vary between 60 and 200 euros for destinations in Asia.

- Visa: €270 for visa and administration fee
- Insurance: No extra costs, my insurance already covered everything
- Accommodation: €750 for the whole trimester
- Books and other study material: Did not buy any books
- Snacks and Drinks: Around €50 a week for snacks and drinks (depending on your lifestyle)
- Food: Around €150
- Transport: Around €300 in total
- University related activities: Mostly free or less than €5
- Round flight: Hong Kong –Brussels Around €900
- Travels: Around €3000
- Unexpected costs related to exchange

Chapter 6: Conclusion

My exchange semester in Hong Kong was definitely the best time of my life (until now)!

I lived numerous adventures, discovered many inspiring and interesting places, travelled a lot, and experienced considerable personal growth and development. Studying at a foreign place is also extremely interesting, and allows you to view your studies from a different perspective. Of course, I met amazing people, who considerably influenced my experience in Hong Kong in a positive way. We are still in contact, and having friend with whom you shared the craziest experiences is a beautiful feeling. If you are still unsure whether to start your adventure or not, I urge you to do it! You will it regret it.

Some photos to ignite your appetite for new experiences:



Hong Kong mid-autumn festival



Angkor Wat (Cambodia)



Famous Victoria Bay in Hong Kong



Protest statue on Campus



Amazing view from my flat in i-house



(Nearly) free swimming pool on campus



Suicide cliff in Hong Kong



Stanley beach in Hong Kong



Pre-drinks at Mr. Wong's