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What aspects of geography are there to study in Hong Kong?

These are some of the common questions which people inundate me with whenever they learn that Hong Kong is my first choice of exchange destination. Simple and short answers to these questions would not do justice to Hong Kong, so allow me to take you through some of my thoughts and experiences on being an exchange student in this remarkable city...



A breathtaking night skyline of Hong Kong's financial district

So why Hong Kong?

I have always had a deep interest in Asian countries, especially when I consider myself to be part of the region. Thus, I feel greatly privileged to have the opportunity to go to Hong Kong for an exchange programme. After a short first month of stay at The University of Hong Kong (HKU), my horizons about the city and the world expanded so much that I realized that one semester in Hong Kong was insufficient for me to explore the many possibilities there are available in the city, which were in terms of learning more about its culture, language and people. This was one of the many reasons which motivated me to extend my stay in Hong Kong for another semester.

It is difficult to deny that Hong Kong is the gateway to mainland China. China is an extraordinary country, not forgetting that it is a rapidly emerging world market. By having the opportunity to stay in Hong Kong for an extended period, I had the opportunity to gain first-hand knowledge about this prominent country due to the added incentive of the geographical proximity of Hong Kong to China. This was through the large range of China-related modules available in HKU and also better opportunities to travel to China through school fieldtrips and during school breaks. Once in a while, I will reminisce about the many limestone mountains and karst landforms I saw in Guizhou and Yunnan Provinces in southwest China; the rather chaotic cities of Guangzhou and Shenzhen and the incredibly beautiful grasslands and deserts in Inner Mongolia. I was able to bring these insights back to Singapore to share with my family and friends.

In Hong Kong, there is geography...and much more in university education!

There is a varied range of modules available in HKU, from learning about the trees of the city, archaeology, to pop culture in Hong Kong. As already mentioned, Hong Kong's location beside China and its geographical features can offer much to an inquisitive geography student. At HKU, I feel that my geographical knowledge has been further sharpened through the many fieldtrips to country parks and the famous Mai Po Marshes Reserve under the management of World Wildlife Fund (WWF). I am also glad to have met with many wonderful, helpful and dedicated professors who advanced my knowledge not only in Geography, but also in other subjects like Business, Comparative Literature and Sociology.

In addition, HKU places much emphasis on enhancing general education of students outside the classroom. I can still recall a general education programme which I signed up for which was about the sophisticated use of *fengshui* in Hong Kong's New Territories dating centuries back. It was an enriching experience with fieldtrips to visit century-old ceremonies and other relics by a professor who was deeply passionate about this field.

Hong Kong is not just another Asian cosmopolitan city...

Other than shopping and eating, Hong Kong offered me much more. Throughout the one year that I was there, I not only learnt to immerse myself in the rich Cantonese culture of having desserts and dim sum regularly with friends, I also had the opportunity to share Singapore with the rest of the world when I met many other international students who shared with me the same enthusiasm for Asia.



A typical dim sum lunch with one of my geography classes in HKU
(Dr David Zhang on the extreme left).



Kai Ling in Hong Kong Disneyland

Hong Kong is also a cosmopolitan city where east meets west - while you can visit the newly-opened Disneyland, you can also take a ride down the Victoria Harbour on a quintessential Chinese junkboat.



Taking a ride down the Victoria Harbour on a Chinese junkboat

Of course, we cannot forget that Hong Kong is arguably the “Hollywood of Asia” with the popularity of Hong Kong-made movies by directors like Tsui Hark and Wong Kar-Wai; movie stars like Leslie Cheung, Sammi Cheng and Tony Leung; and the many addictive drama serials which have entered the hearts of many Singaporeans.

When talking about the landscape of Hong Kong, many would be reminded of magnificent skyscrapers and crowded streets. Very few people would associate Hong Kong with lush greenery, beautiful beaches and tranquil ecological sites. Indeed, I was pleasantly surprised to see so much of nature through the many fieldtrips, hiking expeditions and self-exploration to country parks that I embarked on. Hong Kong is indeed an exciting city to be in!



Taking a break by a stream after a long hike at one of the islands on the Saikung Peninsula, Hong Kong.

Learning, exploring and experiencing as an exchange student...

Much more importantly, I feel that no matter where one goes for exchange, such an experience would teach him/her independence, interpersonal skills and many other life skills that he/she cannot acquire in the classroom. Going out of our comfort zone in Singapore can be a challenge but it also can offer us fresh perspectives about the world.

Let me take one instance of such a challenge I face: Even though I have always subconsciously identified myself as of Cantonese descent, I only knew a few words of the language before I arrived in Hong Kong. When in Hong Kong, the language barrier was something which I grappled with for a long time because in a place where Cantonese is widely used (thankfully, the medium of instruction in HKU is English!), it was sometimes very vexing to not be able to get my message across and not be able to understand others. However, with the assistance of HKU, I took up Cantonese lessons in the university which helped in my conversation skills with the locals. By possessing basic knowledge in Cantonese, I felt that I could take a huge step by breaking the ice with local students. Over time, I felt less inadequate about the language and I could gradually assimilate into their lifestyles, benefiting far more than I expected.

For me, an exchange programme to Hong Kong was indeed once-in-a-lifetime, unforgettable and truly valuable experience and I would certainly encourage those contemplating an exchange programme in Hong Kong to go for it!