

# Feature

by Susan Blumberg-Kason



# Rocking it Big in Beijing

An Interview with Alan Paul



Alan Paul with his daughter

In 2005 Alan Paul moved from the New York area to Beijing with his wife Rebecca and their three young children following Rebecca's appointment as the *Wall Street Journal's* China Bureau Chief. A freelance journalist, most notably for *Slam* and *Guitar World* magazines, Alan Paul also wrote a column called "The Expat Life" for *WSJ.com* from 2005 until 2009. His new memoir, *Big in China: My Unlikely Adventures Raising a Family, Playing the Blues, and Becoming a Star in Beijing* (Harper, 2011), chronicles his years in China as a journalist, stay at home father, and blues musician for a band named Woodie Alan. *Asian Jewish Life* recently sat down with Alan Paul to discuss his book and his unique experience in China.

**Asian Jewish Life (AJL):** It's ironic that you had initial reservations about moving to China after your first trip there, but also experienced the most difficult case of reverse culture shock when you returned to the US three years later. What were your first impressions of China and how did they change by the time you left China?

**Alan Paul (AP):** I'll start with what didn't change: China is an exciting, fast-changing place where you never know just what exactly is going on. I didn't really have reservations after my first trip there. I fell in love with the pace and excitement the moment I arrived in Beijing. However, I got quite sick for a few days on our initial first quick "look-see" trip over and the illness knocked the confidence right out of me.

It's a bit hard to explain. On one hand, it was standard traveler's tummy, but I had it bad and the trip home was painful and debilitating and it really knocked me off stride and made me reconsider my blithe confidence that we could pick up and move to the other side of the world.

In retrospect, we probably could have saved a lot of angst by pushing our return back a day or two, because we had to make two flights back and I was really miserable. I got over this pretty quickly and once I did, and we decided to move, I pledged to never look back again.

I'm not sure if any of my initial impressions were completely altered, but everything certainly deepened. I think the biggest misperception about China, and one I must have shared to some extent, is that the people were faceless drones. I think my book illustrates the extent to which this is absurd. In promoting the book, I have spoken to hundreds of people and been a bit dismayed how many of them – including many interviewers and other very insightful, bright people – were surprised that China even had bars, bands, or nightlife.

**AJL:** Stay-at-home dads must be quite a foreign concept in China. What kind of reaction did you get about this from your friends in China, both expats and locals?

**AP:** Well, some people didn't know what to make of me. I think in some ways it was a positive for me in terms of the expat community. It made me a bit of an outsider, which forced me to push out and explore things on my own a bit. The little expat bubble wasn't that comfortable for me, so I leapt into other things pretty quickly, which really served me well.

Some Chinese were sort of astounded by me and expressed admiration. There was a black [unlicensed] cab driver named Mr. Lu who we used a lot and he always told me how smart I was to have my wife do all the work. He thought it was a rather remarkable situation.

**AJL:** Did you find that your Jewish identity changed once you moved to

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Beijing? Did you feel more of a minority as a Caucasian American or as a Jew?

**AP:** I was certainly more aware being a minority as a Caucasian American. When we went out with our kids, we would sometimes have whole groups of people following us around, especially outside of Beijing. Within the expat community, I was also quite conscious of being a minority as Jew. I had some disputes with my kids' British school over the explicitly religious nature of the "winter show," which one year for my eldest son was a play about Jesus' birth. I tried to explain that it would have been a lovely play for a church but was totally wrong for a school, but I got absolutely nowhere. I had to decide whether or not I was going to become the obstinate Jew or not. I decided to drop it, only insisting that Jacob not be punished in any way if he refused to sing the songs in music class. The other aspect that was interesting is we had good friends who were Australian Jews and they were shocked that I was so annoyed by this. It made me appreciate American separation of church and state/school.

The result of all this was that my Jewish identity actually deepened in Beijing because it did separate me a bit from the mainstream – certainly far more than it does here in metro New York – and it

took a bit more effort. Before we went, I wasn't sure what we would do for the kids' religious education or if we would have services. I thought it would all be on us, and was very pleasantly surprised to find that there was a vibrant, friendly congregation, Kehillat Beijing.

We arrived in mid-August and Rosh Hashanah was just a few weeks later. I found the experience profoundly moving. It felt optional and my decision to go was a decision – I was removed from merely doing things out of habit and had an opportunity to really think about what it all meant to me. I had an option to take a few years off from religion and I found that I really did not want to. I had a profound sense of just how tiny of a minority we are in the world, as well. No one outside the little room cared that it was a holiday and all of that made it more special for me. It just all became more private and more internal and therefore more meaningful.

**AJL:** You addressed the issue of drinking in your book and how you found yourself drinking more than you would have liked. Then you learned that your band mate Woodie Wu was a recovering alcoholic. Did you find it difficult to live in a society that doesn't talk about alcoholism yet expects people to drink at every social outing? Do you see any parallels

between Jewish culture in which wine is important in many of the holidays, yet as a whole isn't known for big drinkers?

**AP:** Well, Woodie was not a recovering alcoholic when we got together; he was a practicing alcoholic. I did not realize the extent of his problem, which is something I would eventually look back and really question myself about: was I blind or was he good at hiding his problem? It was more the latter, but it was a good lesson on keeping your eyes open and being attuned to your friends and potential problems.

I did drink too much at our early gigs, because I was excited and running on adrenaline and people were buying me drinks and the bar was giving me free drinks. Then I realized that if I was going to be doing this on a regular basis, as I wanted to, I couldn't treat each night like my twenty-first birthday party. I dialed it way back. The next year, Woodie quit drinking and I mostly did as well, in support of him. I would maybe have a beer before we played and one after, but I was fine drinking water and Coke with him.

Chinese culture recognizes that some people drink too much, of course, but they don't understand the disease model of alcoholism that we do. I'm not sure I really see a Jewish/Chinese connection about drinking. I'm not sure, but I don't think there is a particularly high rate of alcoholism in China, but there is an expectation that at certain social gatherings – especially business banquets or dinners – people will drink to great excess. I can't think of anything parallel in Jewish social culture.

**AJL:** You are a great example of someone who makes the most of what he's dealt. Do you feel that the key to happiness as an expat is to follow a passion like you did with music? If you hadn't formed Woodie Alan, do you think you would have been as happy and fulfilled in China?

**AP:** I didn't really form the band until toward the end of my second year in China and it didn't become a major part of my life until my third year, and I was very happy and fulfilled before that. It certainly changed a lot for me and brought me inside Chinese culture in a way that nothing else could have. On the other hand, my family probably took a few less trips within China than we would have because I got pretty busy.

I do feel that the key to happiness is to follow your passion or find new ones. I did a lot of hiking on non-repaired sections of the Great Wall and exploring Beijing's old neighborhoods during my first two years for instance and probably would have done more had the band not taken off. I think the real key to happiness is making sure you find friends who are not trapped in a bubble, and are not complaining all the time. Every expat community has its share of people like that and they can drag you down.

**AJL:** What is the one piece of advice you would give to someone moving to China for the first time that you wished you'd known before you moved there?

**AP:** Stay calm, enjoy every moment and have fun. There will be hard days, but there won't be boring ones, so embrace the chaos and enjoy the adventures.

**AJL:** What was most difficult about moving back to New Jersey after living in China for three years?

**AP:** Not living in China anymore. I don't mean to be glib, but I understandably get asked this question a lot and it's hard to answer because we really missed everything. We missed our friends and the camaraderie we all shared. We missed the kids' school and friends. We missed the sense of adventure that could be a part of even a simple trip to the grocery store. And of course, I missed my band terribly. It's hard to categorize that, but it was the guys in the band,



Paul in the Woodie Alan Band

the performances, the preparing for the shows, the backstage hangouts with Chinese musicians, the post-gig meals – all of it. And we knew that we weren't returning to that life, so we were kind of mourning it, in a way that we never did for our life back here in the U.S., to which we knew we would some day return.

**AJL:** Have your kids continued to study Mandarin? Do they miss China?

**AP:** Sadly no. My oldest Jacob did for a good six months and then he got really busy preparing for his bar mitzvah. It just felt like too much to have him studying Hebrew and Mandarin at the same time while also keeping up with school. They all miss China in various ways and to various degrees. The dull daily ache has faded with time, however. We went back as a family in the summer of 2010 after having been gone for about 18 months and that was a great thing to do. It strengthened their memories and bonds and helped them move on.

**AJL:** Ivan Reitman purchased the movie rights to *Big in China*. Congratulations! Who would you like to play your character in the film? Your wife's character?

**AP:** Thank you. I swear I don't have anyone in mind to play me or Rebecca – as long as they are two fantastic,

beautiful people! Honestly, it's not that I don't care – because of course I do – but I'm really focused on getting a good script and feeling good about the story and the depictions of us and our life and our friends and China... if that all comes out well, then I'm confident some great actors will want to be involved. And all of that is much more important than someone who looks like us. I've been talking to the screenwriter a lot and feel good about where he's headed. If things keep moving forward, I hope to visit China with him and Ivan and show them around my world.

**AJL:** Are you planning to write another book?

**AP:** I am working on a *Panda Dad* book based on the column I wrote for the Wall Street Journal in rebuttal to the Tiger Mom. It has some great potential, but I'm still not sure about it. I have been very active promoting *Big in China*, finalizing the movie deals and now doing some rewrites for a Chinese-language edition. When that wraps up, I will turn my attention squarely to *Panda Dad* and see if it's something I definitely want to do. ♪

For more about Alan Paul and *Big in China*, check out [www.alanpaul.net](http://www.alanpaul.net).