



# **Big in China: My Unlikely Adventures Raising a Family, Playing the Blues, and Becoming a Star in Beijing**

*Alan Paul*

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"What a romp....Alan Paul walked the walk, preaching the blues in China. Anyone who doubts that music is bigger than words needs to read this great tale." —Gregg Allman

"An absolute love story. In his embrace of family, friends, music and the new culture he's discovering, Alan Paul leaves us contemplating the love in our own lives, and rethinking the concept of home." —Jeffrey Zaslow, coauthor, with Randy Pausch, of *The Last Lecture*

Alan Paul, award-winning author of the *Wall Street Journal*'s online column "The Expat Life," gives his engaging, inspiring, and unforgettable memoir of blues and new beginnings in Beijing. Paul's three-and-a-half-year journey reinventing himself as an American expat—while raising a family and starting the revolutionary blues band Woodie Alan, voted Beijing Band of the Year in the 2008—is a must-read adventure for anyone who has lived abroad, and for everyone who dreams of rewriting the story of their own future.

## **Big in China: My Unlikely Adventures Raising a Family, Playing the Blues, and Becoming a Star in Beijing Details**

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# **From Reader Review Big in China: My Unlikely Adventures Raising a Family, Playing the Blues, and Becoming a Star in Beijing for online ebook**

## **Alan Paul says**

Alan Paul

I'm the author and I'm sure there is somewhere else I should be posting this, but until I figure that out...

I figured I might as well bump my average rating up, but I certainly don't think the book is perfect. A year after its release, I certainly see some things I wish I had done differently, but I remain proud of it and thankful to all of you who have read it and especially those who have taken the time to review. I'm pleased that most of you enjoyed it, and take some of the critical comments to heart.

Happy to hear from any of you.

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## **Abbe says**

From Publishers Weekly

In this entertaining memoir, Paul recounts an unanticipated life-changing experience that began when his wife accepted a three-year work assignment in Beijing. After resettling their three young children from suburban New Jersey to China, Paul, a music and basketball journalist who played guitar only as a hobby, embarked on an exploration of local culture and music. The search prompted his transition from writing about music to being a bona fide rock star in the band Woodie Alan, a cross-cultural blues group named after Alan and his Chinese band member, Woodie Wu, a guitarist with a Stevie Ray Vaughn tattoo. Paul blogged about his Chinese experience and also wrote a column on it for the Wall Street Journal's Web site. His story, however, is much more than a musical and journalistic victory dance. It's equal parts family memoir, travelogue, personal analysis of globalization and expatriate communities, and a view of the world's most populous nation through American eyes. (Mar.)

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From

*Starred Review* In this funny, poignant, and entertaining memoir, Alan Paul tells his improbable story of an American music journalist unwittingly becoming a rock star in China with grace and good humor. What's more, his Chinese American blues rock band, Woodie Alan, earns the title ?Beijing? s best band.? This achievement was an accidental by-product of his journalist-wife Rebecca? s position as China bureau chief for the Wall Street Journal. He writes with enthusiasm about his new life as an expatriate American in China with three children in tow, the difficulty of learning Chinese (he concludes he has a better chance of communicating with dolphins than mastering its strange words and sounds), getting a driver? s license, and understanding Chinese rules of the road, which, he theorizes, means never having to stop unless you absolutely have to. His experiences playing in a mostly Chinese band offer plenty of entertaining anecdotes that offer culture-shock insights. His Chinese sojourn ending after his wife returned to New York as the paper? s international news editor, Paul looks back with equal doses of regret for the unforgettable

opportunities that came his way and anticipation toward a new American future. Immensely enjoyable. --  
June Sawyers

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### **Anne says**

A fun and interesting memoir by a friend of mine. I worked with Alan and his wife, Rebecca, at the University of Michigan's student newspaper, The Michigan Daily. Alan details the 3+ years he and Rebecca spent in China while she was Editor for the Wall St. Journal, and he was full-time dad, part-time bluesman and 100% immersing himself into a new world. It's an interesting take on a country that few Americans really know. I found the crazy paths that Alan took amazing to believe and I think you will too.

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### **Alex says**

Interesting enough. I got bored halfway through with his band stuff though, and I started skimming. Mostly I was interested in his China experience, which while fine, seemed a little lacking at times. He's no Peter Hessler, that's all I'm saying.

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### **Megan says**

This is not the book to read if you want to learn (much) about China. However, if you would like to be convinced of the power of the experience of living abroad, this is the med memoir for you. I lived the China for four years and felt much the same about my time there-- you form a connection that is deep as you grow to love a home that is never quite a home. Paul was there in a real golden age-- I'm guessing it's not quite the same experience with the foreigner fear-mongering going on now.

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### **John says**

Gets especially high rating as the author tried hard to get to know China and the Chinese, rather than just leading a completely cosseted expat life. I confess I wasn't all that interested on the musician aspect of the story, but I knew that going in, and was able to skim through a bit of that towards the end.

Bottom line is that Alan's a really nice guy, presenting the details in an engaging manner. Definitely **not** "just another expat in China" story at all. Recommended!

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### **Carol says**

As soon I saw the title of this book, I wanted to read it!

In 1993, I had gone on a three week tour of China and now my son works there. China has changed so much since I was there so I was really excited to find this book. I wanted to see if Alan Paul had similar experiences and did he become attached to the people like I did. I was so sad to leave that tears were streaking my face when the return flight was over.

Alan Paul, the author went with his wife and family when she accepted a job as the China Bureau Chief for the Wall Street Journal. They were in Beijing for four years ending with the Beijing Olympics in 2008. Mr. Paul related how he and his wife debated uprooting his family, their three young children to live in a totally different country. They didn't have to but decided to take on the adventure.

At first, the family settled into the Ex Patriate community and lived in the compound with all the others from different countries. They later started exploring outside the walls and even into the countryside.

Maplewood, where they lived in the U.S. was tree lined, comfortable and safe. comfortable and safe. In China, he let himself pursue a dream that could not even be imagined in Maplewood. In China, he became an daring explorer. He let himself be his true self ignoring those recordings in his head that say "You aren't good enough". Before he could not even imagine himself in a blue band, let alone to the leader. He found joy.

His children got used to taking short trips to the Great Wall and eating different foods, and meeting new people from all sorts of cultures. The whole family left Beijing after four years with tears in their eyes and a new way to see the world.

I would recommend this book to anyone interested in travel, China, in almost magical changes and those who love the blues. There were many of my old blues favorites in this book.

I received this book as part of the Amazon Vine program but my thoughts in this review are entirely my own.

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## Converse says

Allen Paul, a journalist who worked for Guitar World and the basketball magazine Slam, got the opportunity to live in China for a little over 3 years when his journalist wife, Rebecca, applied for and got a posting in Beijing with her employer, the Wall Street Journal. They were in China during the 2008 Olympics. Allen, in the lingo of expats the "trailing spouse," found his time in China the opportunity to play music instead of just covering it and found himself in a mostly Chinese blues band. They started out doing covers but fairly quickly started playing their own compositions. After their first public performances, in which most of the audience were friends of the band members and were mostly westerners, they ended up playing at much larger venues to almost exclusively Chinese audiences.

Paul comes across as friendly guy benefiting from his willingness to go outside the expat compound he lived in and mix with ordinary Chinese. The other band members were interesting people and excellent musicians. Paul is good at describing what being a westerner in China is like, the odd "fake rich" (as he stays) lifestyle of expats on expense accounts, and his musical experiences.

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## **S. says**

apparently quickly written for profit, lacking any drama, pacing, buildup, or insight. Paul through massive efforts and the heavy support of his wife who held down the tough job apparently just about became a minor regional talent in Beijing, but his lack of Mandarin, musical ability, personal aesthetic sense prevent this from being a China classic such as the four-star Foreign Babes in Beijing or even three-star Mr. China. it was worth the 1.99 ebook special but not more. moreover, having had a few years' expat experience in China, it was a book I felt obligated to read, but I can't recommend it on its merits or as an introduction to gated-community China except for somebody really planning to commit to the country.

the biggest problem, as I wrote, was that Paul was very dependent on his accomodating spouse the whole time, so instead of a great, dynamic personality conquering things on its merits, we have instead the sort of lackadaisical story of a tagger-along getting some of the 'china statistics' (=if 2% of China has heard of you, that's 30 million people; if Paul's broadcast on TV hit an audience of 30 million, well, that's 30 million really poor, impoverished people who happen to just see 'laowai novelty of the minute' on a variety show and will forget his name by next year). the book does have some merit in its descriptions, some insight into the culture and dynamic, and a certain optimistic spirit, but you'd be far better off putting anything above \$2 towards, even, Seven Years in Tibet, or Shanghai Baby.

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## **Barbara says**

Let's be clear - this is not a book about China. This is a memoir about what it means for your family and identity to move to another country.

Alan Paul, freelance journalist, spent more than 3 years in Beijing when his wife accepted the post of Bureau Chief for the WSJ. Before the move, they lived in suburban NJ, where he juggled his work assignments with being the primary caregiver for their 3 children (aged 7, 4 and 2 at the time of the move). But in Expat World, where the relocation packages include house, car and driver, and their salaries also covered a housekeeper, a nanny and a cook, Paul had the time to explore new passions. Which for him, turned out to be blogging and playing blues guitar.

The second thread of the book is his friendship with the Chinese musicians he found to play with, and growing success of their band in the nascent Beijing music scene.

I heard Paul read at his book event in Shanghai, and he's clearly a nice guy. But the memoir doesn't read as a whole lot more than that. Aside from some descriptions of the food, a bit of travel and of course the madness of the Olympics, it could have been set anywhere where US families get relocated. The writing is honest and easy to read, but completely unmemorable. In the end, this is a book about unexpectedly becoming a musician in middle age, written by a Daddy-blogger who happened to find himself in China.

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## **Laura says**

Big in China is Alan Paul's memoir of his three-and-a-half years in Beijing living as an expat with his wife and three young children. His wife Rebecca was offered a job as the Wall Street Journal's China bureau chief, and Alan was a stay-at-home dad and freelance writer. They saw this move to China as an opportunity and they embraced it by working hard and taking frequent trips off the beaten path into the villages in China

and mingling with the people.

I simply loved reading about these trips and admired how they did this with three young children in tow. It was also interesting to see how the expat community lived within compounds that were gated and guarded and their homes staffed with servants who did everything: cooked, cleaned and took care of the kids. Although Paul and Rebecca pursued their careers passionately, they were clearly close as a family and made sure to spend time as a family doing things together.

Alan was also editor for *Guitar World* and loved to play the guitar. One day he stumbled upon Woodie, a hip Chinese man who loves blues music. Shortly after, they formed the blues band *Woodie Alan*. It was a match made in heaven. Little did they know that their cross-cultural collaboration would become so successful that they would earn the title “Best Band in Beijing” and would go on to tour China and produce a CD album of original songs in both English and Mandarin. Having just finished reading *Guitar Zero* by Gary Marcus, which explored the science of learning music, I was able to truly appreciate what it took for these men and their band members to play so well together and rise to success so quickly.

*Big in China* is a well-written, enjoyable read about how one man and his family fell in love with a foreign country and its people. It's easy to read, and although it opened my eyes to China and its culture, it did not delve into any of the politics and immense social problems known about China. Rather, it focused on Alan's perception of embracing life on unfamiliar territory with his family. It's a heartwarming account of how one man discovered first-hand that people of vastly different cultures are very much alike and yearn for the same things, including the transcending joy from an art that unites people everywhere: music.

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### **Ann Fisher says**

Pure coincidence that I read this so soon after *Dreaming in Chinese: Mandarin Lessons in Life, Love, And Language*. Like Deborah Fallows, Alan Paul was a "trailing spouse," living and working in Beijing because that's where his wife's job had taken him. Like Fallows, he makes the most of it. His descriptions of raising kids in a community of other ex-pats, struggling with the language, trying to pass the drivers exam, and traveling around the country with the family would have been entertaining enough, but his immersion in the Beijing music scene, ultimately becoming the lead singer in his own band, "Woodie Alan," takes the book to a whole different level.

We learn that Paul was a band nerd from a young age, writing a term paper on Duane Allman while he was still in 8th grade. He eventually became a music journalist, writing for music magazines and meeting many of his musical heroes. But it wasn't until he reached China that he became a serious musician himself. The stories of meeting other musicians, sharing light night meals and cheap hotels on road trips, and, improbably, finding himself headlining music festivals that were broadcast to millions of Chinese who had never heard of the Allman Brothers.

I'm giving this five stars. If you have any interest in contemporary American rock or blues (I'm not sure I've ever heard an Allman Brothers song) you'll like it even more.

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## **Ensiform says**

A music writer, Paul travels to Beijing with his wife and their three children when she is offered a job as the Wall Street Journal's bureau chief there. He works hard at the language, gets a driver's license, enjoys the food, writes columns, and becomes the stay-at-home parent in the foreigner's compound, complete with servants. With a new perspective and perhaps more time on his hands, he takes up guitar again and hangs out in music clubs. After being called on stage and performing a few classic rock standards, Paul thinks he's found a winning formula and soon puts together a band with another ex-pat and three Chinese musicians. After extensive practicing and touring, this band is named "Best New Band in Beijing" – a rather stunning feat in a usually fairly insular culture that gives no quarter to foreigners.

This is a fun, witty book about how one man's enthusiastic embrace of the new led him to revitalize his passion for music, and to change the music scene of Beijing itself. I was bowled over by the enthusiasm and positivity in this book, something that is lacking in many Westerner-in-China memoirs. Where almost every other visitor and ex-pat dwells on the honking and crush of traffic, Paul sees it as an escapade. The exotic food, the language barrier, the culture clash – all is opportunity or adventure for Paul, not a challenge or hardship. Granted, his viewpoint could be called insular itself; as a member of a working ex-pat family and not a tourist, he probably didn't deal with bureaucrats or xenophobes as much as some visitors. But regardless, his positivity and equitable understanding are refreshing and contagious traits. Whether it's attending to his young children's culture shock, his ailing father, his quiet and serious bandmate, or his tutor's worried vacillating about the life path he is meant to take, Paul focuses on human connections, not differences. Musing on the changed landscape and displaced people in the constant reinvention he notices in Beijing, Paul notes only, and very wisely, "everyone's view of 'normal' starts the moment they arrive" – he wasn't about to fret about what Beijing was "becoming;" he was too busy being involved in what it was. This is an inspiring and very unusual tale.

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## **Francesca says**

First of all my stars interpretation (since nowhere within Goodreads I found it defined...) 5 stars means for me a book who changed my life (a copernican revolution!) not necessarily aesthetically beautiful; 4 stars means a masterpiece; 3 stars: I enjoyed it very much. 2 stars and 1 I don't usually use it because now thanks to Goodreads I filter the books and buy only books above 3.75 read by many people. So I liked BIG IN CHINA very much, read it in few days and found it very useful for better understanding Chinese people.

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## **Evelyn says**

Loved it - took me back to Shanghai days. The book discusses many of the issues shared by many expats living in China and elsewhere but the added layer of interest and culture brought to bear by Alan Paul's experience of playing in a successful band makes the books much more than another expat memoir.

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