A close-up portrait of Susan Blumberg-Kason, a woman with dark hair, smiling warmly. She is wearing a black top, a necklace, and earrings. The background is a warm, reddish-brown color with some geometric patterns.

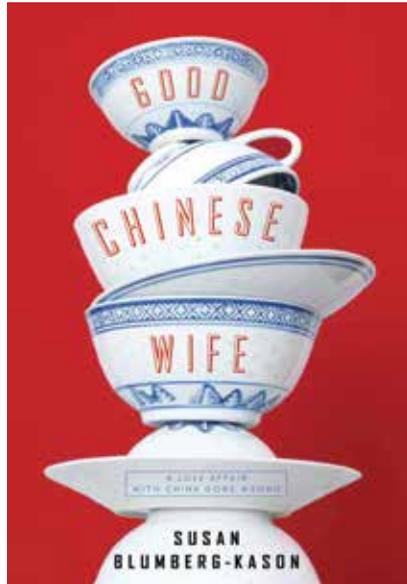
**Interview with
Susan Blumberg-Kason on
*Good Chinese Wife:
A Love Affair With China Gone Wrong***

When it comes to the success of a cross-cultural relationship, does culture or personality matter more? Susan Blumberg-Kason's stunning new memoir *Good Chinese Wife: A Love Affair With China Gone Wrong* offers a very personal answer to that question.

Set in Hong Kong, Mainland China and America, the story follows Susan's whirlwind courtship and marriage to Cai, a dashing young man from Mainland China who turns out to be more trouble than she imagined. Instead of leaving, she resolves to become the perfect "Chinese" wife, a balancing act that becomes increasingly precarious after the birth of their son. Eventually, this initially shy young woman finds the strength to make a courageous escape, standing up for herself and her family.

A freelance writer in Chicago, Susan has written for an affiliate of the *Chicago Sun-Times*, the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, and *Chicago Parent* magazine. Her essay "Ninety Minutes in Tsim Sha Tsui" is included in the 2014 anthology *How Does One Dress to Buy Dragonfruit*. She also wrote *All the Tea in Chicago*, the ultimate guidebook to the city for tea enthusiasts. Susan also happens to be the books editor for *Asian Jewish Life* as well as a frequent contributor.

Needless to say it was a treat for *Asian Jewish Life* contributor, Jocelyn Eikenburg to sit down with Susan to learn more about *Good Chinese Wife*, discussing everything from her inspiration for the book to what it was like being Jewish in a Chinese family, as well as her current work in progress exploring her own Jewish ties to China.



Asian Jewish Life (AJL): Could you share with us the inspiration for writing your memoir?

Susan Blumberg-Kason (SBK): During most of my first marriage, I was constantly on the lookout to find a memoir to read about a western woman married to a man from China. I found a couple, namely Liang Heng and Judith Shapiro's book, *Son of the Revolution*. There was also Betty Lee Sung's *Chinese American Intermarriage*. The first was more about Liang Heng's experience in China and less about the marriage, whereas the second was all about cross-cultural relationships but presented in a case study format. Later, when I started writing *Good Chinese Wife*, I came across Ellen Graf's *The Natural Laws of Good Luck: A Memoir of an Unlikely Marriage*. I love her book, yet thought there was still a market for one like mine because I was at a different stage of life when I was married to Cai.

AJL: Your love affair with Cai, a man from Wuhan, China, takes place in Hong

Kong in the mid-1990s when you were studying as a graduate student at a local university. What was interesting about dating in Hong Kong back then?

SBK: Hong Kong was in a holding pattern back then. It was a few years before the Handover and no one knew what was going to happen after 1997. This was before the start of Mainland tourism to Hong Kong and even at the university where I studied, there were only 200 Mainland students, most of them in graduate school. For someone like me, who had studied Mandarin in the US, it was easy to meet Mainland men because the community was still relatively small and they tended to socialize amongst themselves. I attended Mainland dance parties and went with these students to the horse races and to the beautiful beach Shek O. I was the only foreigner on these outings, although there were quite a few at the first dance party. I think the culture on campus has changed now because there are so many Mainland students in Hong Kong and the community is not so tight-knit as it was in the 90s.

AJL: China has a history of welcoming the Jewish people with open arms. Did the fact that you were Jewish make you feel more comfortable in China – and by extension, more comfortable dating and marrying someone from the country?

SBK: Back then I didn't meet many people in China who had ever met a Jewish person or who had even heard of Judaism. Even my former husband wasn't really aware of Judaism. That said, I never experienced anti-Semitism in China, which made it very comfortable for me to be there. I do vividly recall when one of my former brothers-in-law learned that I was Jewish and he mentioned the Shanghai Jews during WWII. His mother

Interview

by Jocelyn Eikenburg



Jake's first Hannukah, San Francisco, 1998

was from Shanghai and had told him about the Jews there during the 1930s and 40s. It was the first time I had heard of this relatively unknown history.

AJL: Your Jewish identity is an important part of your story – such as trying to explain to Cai's parents that you don't want to eat pork, and having a bris for your son. What was it like navigating a world where people might not always understand what being Jewish really means?

SBK: I really tried to fit in and was worried at first that Cai's family wouldn't accept me because I wasn't Chinese. So I was careful not to draw more attention to my differences. For that reason, I wasn't so open about my Judaism. In the beginning of my marriage, I only mentioned it in passing. My parents attended a lecture in Chicago by the renowned scholar Xu Xin and brought a couple copies of his Jewish encyclopedia (printed in Chinese) for Cai and his parents. I'm not sure they ever read the encyclopedia and at the

time I didn't want to make a big deal about it, so didn't discuss it with them. Later when Jake was born, I asked Cai about having a bris for Jake and he agreed. It wasn't easy for him, and I write about that in *Good Chinese Wife*. When Jake was a year old, I suddenly felt like it was important for Jake to be raised with a religion. That's not uncommon for people who aren't very religious growing up but then change when they have children. So I signed us up for an interfaith group run by the Jewish community in San Francisco. Cai went with Jake and me a couple of times, but then claimed he had no interest and didn't want to continue going. I took Jake by myself until we left San Francisco. I am happy to say that Cai attended Jake's bar mitzvah three years ago and was very proud of Jake. This fall Jake is studying in Israel and Cai will visit him there!

AJL: Few Chinese men marry Western women today, and you married Cai in the mid-1990s, which must have made you incredibly special. What did it feel like

being the Western wife of a Chinese man during that era?

SBK: I definitely got a lot of stares in China, but I think the same would happen today because there still aren't a ton of Asian male/Western female (AMWF) marriages. I think both Cai and I felt special at first. He would always point out mixed children and AMWF couples. But I knew I wasn't the only one. Before I met Cai, I had quite a few friends in the US who dated or were married to Chinese and Taiwanese men. So I didn't feel like a pioneer by any means.

AJL: Your wedding banquet took place in Mainland China in 1995. What Jewish traditions, if any, did you incorporate into the celebration?

SBK: Our wedding in Cai's hometown, which was actually a two-hour drive from Wuhan, was purely Chinese. We didn't have any Jewish or American customs. The special thing about our wedding was that as the child of a Communist Party member, Cai was able to include more cars in our motorcade and twenty tables at our banquet as opposed to the limit of ten for Party members' families. This was allowed because I was a foreigner. Six months later when we traveled to the US, my paternal grandmother gave a bagel brunch for us in which she invited 100 friends and family to celebrate our wedding. So that was the Jewish component of my wedding celebration! As a side note, my parents had a big wedding reception for us in Chicago. They hired Chinese musicians who played an erhu and pipa. My mom decorated the tables with red and gold centerpieces she bought in Chinatown. And I wore a red qipao.

AJL: "*A Love Affair With China Gone Wrong*" is the subtitle of your memoir. Some might assume that your story perpetuates negative stereotypes of

Asian men or even China itself. What would you say to these readers?

SBK: To me, the subtitle points to me and how I wasn't able to handle life in China and in a Chinese family. Saying that a love affair with China went wrong isn't saying that China is bad, but just that it was different from what I first experienced as a traveler in my teens. And in all the reviews I've read, people have pointed to me, not to Cai, as the culprit. Some have praised my openness in writing this book and admitting my mistakes, while others have criticized my decisions in the story I'm telling. And I'm fine with this because I tried very hard not to demonize Cai in this book. That's not easy to do when the person in question engages in abusive behavior. But in the end, I think the story is more compelling when it's told the way I tell it rather than just blaming the other person and taking no responsibility for myself.

AJL: In cross-cultural relationships, it's not always clear what's culture and what's personality. A lot of times, we even wonder if culture or personality influences the relationship more. Your story ultimately offers a personal answer to this question. Without giving too much away, what are some insights you've learned in this respect?

SBK: I wanted to show how people sometimes justify their relationship problems as cultural differences when they are involved with someone from another country. This happens with people from all over the world and isn't unique to Asia by any means. What I've learned is that when something doesn't sit well with someone, it doesn't sit well. It doesn't matter if this issue stems from a cultural difference or a personality one. Respect is crucial for a successful relationship. I think my problem was that I went into my marriage thinking I knew all about Chinese culture and would be



Susan with Jake and her parents in San Francisco

able to handle our cultural differences. A handful of different friends even warned me about cultural differences before I married Cai, but I ignored them. I thought I knew it all!

AJL: You're currently working on another memoir set in China, this time exploring your own Jewish ties to the country and Jewish history in Shanghai. Could you tell us about this?

SBK: After my divorce, I started to learn about the Jews in Shanghai during WWII. Although I wasn't part of a Chinese family anymore, I felt more connected to China than ever when I read about Jewish refugees who fled Nazi Europe for Shanghai. Learning about the Shanghai Jews caused me to reminisce about my trips to Shanghai in the late 1980s and early 1990s. I realized I had visited many of the landmarks in the Shanghai Jewish community before I knew anything about this history. Then two years ago I was stunned to learn that my grandfather had a cousin who escaped Germany in 1939 and lived in Shanghai for eight years.

So I'm working on another memoir that takes up where *Good Chinese Wife* ends. I'll weave in my trips to Shanghai with the discovery of my relative who lived in Shanghai and what he did there during and after the war. My working title is *Once Upon A Time in Shanghai*. ✎



Writer and founder of the award-winning blog *Speaking of China*, Jocelyn Eikenburg is one of the most prominent voices on the web for

Chinese men and Western women in love. She draws on her own marriage to a Hangzhou native to explore love, family and relationships in China through her writing. Her writing credits include *Matador*, the *Global Times* and the *Idaho State Journal*.

Jocelyn found her passion for writing — as well as her true love — while living and working for five and a half years in China, including Zhengzhou, Hangzhou and Shanghai. A Cleveland, Ohio native, Jocelyn is currently working on a memoir about love and marriage in China.