

Meet Pat

How the new generation of half-pats is changing the face of our world

----- by Mark Godfrey

Brian Bucsit, who was personal trainer to the rock band Pearl Jam, took a severe pay cut to come to Beijing in 2004 with his wife and son. "China was never really in my sights," says the 35-year-old, "until my wife decided to study Sinology."

Bucsit's wife Katja Sassi, wrote her Master's thesis on the lives of Beijing's "half-pats" defining the group primarily as foreigners coming here to develop their careers. Before the arrival of the half-pat, most of China's foreign community came here on fat expat packages and lived in exclusive communities. Half-pats, meanwhile, settle for pay and apartments that look a lot more local.

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According to Sherry Xiao, a partner at the Shanghai offices of the human resources consultancy, JLJ Group, half-pats, which make up about 40 percent of the workforce in executive positions in China-based companies, take home a salary about half of their expat equivalents. The typical half-pat might have medical or accident insurance coverage thrown in, but luxuries like education allowances are excluded.

Belgian actress and model Shannti Dinnoo is a half-pat living the Chinese dream. She reckons pay



and conditions are better for actors in Europe, but there just aren't the same opportunities. China means "more work, more challenges, more excitement," says Dinnoo, who was cast in a TV commercial within a month of arriving in Beijing in September 2003.

Chinese-speaking half-pats, who come without the expense of family relocation or education, are attractive for cost-conscious employers "because their commitment is firstly to China," Sassi says. "They usually earn less but speak better Chinese than expatriates." Such discrepancies are often frustrating to half-pats who see themselves as having insider knowledge but without all the creature comforts.

The salary crunch makes settling down a tricky proposition for long-term half-pats. A mortgage on a two bedroom apartment beyond Beijing's Fifth Ring Road chews up a third of a RMB10,000 monthly salary, says five-year Beijing resident Patricia Cadena, a presenter on CCTV's Spanish channel. It often boils down to choosing to go home once a year, or choosing to own your own place.

"I am not where I want to be in terms of financial security," says Maria Gilsenan from Ireland, who moved to Shanghai in 2004 to work as a marketing executive at a real estate management company. "Friends at home are doing better financially. They have cars and mortgages."

Yet the relatively accelerated professional learning curve makes the move worthwhile for many half-pats. "I'm doing so much more professionally than friends at home or friends elsewhere in the world," says Gilsenan. "I want to differentiate myself when I go back home."

Like Gilsenan, many career-oriented half-pats are here for a China experience, but not for the long haul. Chanell Daniels, Publications Coordinator at the EU Chamber of Commerce in China, plans to return to the UK next year after less than 12 months here. "I fear that if I stay in China for much longer my career will always be associated with China," she worries. "I have also heard of problems people have had with

finding jobs that have a domestic focus in their countries of origin, or that are international without a focus on China."

For those in China for the long haul, language ability is the way to get an edge in an increasingly crowded job market. There's plenty of chances for go-getting half pats, says Ivana Vuckovic, from Serbia, who's spent 10 years building a public relations career in Beijing, where she estimates more than 80 percent of foreign PR executives are on half-pat packages. Extra skills and hard work are rewarded in half pat pay packages. "You don't get the car and the house but your worth will be reflected in holiday, pay and status."

Half-pat life has been a mixed bag for Bucsit, as China's fitness industry remains unsophisticated compared to the West. "My wife was able to follow her course," Bucsit reflects, "and my son has had a rich first three years of life."