



土牛年快乐

HAPPY YEAR OF THE EARTH OX!

Dear family, friends, and colleagues,

Happy Year of the Earth Ox! (OK, we're a little late. The Lunar New Year began January 26th.)

Perhaps we're a lot late. It's been almost two years since our last letter. 2007 and 2008 were quite busy! Alison was in China from June 2007 to June 2008, and Matt joined her there for the summer of 2007.

We lived in Beijing during the summer of 2007. Alison was brushing up her Mandarin Chinese at an intensive language program while Matt worked with IBM's China Research Lab. With all of the construction for the 2008 Olympics going on, Beijing was a dynamic but sometimes frustrating place to live.

At the end of the summer, Alison's sister and brother-in-law visited, so we took a week-long trip to the nearby province of Shandong with them. Highlights included: dodging hordes of Chinese tourists at Qufu, the birthplace of Confucius; climbing Mount Tai, a sacred Daoist mountain, and free beer samples during a tour of the Qingdao Brewery.

After a quick trip back to the US in September 2007 to defend her dissertation prospectus and celebrate the wedding of her cousin Keith, Alison returned to China for her dissertation field work. She spent the rest of the academic year in Nanjing, a large city near Shanghai. Her research focused on how lay Buddhists in the city of Nanjing are rebuilding and starting new Buddhist involvement now that restrictions on religion have relaxed. She did a lot of participant-observation at Buddhist temples and other events, and interviewed over 40 lay Buddhists about their lives.

Meanwhile, Matt has continued to enjoy his work at IBM's Visual Communication Lab. Most of his time has been occupied by Many Eyes, a public website that enables anyone to visualize their data easily and share it with others. His work over the past two years has included building interactive color maps for countries around the world, organizing a joint project with IBM's IT management group, and designing and patenting technologies to help people collaboratively develop visualization dashboards.

While Alison was in Nanjing, Matt nefariously plotted to visit several beautiful places without her. He spent New Year's 2008 scuba diving in the Red Sea with friends, followed by a brief visit to Luxor to go biking among the tombs while chased by hordes of slaving touts. In April he visited Florence, Italy for a conference, while later that spring he flew out to San Jose twice for our friends' weddings.

After Alison returned to the US in June 2008, we have been enjoying living together again. We organized a team of friends in September to participate in Hub on Wheels, a citywide bike ride to benefit Boston Public Schools. We also made a trip to the UK in January 2009 for friends' wedding with a few days exploring Edinburgh, Scotland. Compared to Boston, it was balmy across the Pond!

The biggest news is baby news. Alison's sister Gwyneth gave birth to the first grandchild, Iris Jones Eckelman, on January 9th, 2009. Iris and her parents are doing great and we have made a few trips down to New Haven to see them.

Not to steal the limelight, but we are also expecting a baby! This one in June. We're trying to get as much practice as we can with Iris, and are benefiting enormously from the experience (and hand-me-downs) from Gwyneth, and our approximately 15 cousins, friends, and colleagues who have had babies in the last 18 months. (Not kidding! We've apparently entered the baby stage of life.) All of these babies have given Alison ample opportunity to practice her knitting, the new craft she took up while in Nanjing.

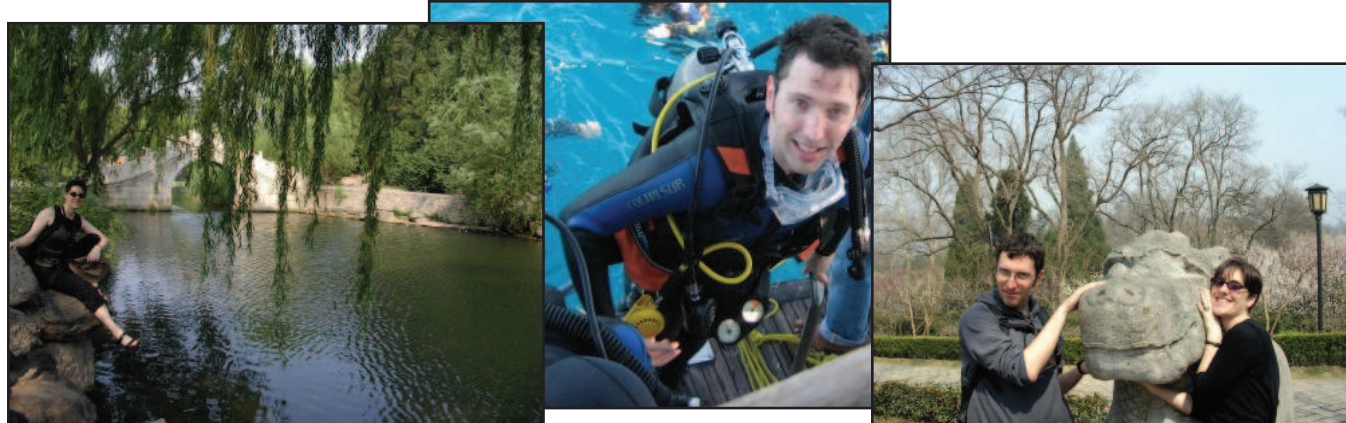
Alison is spending this year and the next writing up her dissertation, working on other research projects, and expects to graduate in the spring of 2010. Matt is launching a new project in the spring and working on papers related to it, as well as learning to play the guitar and getting an installation piece ready for the Boston CyberArts Festival in April.

This year, 4706, is the year of the Earth Ox, when (if the astrologers are to be believed) the dependable, calm, and modest attributes of the Ox are married to the pragmatic and cautious nature of the earth element. It's a fitting symbol for these tough economic times, and the values needed to persevere in the face of volatility. We wish you all the best, and that you may greet the challenges and joys of the coming year with an open mind and a ready heart.

Best Wishes,

- Alison and Matt

<http://www.jonesmckee.com/blog/>



Clockwise from top left: Alison relaxing on Tsinghua University's campus; Matt scuba diving in the Red Sea; goofing around on Plum Blossom Hill in Nanjing; taking a rest break with our Hub on Wheels team; Matt at Edinburgh Castle; Alison with her 5-week old niece Iris sporting the hat she knit for her.

