

## **Scholarly Notes: Teaching Children English in China**

**By Allison Smith**

Some Asian Studies majors at Mary Baldwin College consider teaching English in Asia—I was one of those. My job during the summer of 2004 was to teach spoken English and listening comprehension to students in middle school and high school, ages 12 to 18, in Yantai, a city in northern China, southeast of Beijing.

The Chinese school day is very different in some respects from what happens in America. For one thing, their school day lasts 15 hours, including time for meals. On the plus side, however, they do get a nap time. When I told the Chinese students that I went to school for six and a half hours a day, most of them were ready to pack up and move to the United States. Most of the students stayed at school during the week, going to see their families only on weekends. When I asked one of the first-year students if she missed her family, she said no, and seemed to think it was strange that I had asked.

Partially because of the wide age range of my students, each of my classes was very different from the others. The younger middle school kids were learning English for the first time and were always excited. The days I taught them went by quickly, because they wanted to learn as much as possible. Those classes were also smaller than those of the older students, making it easier to get them to participate and to get to know them.

The attitude of my older students was very different. Because they knew they would not be tested or graded, they tended to be apathetic, even napping in class or ignoring me. Some would simply read magazines, while once two students pulled out squirt guns and started a water fight!

I spent 45 minutes each week with every class, which didn't seem like nearly enough to improve their spoken English. With the large size of some of the classes, it was impossible for all students to practice, and they didn't seem to care. I spent time with other teachers in Yantai and we all had moments of frustration. The short time we were there didn't allow us to see real progress on the part of our students.

Nevertheless, most students realized that there were benefits to having a foreign teacher in their schools. They were exposed to American culture in a way they wouldn't have been otherwise. Since very few foreigners go to Yantai, and since before me, the English teachers had

been British, many students were excited to ask me questions about the United States—especially about American music and movies. I told them Britney Spears is not the best we have to offer!

During my time in China, I was able to see the country in a unique way, and I learned so much. I loved doing something so different from anything I had ever done before. China is a fascinating country, a wonderful place to go.