



"SARASOTA AS A COMMUNITY IS QUITE OPEN TO CHINESE MEDICINE." —RUAN JIN ZHAO, PH.D., OMD, L.AC, L.HERB

PIONEERING NEW APPLICATIONS FOR TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE

BY LINDA FRANCES JOFFE PHOTOS BY BARBARA BANKS

The Center for Traditional Chinese Medicine is the largest and most sophisticated practice of its kind in Sarasota. Located in a handsome, 6,500 square foot-plus building on South Tamiami Trail, the impressive facility includes nine acupuncture treatment rooms, a built-in music system and dimmer lighting, a recovery room, an herbal pharmacy and preparation room, laboratory and research facilities, and a conference room for teaching. It took nearly a quarter of a million dollars to completely renovate the former attorney's office into the state-of-the-art, welcoming facility that it is today.

This is quite an accomplishment for its president and guiding force, Ruan Jin Zhao, Ph.D., who grew up in China on the banks of the Yellow River, one of seven children in a family whose head of household had been exiled to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution. Dr. Zhao fully expected to spend his life as an acupuncture physician and researcher in Beijing. But circumstances intervened to bring him to the United States, and his life turned out much differently than expected.

"Sometimes I still wonder, did I do the right thing in leaving Beijing?" he muses over a cup of green tea. "I had the best lab in China, and I still miss my native country. I left at a time when the intellectuals were mistreated, and now that is changing. But when I really think about it, I am glad to be here. There is so much more opportunity for me and my family." At 43, he is living the American dream. The father of three plays tennis, drives an SUV, and takes his wife and children to Orlando for authentic Chinese food. He and his wife support causes like the Child Protection Agency, the Make-a-Wish Foundation, and the Florida West Coast Symphony.

This American life is a far cry from Henan Province in China, the cradle of Chinese culture where Dr. Ruan Jin Zhao was born. It was a fertile land for the growing of Chinese herbs and flowers, and so at an early age he was steeped in the ancient ways of healing. His father was an electrical engineer; his mother raised her large family and was an accountant for local businesses. They wanted their son to be a doctor.

At the age of 15, the bright young man began to study traditional Chinese medicine, which empha-

sizes balance and harmony, treating the body as an organic whole, mindful of the over-arching principles of Yin and Yang – the two opposing forces in the universe. "My parents pushed me into medicine, but I really didn't like it at first," says Dr. Zhao. "I wanted to be an engineer like my father, to make machines like him. How, I wondered, could these simple twigs and leaves cure diseases?"

The answer came three years into his studies, when he used his knowledge to save his grandmother's life. The local doctors had given up on curing her from a strange disease characterized by high fever and inability to keep down food. His mother urged him to help, so he reluctantly agreed to mix a formula from one of his textbooks. Within hours, his grandmother began to recover. Then 75, she lived to the ripe age of 91.

Dr. Zhao went on to receive his bachelor's and master's of science degrees in Chinese Medicine and Cellular Biology from the Henan College of Traditional Chinese Medicine, and his Doctor of Oriental Medicine degree from Beijing College of Traditional Chinese Medicine. He was also awarded a Doctor of Philosophy degree in Herbal Pharmacotherapy, Cellular Biology and Immunology from Beijing University.

"I treated a lot of patients during that time," recalls Dr. Zhao. "Once, when I went back to my hometown for a two-month vacation, I saw as many as 120 people a day. The patients follow you everywhere, day and night." While his current practice is a bit more conventional (he tries to leave by 6 p.m.), his experience in China prepared him for his busy work day at the Center for Traditional Chinese Medicine, where he sees a large number of patients each day, with the help of two assistants.

At the university, he met his future wife, Jing Liu, a pharmacology student who has worked alongside him for 15 years to prepare the personalized herbal remedies. ("She's tough," comments Dr. Zhao with a smile, "but we really enjoy working together.") They married in 1990, the same year he became, at the age of 26, the youngest professor of cellular biology and histology in the history of Beijing University. "We have a rule in China that you don't get married until you are through graduate school," he explains. They

RUAN JIN ZHAO HAS DEDICATED HIMSELF TO CANCER AND VIRAL DISEASE RESEARCH.

had a daughter, Sisi, in 1991.

The next year, everything changed.

That year, 1992, he was invited to the University of Texas in Austin as a visiting scholar, just for three months. It was a program organized by the Chinese government to study western aspects of laboratory techniques in medical microbiology and immunology. He also traveled to Newark Medical School in New Jersey, Cornell University Medical College, and John Hopkins Institute of Science. Three months turned into nine.

He eventually found himself in St. Petersburg to lecture at the University of Florida. He took a teaching position at the Florida Institute of Traditional Chinese Medicine and in 1993 became an adjunct scientist at the Tampa Bay Research Institute, a position he still holds. It became clear that he was going to stay, at least for a while.

In the meantime, Jing and their daughter were still in China.

"This was not an easy time to leave the country," Dr. Zhao remembers. Jing was able to come to America in 1993, but she had to leave Sisi behind with her parents. "When I left China, our daughter was only a month old, so we hadn't had much time to bond. But she was a year old when my wife left her, and for her, it was very, very difficult."

They thought that they could bring their daughter out in three months, but they wouldn't see her for more than three years. The day she arrived in Tampa in the arms of Jing's parents was a reunion that Dr. Zhao will never forget.

"Until we had Sisi with us, we couldn't even think about having more children," reflects Dr. Zhao. Now they have another daughter, Zhuo, age 10, and a bright-eyed, eager young boy, Meng, age two. Both girls love music – Sisi plays piano and flute, Zhuo the violin and clarinet – and attend St. Stephen's Episcopal School in Bradenton. Zhuo is also an artist and a champion ping-pong player.

Although they come from a Buddhist tradition, in this country they like to experience everything, which includes sporting activities and Christmas. "It's important to be busy," he says, "but one must also take the time to relax and enjoy life." Jing's parents live with them now, although they miss the old ways in China. Dr. Zhao's own parents still live in Beijing, and he visits them there once a year.

A chance encounter with Dr. Helga Wall-Apelt brought him to Sarasota in 1993. Wall-Apelt, who had practiced internal medicine and radiology for

more than 30 years in Germany, met Dr. Zhao in St. Petersburg. An acupuncture student, she invited him to join her in starting a center for Chinese medicine, originally located in Midtown Plaza (above Davidson's Drugs). Together they developed a reputation as pioneers in the integration of Oriental medicine into the mainstream medical practice. In 2000, Dr. Zhao bought out the practice, and he moved it to the new building in January 2006. He specializes in chronic diseases, pain management, menopause, cancer, autoimmune diseases, and pediatric care.

"Chinese medicine is a very useful, practical system," he states. "If one is well-trained, you will have a good outcome."

A well respected lecturer and author ("From Legend to Science: A History of Chinese Medicine," Vantage Press, 2004), Ruan Jin Zhao has dedicated himself to cancer and viral disease research. He is associated with the J. Lee Moffitt Cancer Center and Research Institute at USF, and he co-authored an important study on Bing De Ling, a Chinese herbal formula that was found to boost the immune systems in cancer-ridden mice, as an adjunct to chemotherapy (*Journal of DNA and Cell Biology*, 2005). He developed the compound from his storehouse of more than 700 ingredients.

"There is no single way to treat cancer," states Dr. Zhao. "Chinese medicine can play a role in both prevention and treatment."

In the future, he would like to do more teaching and hire a specialist to share his practice, so that he can develop more herbal remedies for the devastating diseases of our time, as well as for living a more healthy life. He feels the future is bright for working alongside western doctors in fields such as internal medicine, cardiology and oncology.

"Sarasota as a community is quite open to Chinese medicine," he concludes. "It's a good time and place to be in this field."

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