

# A CULTURAL Concoction

## Exchange scholar, cook, consultant brings East, West together

By KATHY LAUER-WILLIAMS  
Of The Morning Call

**F**rom the slow fluid grace of Tai Chi to the pounding rhythm of aerobics, from the basic simplicity of the wok to the multi-use complexity of a Cuisinart, the cultures of the United States and China are as different as Yin and Yang.

But to Pingjian Zhao, they also are cultures that can work together and learn from each other.

It's a philosophy Zhao demonstrates in everything she does — in her cookbook which interprets western cooking for Chinese cooks in her native China; in her hotel management system which blends elements of Chinese and western styles and in her classes at Northampton Community College where she introduces American students to her unique hotel management style as well as Chinese culture through cooking and Tai Chi, an ancient Chinese exercise emphasizing balance and breathing techniques.

"My goal is to bring the two cultures together," says Zhao.

Zhao, 40, has been teaching at Northampton Community College since 1995 as part of a scholar exchange program with Tianjin University of Commerce, about 80 miles from Beijing, where Zhao is an associate professor.

An avid student of American ways, the bi-lingual Zhao was eager for the opportunity to join the exchange program. It's been an experience she's glad she didn't miss.

"I knew a lot of background [about the United States]," she says. "I thought Americans would be different. But I learned all people are the same."

Growing up in China in the 1960s, Zhao didn't attend elementary or high

school as a child because many schools were closed during China's Cultural Revolution. She began working at age 16 doing a variety of different jobs.

"Nobody was teaching," she says. "We did labor work. I started from the very basics."

Despite her lack of early formal schooling, when she was 22, Zhao went to Tianjin Teachers' University where she got a bachelor of science in physics in 1980. She began teaching physics at Tianjin University of Commerce.

For Zhao, everything changed in 1987 when China opened its doors to the West. Suddenly the country was building hotels for the new influx of tourists. However, the Chinese, unfamiliar with hotels, didn't know how to manage the new businesses.

"China just opened to the outside world," says Zhao. "There were new hotels being built, but not a lot of people had that kind of knowledge."

Zhao realized the boom in hotels offered new opportunities for the Chinese and educated professionals would be needed to run the hotels. "It was something I knew I really wanted to learn," she says.

Despite her eagerness to learn the field, Zhao discovered there was little background on the subject available in China. Her dean at Tianjin University of Commerce decided to go to America to gain knowledge to set up a department in hotel management at the university.

Zhao, who meanwhile had gotten her MBA through Oklahoma City University, had become fluent in English, which enabled her to learn hotel management topics from American sources.



"I started doing research and realized it was based on a totally different organization system," she says.

Meanwhile, the government was relying on foreign groups to run the new hotels.

According to Zhao, the cultural difference between the foreign entrepreneurs and the Chinese government caused a lot of problems.

"The foreign groups were always fighting with the government and couldn't establish a good relationship," she says. She adds some of the differences were almost insurmountable.

"They have totally different financial systems and different accounting," says Zhao. "It was the state versus private management. Even human resources are different. In China, you never got fired. The government is king."

At the new Tianjin Palace Hotel, a foreign group had started to run the hotel but then left, leaving behind many problems. Zhao was asked to try to straighten things out.

"It wasn't working," she says. "The systems couldn't connect. I thought I could pull them together. I set up a management system that was more efficient and the hotel became successful."

Zhao also was asked to consult on management strategy at Bangchui Island Hotel.

Since there were no textbooks on hotel management in China, Zhao began writing one herself.

"Everywhere hotels were importing expensive equipment, but they didn't know how to use it," she says.

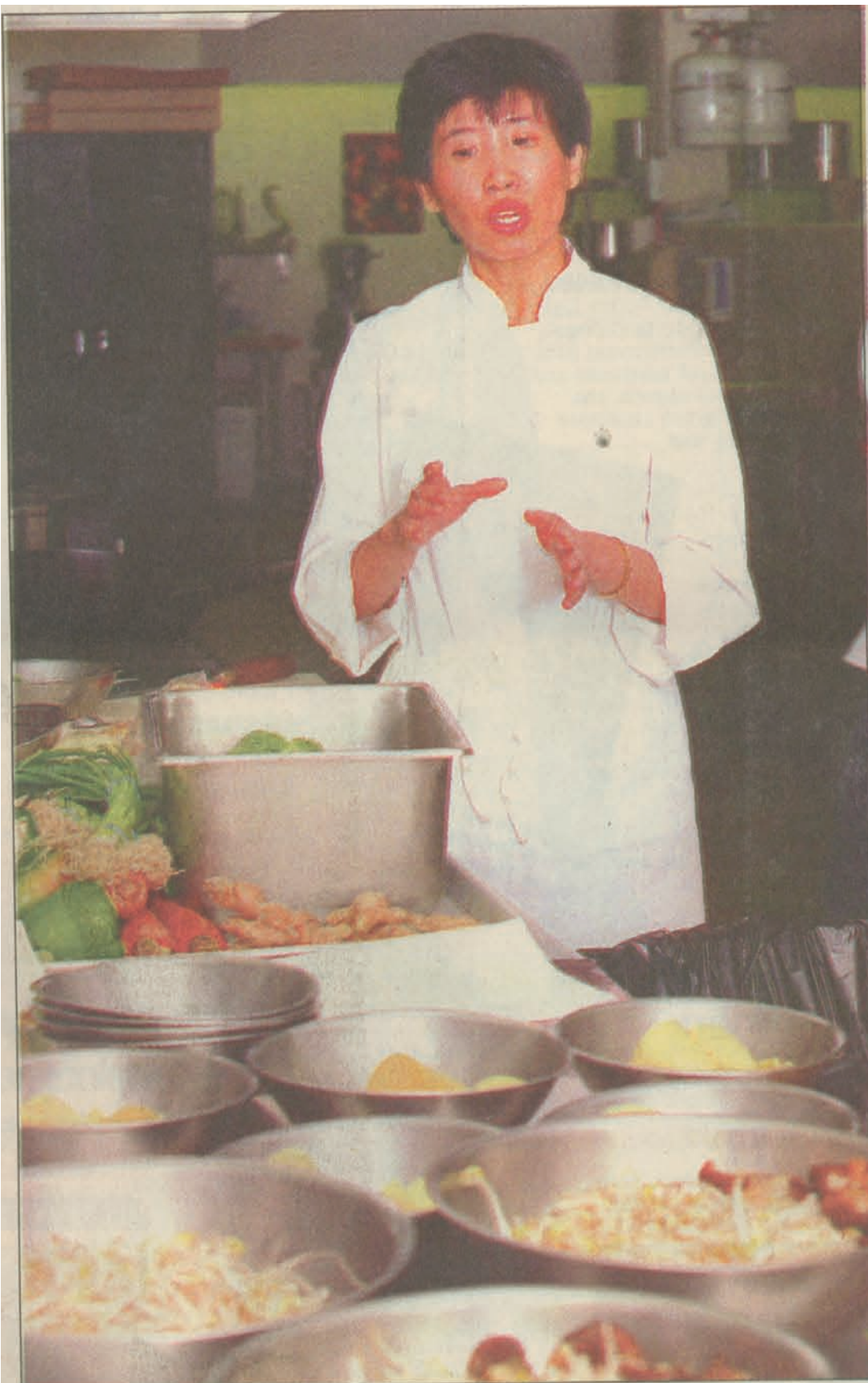
Her textbook on Hotel Equipment and Facility Management was published in 1993. She admits much of what she learned was from actually working in hotels.

At Tianjin University of Commerce, Zhao became the division director of hospitality management, teaching classes in hotel management, hotel information systems and equipment management. She also became vice president of the Yan tai Peninsula Holiday Resort.

She developed a new computer application for hotel management in China and her subsequent class in the field received certification from the American Hotel and Motel Association in 1995. It is this class in hospitality computer management which she has introduced at Northampton Community College.



Photo Courtesy of Northampton Community College  
Zhao, who developed a new computer application for hotel management in China, teaches students at NCC.



YOUNG HONG / Special to The Morning Call

**Cook, author and teacher Pingjian Zhao lectures to a class at Northampton Community College. At left, a dish of bean sprouts and mushrooms.**

"It is important that students have the knowledge they need before they work in a hotel," she says.

Zhao has published other textbooks on modern restaurant management and hospitality occupational ethics.

Meanwhile, Zhao who had always enjoyed cooking, got her master chef certification in 1989. Her desire to be a master chef was sparked by her work in hotel management.

"The head chef is one of most difficult to control," says Zhao. "If you don't have the education, he won't obey you."

Zhao's specialty is Beijing cooking. She says of the four main styles of Chinese cooking — Szechuan, Shanghai and Cantonese — Beijing cooking most relies on traditional recipes.

"It is not spicy, but solid strong food," she says. "It's mostly basic with rice, fish, shrimp from the capital of China. Many are very old traditional dishes."

Zhao says the biggest difference between American cooking and Chinese cooking is the number of implements.

"You use a lot of things," she says. "We use one wok for everything and one steamer. We don't use a lot of utensils."

The dilemma of cooking western food with few utensils prompted Zhao to write her cookbook, "Simple Methods of Western Food Preparation," in which she redesigned Western recipes using Chinese utensils and condiments.

"There is a lot of interest in Western cooking, so my book sold very well," she says. "I had to change some condiments you just can't find in China, and a

double boiler is unheard of."

In addition to her hotel management classes, Zhao says she enjoys teaching American students about Chinese cooking. She says the biggest complaint from her students is that there's too much cutting.

"In Chinese cooking, we keep all food on the table uniform in size," she says. "We cut everything the same. The broken surfaces cook more easily and get a different taste."

She says many students are familiar with food from Chinese restaurants, but she explains most are Chinese-American and the original recipes have changed.

"I cook the Chinese way," she says. "All the foods I use are traditional. It's a different taste, but the students like it."

She says cooking has a strong cultural meaning in China as well.

"On Sunday we got up early, shop, and then chop the food," she says. "We make dumplings and they take a long time. The whole family works together, talking."

Zhao whose daughter, Xingfu Chen, is in China, says she misses her family, but talks to them frequently on the phone. Despite the separation from her family, she says her stay in Bethlehem has been a good experience.

"The people are very nice here," she says. "Many of my students are already working in the field, so we can discuss what they've learned."

Zhao will be teaching classes at Northampton Community College through the spring semester of 1997.