

Working at the same place in similar fields, Michael S. Smith and Chang-Hong Yu enjoy a situation not too unusual among married couples. Not so ordinary is their line of work. They are both physicists at Oak Ridge National Laboratory (ORNL), pursuing studies of the processes involved in cataclysmic stellar explosions and exotic, highly unstable nuclei.

Michael is an award-winning astrophysicist (among his recognitions are the Presidential Early Career Award); Chang-Hong's work in nuclear physics exploits the Holifield Radioactive Ion Beam Facility's ability to replicate conditions believed to occur in supernova explosions.

Two things about ORNL lured Michael there in 1992: the Holifield Facility, which was gearing up with new and unique capabilities for astrophysical studies; and Chang-Hong, a postdoc from the nearby University of Tennessee who he had met at a conference. Soon after arriving at the lab, however, there came a dramatic twist: Just as Michael began his research at ORNL, Chang-Hong left for the University of Rochester.

Nevertheless, love endured. They married in 1994 and Chang-Hong joined the ORNL physics staff the following year.

The Smiths, who include son, Kai, 10, and daughter, Alia, 4, embrace Chinese culture. Both children are bilingual and attend a weekend school on Chinese language and culture. Chang-Hong, a top student in her native Szechuan Province city of Chengdu, helped form a local Chinese dance ensemble that dazzles audiences with its precision and color.

Michael teaches the Asian martial art of Wu Shu and competes, often victoriously, in China. His skills come to the forefront as his hands slice the air during conversations about his research. Michael, in fact, was recently recognized as ORNL's top science communicator.

Michael and Chang-Hong prove that you can unlock the secrets of exotic nuclei and document the cosmic origins of elements, and still have time to raise a family and enjoy a hobby or two.

Text: Bill Cabage, ORNL

Photos: ORNL and courtesy of Michael Smith and Chang-Hong Yu



“By the time I can look in the refrigerator to see what is left over, Chang-Hong can whip up a gourmet spicy Chinese dish.”

Michael Smith



“People are always very surprised to learn that the dancer they just saw is a senior nuclear physicist! I really enjoy doing both and am proud that I can do both well.”

Chang-Hong Yu

