

# **EAST BAY BUSINESS TIMES**

## **ENTERPRISE**

### **Profile**

## **Weiping Xia: Sending U.S. tech back home**

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For Weiping "William" Xia, going back to Guizhou province in his native China is more than just business. The 44-year-old vice president and one of the founders of Oakland's Han's Technologies Inc. saw a province where only 20 percent of the people had water, and, until recent years, had no wastewater treatment plant.

"These people are not farmers," Xia said. "These people are government workers."

Xia lived in the province's capital, Guiyang, as a young graduate student, and probably never imagined he would return 20 years later to help bring the area its first wastewater treatment plant. But in 1998, when business began to open up in China, Xia saw an opportunity. He still had local contacts and eventually was able to land a contract to design the plant, which would help serve the city's 3 million people. "It's very exciting," Xia said of seeing the plant built and watching the residents' lives improve. "They know you have a heart for them."

**About 90 percent of the plant's technology comes from the United States, and Xia considers it a showcase for his engineering firm, which specializes in water pollution control technologies. Since then, Han's has done about \$12 million worth of business across China. It was the first company to develop a U.S.-China joint environmental consulting firm in the country. In all, the venture, called Shenzhen Han's Environmental Technology and Engineering Co., has helped build five wastewater treatment plants.**

**Guizhou is a poor region in southwest China, and not many other foreign businesses want to go there, Xia said. "They don't think that it's a business opportunity," he added.**

**Han's now is waiting to hear on funding from the Asian Development Bank on a \$400 million bundled project comprising 27 subprojects, including some for wastewater treatment and solid wastes, all in the Guizhou province.**

**A Berkeley resident and U.S. citizen, Xia spends six months out of the year in China, something he jokes his wife is not too fond of. In China, as in other Asian countries, Xia said, business is based on friendships. And doing all your business remotely just doesn't work.**

**You need to be there to make friends," Xia said.**

## **A different role**

**The role of businessman is an odd one for Xia, a chemist by education and an engineer by profession. "The company itself is an engineering firm," said Xia, who concedes that marketing does not come naturally. "We are all engineers."**

**He and a small group of engineers started Han's Technologies in March 1997, and Xia is the only original founder still there. Xia, who was tired of chemistry, says he was interested in doing something more creative and the idea of starting a company appealed to him. Han's now has 14 U.S. patents for its technologies.**

**"People are always looking for creative opportunities," he said. Still, Xia says the job has its challenges. Although he and his colleagues were able to find equity investors to start the firm, it always has been difficult landing deals with U.S. venture capitalists. They are much more interested, he added, in biotechnology and high-tech firms, and want a quicker return than Han's can offer.**

## **Fighting the hurdles**

**And doing business in China, as elsewhere in Asia, is filled with obstacles. The United States, he said, is not as interested in investing**

**the amount of money there as are other countries, such as France and Italy. What's more, it was nearly impossible for Xia to bring people from China to the United States to learn more about his business. The bureaucratic maze of obtaining visas for the visitors became so cumbersome that Xia says he finally gave up.**

**Even so, Han's Technologies has gained some recognition. This week the company was awarded the International Trade Achievement Award from the state for its "outstanding environmental projects" in China. And in April the U.S. Commerce Department awarded the company an export achievement certificate for its wastewater treatment plant in Quinzhen.**

**Xia came to the United States to study at the University of Virginia, and later, partially because of the political climate in China, he decided to stay here, where he married. "I owe a lot to the States," he said. "I like the States. I got everything from the States."**

**Xia says he spends most of his time working, but he likes to walk around Point Isabel Park in Richmond with his 2 year-old German shepherd, Dongdong.**

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