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Construction:

Fontainebleau glazing contractor no stranger to overcoming adversity

Zetian Systems founder uses profits to help young girls in rural China

By [Steve Green \(contact\)](#)

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Las Vegas businesswoman Weina Zhang says she works all the time not for the money, but to help young girls in her native China.

Zhang, chief executive and majority partner in Zetian Systems Inc., is a relatively unknown but fast-rising name in the worldwide construction industry. Her company supplies glass panels and other architectural products, mainly from China.

Her company has landed high-profile jobs at the \$2.9 billion Fontainebleau casino resort under construction on the Las Vegas Strip and at the 102-story One World Trade Center building under construction in Manhattan -- part of the complex of buildings that will replace the World Trade Center towers destroyed in the 2001 terrorist attacks.

Zhang, 36, is a serial entrepreneur who launched her business career in China as a teenager with capital of 25 cents. At that time, she traveled from village to village selling second-hand shoes on consignment.

She eventually made enough money with the shoe venture to achieve her goal of buying a pair of jeans, and it was this experience that seems to have established her sense of confidence that has propelled her into a position where she now controls a profitable company and can afford to help girls in rural China who often otherwise would have to be raised in orphanages or go without needed medical care.

Zetian Systems was founded by Zhang and partner Greg Olin four years ago and is now a certified woman-owned business, giving it an advantage in some contract bids. The word "Zetian" comes from the name of the first and only woman Empress of China. "Her spirit of change, daring vision and aspiration infuses our company," Zetian says. The company's logo, symbolizing a Phoenix, represents Zhang's personal healing from an accident in the mid-1990s in which she was severely burned and nearly died.

It's this spirit of overcoming challenges and aspiring to be better that drives Zhang and her company. And it helps explain why Zhang -- with no architectural or engineering degree or formal education in

construction -- is nevertheless rising in the ranks of the male-dominated construction industry.

The company's highest-profile job now is supplying and installing 1 million square feet of energy-efficient, tinted glass panels that make up the exterior curtain wall of the 63-story Fontainebleau resort. Zetian and its sister installation company, Z Glass, are still working on the \$61 million contract and Zhang refuses to walk away from the job even though there are uncertainties about whether the company will be paid for the remaining work there due to financial troubles for Fontainebleau's owner.

Zhang and Olin won the glass curtain wall contract for the resort by finding Chinese sources for the raw materials and fabrication at prices that are typically better than what U.S. competitors could offer.

Their connections in the construction industry, and reputation for delivering lower-cost products from China, also helped Zhang and Olin land the high-profile job at One World Trade Center, formerly called the Freedom Tower. The value of that contract for Zetian has not been disclosed. Zetian is a subcontractor on the \$82 million job for Solera Construction Inc./DCM Erectors Inc., a partnership active on building projects throughout New York and Toronto.

The construction manager for One World Trade Center is worldwide construction giant Tishman Construction Corp., which has checked out Zetian's performance at Fontainebleau.

Turnberry West Construction, builder of the Fontainebleau., reported to Tishman:

"We sent a team to China to see the sub-suppliers and manufacturing operation there, as well as performance testing observed by our 3rd party waterproofing/glazing consultant. All went well and we placed the order in early 2007, at a very favorable price compared to U.S. suppliers.

"The tower is now 95 percent finished for glazing and with very few exceptions the supply line and quality of product has been consistent and timely.

"During the installation, the install contractor failed to perform Zetian immediately set up and licensed a new entity (Z Glass) to take over the remaining 2/3's of the install, and salvaged the job for us. Overall, Zetian has performed well in all areas that were required of them at favorable prices."

"It is a small, somewhat start-up company led by its principal, Weina Zhang, and dealing with her is essential for establishing the business deal. Others will then take over project engineering and management, requiring typical (contractor-subcontractor) supervision and management. We would certainly recommend them for work in Las Vegas, and they have completed multiple curtain wall and other glass installations on large condo and commercial buildings here."

The New York job for Solera/DCM and Zetian consists of supplying and installing glass panels and bird screens around the exterior of the first 20 stories of the building -- those stories were designed as a concrete shell for security purposes.

Trade Center developer the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey came under fire from U.S. glass manufacturers for awarding the glass contract to Solera/DCM when it was learned that the partnership, through, Zetian, would obtain the glass from China. The Trade Center building is supposed to be a pro-American symbol of U.S. strength and perseverance, they said.

The U.S. glass makers also complained they had spent substantial sums designing and engineering

special glass for the project, only to see the work go to a source in China.

Gary Danowski, an official with U.S. glass giant PPG Industries, based near Pittsburgh, told USGlass magazine: "It's always hard to lose a big project and much more so one that is so prestigious. I'm not sure a more important symbol of our nation than the Freedom Tower will be seen in my career. The thought that the protective skin of this icon of America will be made from glass sourced on the other side of the planet and not local material is quite a blow."

Steve Coleman, a Port Authority spokesman, said that as a subcontractor, Zetian was caught in the middle of the controversy. He said the controversy was short-lived and that the Port Authority acted appropriately by awarding the work to the lowest qualified bidder. He noted PPG, despite its complaints, had also planned to outsource some of its work -- to Canada.

Zetian has declined comment on the controversy, but sees the World Trade Center job as a stepping stone to substantial new work in the New York area, where four more buildings are planned for the Trade Center complex and the exteriors of numerous old buildings may be re-clad with glass panels and other architectural products -- products Zetian hopes to supply from China, where it has a partnership with and a minority interest in a fabrication company.

In Las Vegas, Zetian has a small headquarters staff and until recently it had a good-sized workforce at the Fontainebleau. That was until work slowed on that project as Fontainebleau sued several banks it claimed had backed out on \$790 million of construction financing needed to finish the resort that is due to open this fall.

Zetian and sister company Z Glass reduced their workforces from 189 people to 66 people in the United States and China in recent weeks because of the slowdown in construction at Fontainebleau caused by the financing issue, but Z Glass crews remained on the job there this week despite uncertainties about when -- or if -- Zetian and Z Glass would be paid.

"They are a very good client for us. We will stay there until they tell us to leave," Zhang said, adding Zetian and Z Glass remain in good shape financially with other work at the CityCenter complex on the Las Vegas Strip and at the World Trade Center.

She stressed Zetian, with no debt and a bonding capacity of \$50 million, is not in danger of filing for bankruptcy and will have plenty of work through 2013 at the World Trade Center.

Zhang, in the meantime, is scouting the globe for potential work to add to the portfolio she and Olin have accumulated at Zetian and its predecessor companies.

Zhang's determination to overcome any setbacks at Fontainebleau is typical of her life, as related in a company biography:

Her grandfather, Fuyi Zhang, was born into farming slavery in the early 1900s and later joined the army of revolutionary and future Chinese Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong. Fuyi Zhang then moved to the Mongolia region of China to fulfill his dream of owning land and adopted a nephew, Ting Yu, who

became a school teacher and along with a Ms. Gugia would become Weina Zhang's parents.

Weina Zhang was one of the couple's three children. The first, a girl, was born in the family home without the assistance of doctors or nurses. With no healthcare in the village and hygiene difficult to maintain, she died at just 45 days old. Even in the early 1970s, the family had no running water and the village had no electricity. Heat came from a wood-burning stove.

Weina Zhang was born Oct. 20, 1972, and was named Yanhug, meaning "glory to China," just as millions of girls there were named year after year. A brother, Yanbing, was born in 1975.

"Meals consisted of corn bread and a wheat soup. Very special occasions called for an egg, and/or some milk," Weina Zhang's biography says.

Fuyi Zhang, her grandfather, became the central influence in her life.

"Although he had received no formal education, he became well known for his accounting skills and was well respected as an honest and wise neighbor. His life's principal could be summarized in the saying he repeated to Yanhug over and over again: 'If you are thirsty and in dire need of water, should a man offer you one drop at that time of need, reward him with a well,' " Weina Zhang's biography says.

Weina Zhang first attended a one-room school in 1979 along with 20 other village children. The school was a 1 1/2-mile walk each way and provided her education through the 8th grade.

At 13 years old, Yanhug decided to change her name to Venus, pronounced and spelled Weina in English.

"She was enthralled with the Greek goddesses and adopted the name of the goddess of love and beauty - Venus," her biography says.

After attending a boarding school from 9th to 12th grade, Zhang won a coveted spot at a university in Beijing and in the Fall of 1989 started studying hospitality and hotel management.

"Within a few months of commencing college, Weina's financial needs became her top priority. Her family had to take out a loan of \$130 to allow her to attend a university. It was considered a significant shame for a Chinese family to take on debt for any reason," the biography said.

She soon landed a job as an antiques saleswoman with the goal of paying her father's bank debt and becoming self-sufficient.

"Her employer, Keian Yong, offered her a commission for every sale. More importantly, he spoke English and encouraged her to learn it. That was the real ticket to success, he would say," the biography says.

Successful in sales, and seeing great opportunity in that field, she dropped out of college and within two years had saved more than \$50,000, the biography says.

At that time Shenzhen in Guangdong Province, near Hong Kong, was abuzz with opportunities as the government had selected it to become the "experiment" with capitalistic opportunities.

Zhang bought interests in a hotel, restaurant and bar property and networked with friends in the tourism industry to attract business.

"The business flourished from 1991-1996 with the explosive rise of tourists to China. The gold rush of Shenzhen became a reality. At 22 years old, Weina Zhang was reported to be one of the most successful woman business owners in Shenzhen," the biography says.

By 1996, Zhang was planning a move to New York to pursue her goal of being an international businesswoman. Then tragedy struck.

She had a serious argument with her newly announced fiancé and decided to visit a girlfriend to cool down. While taking a shower at her friend's place, she was seriously burned by a fire caused by a leaking propane tank that heated the water in the apartment.

"The terrible result was third-degree burns on her torso, arms and face. Her hair was burned away. Six months of extremely painful recovery followed. The fiancé abandoned her, along with many of those she considered friends. Only a small group stayed with her with some hope that she would survive. Her survival became the bedrock of her existence. Her fear was eliminated. She rose from the flames and re-dedicated her life. It became the single greatest transformative event of her 24 year old life. She determined to not only become more successful, but to assist the less fortunate as her success grew," the biography says.

Zhang moved to Manhattan in 1998 and later to Santa Monica, Calif., but by 2000 had not found success in the United States. Then, in 2000, she received a call from a well-known architect who had coincidentally married her best friend from Mongolia. He needed her help in China.

The architect, Veldon Simpson, was working in China in 1994 to attempt to open a casino in the mainland.

And while that never happened, Simpson saw great opportunity and stayed. He hired Zhang for a company that intended to build a casino in Las Vegas with Chinese materials. Her job was to find qualified manufacturers.

And while that casino didn't pan out, either, she developed business relationships that included one with Laurence Hallier, developer of the Panorama Towers condominiums in Las Vegas. Along the way she met up with Olin, at the time an executive with a Midwestern U.S. company called Super Sky that had collaborated with Simpson, the architect, in 1989 on the glass roof of the Circus-Circus hotel-casino in Las Vegas. Olin was in China looking for ways for Super Sky to lower its costs by using Chinese suppliers.

"The timing for a new opportunity was perfect. Weina was without a project after nearly five years of preparation. Greg Olin was seeking an opportunity to expand his career after 15 years at Super Sky. The great potential was clear: China had developed sophisticated material supply and high-quality products at relatively low cost. Within a relatively short period, Weina and Greg became partners," the company biography says.

Zhang, who became a U.S. citizen in 2006, recalls now how the fire changed her life.

"If I can overcome that, I can overcome anything," she said. "I grew up in a very poor family in Mongolia. I never give up."

And now, besides growing her business, she is focused on helping young girls in Mongolia and other parts of China who even today lack access to health care and frequently are sent to live in orphanages because of the culture in that nation that favors boys over girls. Last year, Zhang founded the Zetian Children's Foundation (www.zetianchildrensfoundation.org) with an initial contribution of \$150,000 from her company.

"The specific goal of the foundation is to locate underprivileged girls (primarily) in China and other parts of Asia and to assist with needs that are not being funded otherwise – minor or major medical treatments that will make the difference in the quality of life and/or financial support of a family to allow a girl to attend school who would otherwise need to work for the family," Zetian said. "In April, the foundation committed its financial support to eight baby girls in rural China who need both heart and cleft lip surgeries before they will be considered for adoption. The foundation will support them following their surgeries until they are paired with an adoptive family."

Having achieved financial success, Zhang said that now, "I'm really working for the girls in China."

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