“Funü nengding banbiantian” 妇女能顶半边天 (Women can hold up half the sky) is a Mao-era household phrase that most people have assumed to be a direct quote from Mao Zedong. The interesting truth is that it is actually not clear where and when Mao said or wrote it and, for that matter, whether or not it was a direct quote.1 Regardless, together with another statement known to be from Mao—“Time is different. Men and women are equals. What men can do women can also do”2—“women can hold up half the sky” has remained one of the most widespread, influential, and long-lasting revolutionary phrases from the Mao era.3 As a newly coined metaphor, “half the sky,” or banbiantian 半边天, with an emphasis on women entering the workforce for “socialist construction,” signified a fundamental change in women’s social, cultural, and public positions. Since the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), the fact that women were “told” they could work together with men has become a point of contention in the

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1 In the introduction to Holding up Half the Sky, Tao Jie states that “in 1958, during the Great Leap Forward, the government again called upon women to leave their households to participate in productive labor. And in the early 1960s, Mao Zedong, then the highest authority in the country, praised women for being an important force in production, holding up half the sky.” However, Tao does not specify the source of Mao’s statement. Holding up Half the Sky: Chinese Women Past, Present, and Future, ed. Tao Jie, Zheng Bijun, and Shirley L. Mow (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2004), xxvi. Incidentally, it is worth noting that despite the title, the book actually gives little attention to the Mao era, a common phenomenon in many books on Chinese women (unless they are specifically about the Mao era).


3 If one googles the phrase, more than 42,000 entries appear; most state that the phrase is a direct quote from Mao but none offers the source—where and when Mao made the statement.
history of the CCP-led women’s liberation movement (妇女解放运动 funü jiefang yundong), but banbianzhan has remained a commonly circulated word meaning, in part, the continuing (albeit debated) legacy of the movement and its state-sponsored and work-oriented specificities.

Broadly speaking, both inside and outside of China, there have been, since the founding of the PRC in 1949, three trends—or, to borrow Margery Wolf’s words, “thrice-told” tales—in assessing the CCP-led women’s liberation, each associated with the larger historical context. The first occurred during the early part of the Cold War, especially in the 1950s and ’60s, when China’s women’s liberation movement was admired by many third world countries and seen as a major achievement of the CCP-led Chinese Revolution and socialism. At the same time, with the iron curtain separating China from the West, the first tale of the women’s liberation movement was passed along by indirect accounts that were general and few and far between. During the second-wave women’s movement in the 1960s and ’70s in the United States, in which women were encouraged to enter the workforce and to struggle for their right to equal pay for equal work, Chinese women’s liberation, though not a model for emulation, appears to have been looked upon positively from a distance. The notion of “half the sky,” specifically, seemed to be one of the few phrases from Mao-era China that met with positive acceptance in the West, especially among left-leaning intellectuals.

The second tale, heard shortly after the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) in the early 1980s, almost completely changed the perspective. The positively perceived Chinese women’s liberation movement began to be questioned on two fronts, both inside and

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4 I refer to Margery Wolf’s A Thrice-told Tale: Feminism, Postmodernism, and Ethnographic Responsibility (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), mainly to indicate the ongoing negotiations among feminist critics, both inside and outside China, in their assessment and understanding of the CCP-led women’s liberation.

5 Official publications during the Mao era are among some of the obvious sources where positive views are found. But contacts with elite women from some of the former “nonaligned” countries after the Mao era, as reported individually by writers and others, also seem to confirm that the Chinese women’s liberation movement was once highly thought of in non-Western regions during the Cold War.