



Fighter for Half the Sky

ON MARCH 7, 2020, IN THE OCTAGON IN LAS Vegas, 30-year-old mixed martial artist Zhang Weili defended her Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) strawweight title against former champion Joanna Jedrzejczyk. Twenty-five minutes of hard-fought action, calculated strikes, precise counters and unrelenting fearlessness, it was one of the greatest fights, male or female, in the history of mixed martial arts (MMA)—and not just according to me.

Flashback to August 2019, Zhang had just become the first Chinese fighter to win a UFC title, after annihilating the reigning champion in 42 seconds. The daughter of coalminers from China's inland, Zhang transformed herself from a gym receptionist to a world champion in a short 10 years and is now enjoying a whirlwind of success. As a boxing fanatic, I followed her epic journey with great enthusiasm and pride, in awe of not only her physical prowess but even more the strength of her mind.

Zhang's breakout victories are bringing legions of new Chinese fans to MMA, a sport that is male dominated at almost every level the world over.

Many women in China take inspiration from World Champion **ZHANG WEILI**.
By **YADAN OUYANG**.

In the span of a decade, Zhang Weili, the daughter of coalminers, went from gym receptionist to MMA world champion.

Until the American Olympic judo medalist Ronda Rousey entered UFC in 2012, the only women at the events were holding ring cards in bikinis, not fighting in the octagon with gloves. In China, it is not surprising that the image of female strength Zhang represents challenged the social mores and gender stereotypes. Many questioned her ability to find a husband in the future. On Zhihu, the Chinese equivalent of Quora, users with an ego damaged from watching her fights posted a slew of comments, all essentially asking the same question: "How big of a man do I need to be in order to beat her in a fight?"

Even though Chinese women have long played an integral role in the formal economy (partly thanks to Mao Zedong's dictum "women hold up half the sky"), cultural expectations and social norms about gender have been slow to catch up. But it is beginning to change. Last month, young internet users and some consumer brands waged a boycott of video platform Bilibili over accusations of misogynistic and sexist content. The pushback led the platform to remove the content in question and issue a statement saying it "accepts and is willing to discuss the criticism."

At a time like this, some words are worth repeating no matter how many times we've heard them. Borrowing the humble words of advice from Zhang Weili: "Girls are equal to boys. Girls can achieve what boys can. You should not be simply defined as gentle or weak, you can also be brave, hardworking, persistent and independent. Never let those 'labels' define or limit you."

In September 1995, the UN gathered here in Beijing on the northern outskirts of the city to discuss how to advance the goals of equality for all women around the world. The outcome of this meeting—besides Hillary Clinton's famous speech "Women's Rights Are Human Rights"—was the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, a plan considered a visionary agenda for the empowerment of women and which presented a comprehensive global policy framework and blueprint for action.

Much has been accomplished since. Yet, there are still a lot more important and critical steps to take in all corners of the world to eliminate inequality, discrimination and harassment—and to ensure that women can fully and effectively participate and lead in all areas of life. ♦

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