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## “America’s Gunpowder Women”

*Pearl S. Buck and the Struggle for American Feminism, 1937–1941*

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**ABSTRACT** This article uncovers the little-known story of how the novelist Pearl S. Buck used her authority as a popular expert on China to pose a direct challenge to her white middle-class American readers in the post-suffrage era. Through provocative comparisons between Chinese and white American women, Buck alleged that educated white women had failed to live up to their potential, and she demanded that they earn social equality by advancing into male-dominated professions outside the home. Although many of her readers disagreed, the novelist’s challenge was welcomed by the National Woman’s Party (NWP), which sought to abolish all gender-based discrimination and preferential treatment through the introduction of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). This story revises our understanding of the post-suffrage era by showing the vibrancy of feminist debates in the final years of the Great Depression, and it provides a new way into seeing how racialized thinking shaped American conceptions of women’s progress between first- and second-wave feminist movements. **KEYWORDS** Pearl S. Buck, feminism, National Women’s Party, Equal Rights Amendment, Great Depression

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It is well known that the American novelist Pearl S. Buck shaped America’s popular imagination of China in the 1930s with the bestseller *The Good Earth* (1931).<sup>1</sup> Much less known is the story of how she also made a mark in the public discussions of American women’s struggle for equal rights in the final years of the Great Depression.

This article recovers that lost history by examining Buck’s now largely neglected essays on the subject of women’s rights and various American women’s responses. Buck argued that the majority of American women were “gunpowder women”—white middle-class housewives who had been educated to blow up the American gender hierarchy yet remained dormant

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1. Michael J. Hunt, “Pearl Buck—Popular Expert on China, 1931–1949,” *Modern China* 3, no. 1 (1977): 33–64; T. Christopher Jespersen, *American Images of China, 1931–1949* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996); Kang Liao, *Pearl S. Buck: A Cultural Bridge across the Pacific* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1997).

in their homes, discontent with their inability to pursue a life of fulfillment.<sup>2</sup> Buck's words reached a wide audience, including prominent professional women such as Mary Ritter Beard and Margaret Mead; mainstream women's organizations such as the National Woman's Party (NWP) and the American Association of University of Women (AAUW); as well as ordinary readers of *Harper's Magazine* and *The Reader's Digest*. Her ideas were debated so widely that even her critics acknowledged her importance. Beard, in her landmark study *Woman as Force in History* (1946), explained that Buck, for all her shortcomings, deserved to be recognized for bringing the "women-men debate" out of small feminist circles to a "larger forum represented by popular magazines."<sup>3</sup>

If Buck's contemporaries recognized her as an important voice, historians of American women have largely focused on other historical actors.<sup>4</sup> The absence of Buck in most accounts of U.S. women's history might be due to her self-representation. "I myself am not and have never been a feminist or active in woman's suffrage," she described herself in 1940 to Mildred H. McAfee, president of Wellesley College, even as she searched for a venue to publish her writings on the subject of American women.<sup>5</sup> Buck deliberately cast herself as an outsider. As historian Karen Leong has argued, Buck strategically cast herself as someone "who intimately understood China and who brought an outsider's fresh and critical perspective to the United States," a strategy that "contributed to her growing prominence as a cultural mediator and political commentator."<sup>6</sup> Paradoxically, this strategy might have also contributed to her obscurity, as she refused to fully align herself with any established strand of feminism that became subjects of later historical studies. Building on the pioneering work of literary scholar Peter Conn who has restored Buck as an important figure in American literary history, this article

2. For a summary of the "Gunpowder Women" article, see Karen Leong, "The China Mystique: Mayling Soong Chiang, Pearl S. Buck, and Anna May Wong in the American Imagination" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1999), 333.

3. Mary Ritter Beard, *Women as Force in History: A Study in Traditions and Realities* (New York: Macmillan, 1946), 41–46.

4. The only survey of U.S. women's history that mentions Buck's significance is William Chafe, *The American Woman: Her Changing Social, Economic, and Political Roles, 1920–1970* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 109–110.

5. Pearl S. Buck to Mildred H. McAfee, October 21, 1940, Folder 70, Box 2, The *Yale Review* Records, 1911–1949, Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Conn. (hereafter *Yale Review* Records).

6. Karen J. Leong, *The China Mystique: Pearl S. Buck, Anna May Wong, Mayling Soong, and the Transformation of American Orientalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 34.

reestablishes Buck as a significant voice in U.S. women's history of the Depression era.<sup>7</sup>

In her attempts to incite America's "gunpowder women" to action, Buck took advantage of her readers' long held-assumption that Chinese women were particularly oppressed—views she herself had popularized in *The Good Earth*. In a provocative comparison, she implied that white middle-class American women, if they did not make use of their privilege of education to work outside the home, should not assume that they were superior to the Chinese. In these comparisons, Buck's portrayals of Chinese women were often contradictory. At times she deployed stereotypical images of foot binding and so-called "backwardness" to describe the plight of Chinese women. At other times, she described them as more advanced than white middle-class American women, even calling on American mothers to emulate Chinese mothers' child-rearing methods. In this sense, Buck espoused both conventional American Orientalism (building on nineteenth-century European Orientalism to portray the East as a primitive, backward place inferior to the West) and what historian Judy Wu calls "radical Orientalism" (reversing the power relationship between the East and West to portray the East as a source of inspiration to improve the West).<sup>8</sup> This inconsistency revealed that Buck was less interested in providing an accurate, comprehensive account of Chinese women's lives than in using the Chinese as a foil for highlighting white middle-class American women's problems. With this approach, she continued a pattern from the early twentieth-century among white American women that, according to literary scholar Karen Kuo, created "strategic differences from and similarities to Asian women" in order to articulate their anxieties about changing gender relations in the United States.<sup>9</sup>

Buck faced significant pushback to these arguments, from readers who pointed out that economic realities made it impossible for most women to

7. Peter Conn spends several pages on Pearl S. Buck's engagement with feminist politics, but this article is the first detailed analysis of her writings on the subject as well as of her interactions with prominent women's rights activists. Peter Conn, *Pearl S. Buck: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 203–7, 233–36, 246–49.

8. Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, *Radicals on the Road: Internationalism, Orientalism, and Feminism During the Vietnam War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013); Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978); Leong, *The China Mystique*; Mari Yoshihara, *Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945–1961* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003).

9. Karen Kuo, *East Is West and West Is East: Gender, Cultures, and Interwar Encounters between Asia and America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), 7.

pursue the life of fulfillment she advocated. Instead of blaming white middle-class women for wasting their educational opportunities, these readers attested that the dire economic situation of the Great Depression and the enduring culture of sexism prevented even well-educated women from entering professions dominated by men. More to the point, they added, most American women were not privileged enough to receive a college education to begin with, and an unprecedented number of women were already working outside the home out of economic necessity.<sup>10</sup> As these readers argued, Buck's homogenizing portrait of American women did not reflect the realities of most women during the Depression.

Yet Buck was not the only thinker to focus solely on the problem of educated white middle-class women. Many of the criticisms made against Buck could also be applied to the National Woman's Party (NWP), an organization that became so enthusiastic about her work that it eventually recruited her. The NWP claimed "feminism" as their own term and sustained one of the most enduring battles among women's organizations in the post-suffrage era by proposing the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), which sought to abolish all discriminations and preferential treatments based on sex. Because the NWP focused solely on sex discrimination and ignored class issues, the ERA was contested by various women activists—labor feminists, social feminists, and a coalition of middle-class reformers—who were committed to improving women's social status without compromising the protections provided by the various sex-based social welfare laws that their predecessors had fought to put in place.<sup>11</sup>

For a brief moment, Buck and the NWP enjoyed a mutually beneficial partnership. Buck shared her popularity with the struggling organization by publicly endorsing the ERA. The NWP provided Buck legitimacy within feminist circles. But their partnership did not last. Even though Buck's popular writings about American women did not speak to the struggles of

10. Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 250–73; Susan Ware, *Holding Their Own: American Women in the 1930s* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982).

11. Susan D. Becker, *The Origins of the Equal Rights Amendment: American Feminism Between the Wars* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981); Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987); Kathryn Kish Sklar, "Why Were Most Politically Active Women Opposed to the ERA in the 1920s?," in *Women and Power in American History*, eds. Kathryn Kish Sklar and Thomas Dublin, 2nd ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2002), 154–61; Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

non-white American women, she challenged the NWP, an organization that was notorious for ignoring the racial dimension of women's struggles, to address the struggles of African Americans. On the eve of World War II, she departed from the feminist scene to focus on fighting for African Americans' equal rights.<sup>12</sup>

This article chronologically narrates Buck's engagement with women's activism, her struggle to navigate through the complex matrix of gender, class, and race that characterized the feminist debates of the Depression years. The first section examines her two popular essays and their reception, the second section explores her partnership with the NWP, and the last section follows the ways in which her ideas were appreciated by various women's organizations that were either opposed or neutral to the NWP, demonstrating that Buck's critique actually had a much wider appeal than the NWP's equal rights feminism. Throughout, the article demonstrates that debates over educated white women's discontentment—a topic usually associated with the more prosperous 1920s and the postwar years—remained robust during the Depression.<sup>13</sup>

In hindsight, it is easy to see the limits of Buck's feminism. She prioritized gender over class at a time when Americans were most concerned about the economy. But given that Americans during the Depression were prone to see societal problems primarily through the lens of the economy, it is all the more remarkable that Buck's critique was taken seriously and sometimes even celebrated. Indeed, Buck's historical significance is not whether she accurately described the situation of American women during the Great Depression. Rather, it lies in the fact that she was able to make the problem of educated white middle-class American women a subject of popular discussion in an unlikely era.

#### BUCK'S COMPARISONS OF AMERICAN AND CHINESE WOMEN

Born to a West Virginian missionary family in 1892, Buck spent most of her life in China before permanently returning to the United States in 1934. By the time she arrived, she had already become a major celebrity as the author

12. On the National Women's Party and African American feminists, see Estelle B. Freedman, *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2002), 79–83. On Buck's activism for African American rights, see Conn, *Pearl S. Buck*, 258–69.

13. For the decline of the debates on women's professional opportunities in the 1930s, see Lois Scharf, *To Work and to Wed: Female Employment, Feminism, and the Great Depression* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980).

of *The Good Earth* (1931). Although the story was told from the perspective of a male peasant named Wang Lung, *The Good Earth* showed that Buck was particularly interested in portraying the struggles of Chinese peasant women. Wang Lung's wife, O-lan, is sold by her parents as a slave to a wealthy family who then gives her away to Wang Lung to be his wife. She toils side-by-side with her husband in the fields when she is not nursing their children, and she enables her family to survive a great famine. She eventually allows her husband to achieve upward social mobility as a wealthy landowner, while receiving little credit for her role.<sup>14</sup> Although O-lan dies in *The Good Earth*, women continued to play important roles in Chinese families in Buck's subsequent novels, including *Sons* (1933), *The Mother* (1933), and *A House Divided* (1935).

Buck's writings on the subject of American women appeared at the height of her literary career, in 1937, when the film adaptation of *The Good Earth*, together with the news of the Japanese invasion of China, increased the demand for Buck's works.<sup>15</sup> First serialized in *Good Housekeeping* magazine, the story "This Proud Heart" centered on a white female sculptor who refused to make a choice between her career and her family. "In short," Buck described the story's protagonist to her agent, "she can give up nothing, and she tries to be artist, wife and mother." In stark contrast to her previous works, there was no mention of China in the entire story. The book version of *This Proud Heart* sold more than thirty thousand copies, more than any of her previous books since the sequel to *The Good Earth*. But Buck was disappointed that it did not spark a critical debate on the status of women in the United States.<sup>16</sup>

Far more effective, it turned out, was taking advantage of her celebrity status as the nation's most popular China expert and approaching the issue from a perspective of someone who had lived most of her life in a foreign country. Buck debuted this approach in a 1938 essay titled "America's Medieval Women," published by *Harper's Magazine*; the essay was praised even by

14. Buck, *The Good Earth* (New York: John Day Company, 1931).

15. While the novel sold about 2 million copies, the movie version drew about 23 million viewers. See A. Cerf Bennett, "A Matter of Timing," *Publishers Weekly*, February 12, 1938, 838–40.

16. Buck to David Lloyd, June 9, 1937, Folder 13, Box 6, David Lloyd Agency Records on Pearl S. Buck, Manuscripts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library, Princeton, N.J. (hereafter David Lloyd Agency Records). For more on *This Proud Heart* and contemporary receptions of the novel, see Leong, "The China Mystique," 322–27; and Robert Shaffer, "Feminist Fiction in a 'Non-Feminist' Age: Pearl S. Buck on Asian and American Women, 1930–1963," *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 7, no. 1 (2016): 6–10.

those who disagreed with her argument. For example, in her critical response to Buck's essay, Millicent Taylor of the *Christian Science Monitor* conceded that any criticism of the United States made by an American woman who had lived "largely in the Orient" was "likely to be at least fresh," and when that American woman was Pearl Buck the criticism was "worth considering." Indeed, it was not an essay that could be easily dismissed.<sup>17</sup>

In "America's Medieval Women," Buck disrupted the widely accepted notion that the United States had a superior "civilization" to that of China. When she returned from China, she realized that the United States was "a backward nation in everything except in the making and using of machines," and its people "nowhere more backward" than in their attitude toward women. Women in America (by whom she meant white middle-class and upper-class women) received better education than women anywhere else in the world. Yet American society "shut the door of [the] home" all the same when these women attempted to apply what they had learned.<sup>18</sup>

In her assessment, men were not solely responsible for this "medieval tradition." In a bookstore, Buck overheard a young woman refusing to buy any books written by female authors simply because she "disliked" them. "What she really meant," Buck explained to her readers, "was she despised women so much that she actually disliked women who did anything beyond the traditional jobs that the average women do." That this young woman seemed far from atypical further infuriated Buck: "There are thousands of women who uphold medieval tradition in America more heartily than do men—just as in China it is the ignorant tradition-bound women who have clung to foot binding for themselves and their daughters."<sup>19</sup>

By making the reductive argument that American sexism was "just as" backwards as Chinese "foot binding," Buck deliberately deployed one of the most widely circulated stereotypical images of Chinese backwardness to provoke her readers. Foot binding, of course, was not the same as bondage to the domestic sphere, but such an exaggeration was appropriate for an essay that described American culture as "medieval." Because words like "medieval" and "backwards" were rarely used to describe American society, Buck probably believed that associating such words with the status of the average white

17. Millicent Taylor, "Through the Editor's Window," *Christian Science Monitor*, July 27, 1938, 7.

18. Pearl S. Buck, "America's Medieval Women," *Harper's Magazine*, August 1938, 226.

19. *Ibid.*, 228.

middle-class woman would prompt her readers to respond more passionately, perhaps even angrily, than they did to *This Proud Heart*.

To further provoke her American readers, Buck also inserted in the same essay a short unsubstantiated passage on recently modernized China to suggest that some Chinese women might be even better off than their white American counterparts. Whereas in the United States the education of middle-class women did not seem to translate into increased participation of these women in the fields of medicine, finance, and the arts, according to Buck, in China “one of the best modern banks was run and controlled entirely by modern Chinese women.” Although she did not specify, Buck was probably referring to the Shanghai Women’s Commercial and Savings Bank, which had been founded in the 1920s.<sup>20</sup>

The main point of Buck’s essay was not to conclude that the United States was “backwards” or worse off than China; rather it was to open a discussion about how white elite and middle-class American women might make better use of their education. While acknowledging that white middle-class American women were “the most privileged in the world,” Buck pointed out that education of these women—their most important privilege—only served as “the root of the[ir] discontent.” Education of women in the United States did not free them from traditional thinking, she propounded. Rather, it only made them “discontent” and “restless” by making them dream of things that they could never attain.<sup>21</sup>

According to Buck, women’s discontent was not simply a women’s problem. Women, as mothers, shaped men’s thinking and the male-female relationship from an early age. Echoing the contemporary American “ego psychology” influenced by Sigmund Freud, and reflecting the anti-maternalist critique that was on the rise among white middle-class women, Buck blamed mothers for scarring their sons’ relationship with women forever. Men, she said, were “naturally” “afraid of women or they would not cling so to tradition.” Furthermore, this fear that boys developed from their interactions with “their imperious, discontented mothers,” later evolved into “fear of their wives and fear of all women, in industry as well as at home.” To solve the problem, then, mothers had to become less discontent. To make them less discontent, there were only two choices: either they had to be “kept ignorant” so they could

20. Ibid., 229. On Shanghai Women’s Commercial and Savings Bank, see Zhaojin Ji, *History of Modern Shanghai Banking: The Rise and Decline of China’s Finance Capitalism* (Armonk: M. E. Sharp, 2003), 129.

21. Ibid., 228–29.

never dream of equality, or they had to be “given equal opportunity with men to use what they have been taught.”<sup>22</sup>

Not all critics agreed with Buck’s assessment. Millicent Taylor found Buck’s argument unconvincing, especially the comparison between the Chinese bank run by women and the American banks run by men. Simply because there were exceptional women bankers in China, Taylor countered, did not mean the whole sex in China was better off than that in the United States. Exceptional women did not represent all women. A better way to assess the success and failure of American women, Taylor insisted, was to study them historically. “Chart the decades and one is amazed at the progress women have made in comparatively few years,” Taylor argued, “In one generation, while still keeping their traditional jobs as managers of the homes of the nation, American women have penetrated into practically every business and profession.”<sup>23</sup>

The historian Mary Ritter Beard resented Buck’s ahistorical, culturally comparative approach as well. When she received a letter from her friend Miriam Holden fuming over the article, Beard vented, “that awful article by Pearl Buck made me sick to my marrow as it evidently did you too.” Beard, whose own essays had been recently rejected by *Harper’s Magazine* and *Ladies’ Home Journal*, expressed her frustration at the magazine industry: “Buck employs all the cheap and nasty gossip which makes a sensation. I attempt a little history but history is emphatically tabu [sic] in all the magazines.”<sup>24</sup>

Beard probably begrudged the attention that Buck received because, as a former suffragist standing aloof from factional strife among feminists, Beard was striving to empower women by producing histories of American women that would liberate them from their sense of subjugation and victimization. It was not that Beard was opposed to comparative approaches or writing about Asian women. She and her husband Charles Beard lived in Japan and had visited China in the early 1920s; she later wrote many articles about Japanese women, eventually publishing a Japanese counterpart to her famous book *Woman as Force in History* (1946), titled *Force of Women in Japanese History*

22. Ibid., 228–29, 231–32. On American “ego psychology,” see Mari Jo Buhle, *Feminism and Its Discontents: A Century of Struggle with Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 130–40. On the rise of anti-maternalism during the interwar period, see Rebecca Jo Plant, *Mom: Transformation of Motherhood in Modern America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

23. Taylor, “Through the Editor’s Window,” 7.

24. Mary Ritter Beard to Miriam Holden, July 29, 1938 in Nancy F. Cott, ed., *A Woman Making History: Mary Ritter Beard through Her Letters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 172.

(1953). For Beard, who hoped to help women learn about their own historical importance by building the World Center for Women's Archives (WCWA), Buck's ahistorical approach undermined the premise of her own enterprise. Reducing the long history of women struggling for equal rights to a history of women holding onto a "medieval tradition," Buck put the blame on women, rather than on structural barriers, for the challenges that continued to hold women back from achieving their potential.<sup>25</sup>

Beard expressed relief when she saw that *Harper's Magazine* published a rebuttal to "America's Medieval Women" written by Grace Adams, who held a Ph.D. in psychology from Cornell. Adams pushed Buck to place the status of women in historical perspective, rather than describing it with an anachronistic word like "medieval." "[E]ven though they may hold few political offices and even fewer exalted positions in the business world," Adams argued, white American women "have already accomplished what their ancestresses hoped some day they might achieve." From the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 to the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920, she insisted, women had made tremendous progress.<sup>26</sup>

But Alma Lutz, a columnist for the official organ of the National Woman's Party (NWP), defended Buck against such historical arguments made by women like Taylor, Beard, and Adams. In her *Equal Rights* column, Lutz expressed her resentment at women who seemed to take consolation in the fact that women had made progress. She explained that "feminists" were "inclined to recount, for their own encouragement and to impress others, the strides they have made," but that they must overcome this inclination to "acknowledge that women in the mass still cling to false tradition about themselves." Lutz found Buck's opinion "especially valuable" because as a woman coming from China she had a perspective "the average American woman could not possibly have." The only point on which Lutz disagreed was Buck's suggestion of choosing between two options to solve the problem of women's discontentment. "There is only one choice to make," Lutz contested, "We must break down tradition and give women equality of opportunity."<sup>27</sup>

25. On Mary Beard, see Nancy F. Cott, "Putting Women on the Record: Mary Ritter Beard's Accomplishment," in Cott, ed., *A Woman Making History*, 1–62; Mary Trigg, *Feminism as Life's Work: Four Modern American Women through Two World Wars* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014).

26. Beard, *Women As Force in History*, 41–43; Grace Adams, "American Women Are Coming Along," *Harper's Magazine*, March 1939, 365–72.

27. Alma Lutz, "A Feminist Thinks It Over," *Equal Rights* 24, September 1, 1938, 317.

Buck's article, as the official organ of the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs (NFBPWC) noted, "caused no little furor among men as well as women." Yet from the perspective of the magazine industry, such furious reactions were markers of success. The most significant sign of Buck's commercial success was an offer from the most widely read periodical in the country, *The Reader's Digest*, to publish a follow-up article.<sup>28</sup>

The follow-up article reached an even wider circle of readers as it was published on the heels of the announcement that Buck had become the first American woman to win the Nobel Prize in literature in 1938. When *The Reader's Digest* arranged to have the article appear in *Harper's Magazine* in advance of its own publication, *Harper's Magazine* capitalized on the author's new accomplishment by advertising that "the Nobel Prize winner" would "unquestionably provoke immediate controversy."<sup>29</sup>

Buck's follow-up article was provocative indeed. In it, she identified what she called America's "gunpowder women": white middle-class women who were neither "talented" to the point of having successful careers outside the home nor "completely satisfied" with motherhood and housekeeping. "Gunpowder women," she explained, faced no "actual adversity." They were "not compelled to earn money to keep from starvation," and, after taking care of their home and children, they had "surplus time, energy, and ability which they [did] not know how to use." What made them problematic was that they had educated "brains good enough at least to be aware of discontent," discontent with the fact that they could not use what they learned, discontent with the fact that they could not fulfill their vision of equality with men. These women, like gunpowder, had explosive potential but lay inert without a spark.<sup>30</sup>

Buck argued that America's "gunpowder women" bore the "burden of privilege," and to explain why privilege could be a burden, she once again drew comparisons between China and the United States. She told the history of the Manchus of the Qing dynasty, the line of emperors who had ruled

28. "Forecasting Business Women's Week," *Independent Woman*, October, 1938, 308; Buck to David Lloyd, May 3, 1939, Folder 14, Box 17, David Lloyd Agency Records.

29. "Publishers Promote Books of Nobel Winner," *Publishers Weekly*, November 19, 1938, 1831-1832; *Harper's Magazine* advertisement, *New York Times*, June 25, 1939, BR10.

30. Pearl S. Buck, "America's Gunpowder Women," *Harper's Magazine*, July 1939, 126-27. The condensed version was published as Buck, "America's Gunpowder Women," *The Reader's Digest*, August 1939, 10-15.

China from 1644 until they were overthrown by the Revolution of 1911. In Buck's telling, the Qing rulers fell from grace due to "their life in pleasure" that had made them weak. White middle-class American women, she explained, similarly became weak after wallowing in "[e]asy food" and "leisure" for too long.<sup>31</sup>

As in the "Medieval Women" article, Buck's comparison was clearly reductive. The decline of the Qing dynasty, as she certainly knew from the years she spent as a missionary in China, could be contributed to more complicated factors, including unsuccessful wars against Western empires, corruption of the Qing imperial courts, and the rise of a new generation of anti-imperialist nationalist leaders like Sun Yat-sen, a Christian convert, who could mobilize the discontented Chinese people against the ruling oligarchy. Similarly, there were more complicated reasons as to why white middle-class American women could not achieve their potential. Even in the "Medieval Women" article, she explained how sexism prevented women from advancing in professional fields traditionally dominated by men. Yet such a provocative, exaggerated comparison, Buck probably believed, could provide a spark for the "gunpowder women" reading her article.

The "Gunpowder Women" article, however, was fundamentally different from the "Medieval Women" article in that it did not disrupt the conventionally accepted idea that the United States was superior to China. Rather, Buck used this hierarchy as a starting point to open up a dialogue, presented through an imaginary conversation between an "Oriental woman" and herself, about why white middle-class American women could not achieve more than their Chinese counterparts.

I suppose thousands of Oriental women have said to me at one time or another, "How lucky you are to be an American woman! You have freedom and equality with man." . . . I'd answer something like this:

"You know, it's true we are very free. We can be anything we like, we American women—lawyers, doctors, artists, scientists, engineers, anything. But, somehow, we're not!"

"You're not!" the Oriental woman would say, astonished. "Why not? Do you mean the doors are open and you don't go out?"

"Well, we go out [ . . . ] I suppose most of us go out in some sort of work if we don't marry first; but we secretly hope to marry first, so that we need

31. *Ibid.*, 127–28.

not, or we want to work just a year or two, and then come back into the home and shut the door and be secure in the old way.”<sup>32</sup>

In this exchange, the American woman represented by Buck does not begin to grapple with the reasons as to why white middle-class American women do not leave the domestic sphere until she is prompted by someone with less privilege to do so. Likewise, in Buck’s calculation, American magazine readers would not begin to grapple with this “why” until prompted by someone with a different perspective.

According to the “Gunpowder Women” article, the reason white middle-class women were not advancing into the professional fields was not simply that there was a “tradition” that bound women to their homes. Rather, the reason was the fact that, unlike previous generations of women, white middle-class American women of the Depression generation had been given their privilege and not earned it. To earn their privilege, Buck argued, women had to work—not domestic work but the “more taxing” “bread-winning work.” In a way, Buck was echoing Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s well-known argument from the late nineteenth century, that women must share the burdens of labor if they hoped to be released from dependency. But Buck took a step further by insisting that women’s work outside the home would be beneficial not only to women but also to the nation. The “whole nation would be better off if women would do the work waiting to be done,” she contended; using the “idle” energy and the brains that would “disintegrat[e] in that idleness,” “women could immeasurably improve all conditions in our country, if they would.”<sup>33</sup>

Beard again criticized Buck’s argument, but this time the problem was not simply Buck’s refusal to consider history but also her refusal to consider women’s unpaid household work as important as professional careers. Writing in *Independent Woman*, the official organ of the NFBPWC, Beard argued that Buck represented the “utterly superficial and narrowly bourgeois” mindset of “modern feminists” who believed that only women lawyers, doctors, artists, scientists, and engineers could contribute to the national economy and society. From Native American women to colonial American women, Beard explained, women’s household work was vital to the maintenance of communal economy and war effort, including the American Revolution. What

32. Ibid., 128.

33. Ibid., 130, 134–35. For Charlotte Perkin Gilman’s influence on American feminist thought during the Depression, see Plant, *Mom*, 34.

women needed was not only a better representation in the professional classes, but also a reconceptualization of women's worth in society. American women, Beard argued, had to disentangle themselves from the idea that the "cash nexus" was the "sole index of economic and any other worth." Otherwise, she insisted, many American women would remain unaware of their own value and their contributions to the country.<sup>34</sup>

Yet in spite of such open criticism, the "Gunpowder Women" article was a major commercial success. It generated so much public interest that the following year *The Reader's Digest* sent Buck an extra check "as a gesture of appreciation." Women's sections of newspapers across the country asked for reprint permissions, as did professors of home economics and presidents of college sororities. Buck told a close friend that letters responding to the article were "pouring in" every day.<sup>35</sup>

If the main criticism of "Medieval Women" seemed to be that Buck did not place the status of American women in a historical perspective, the main criticism of "Gunpowder Women" was that she ignored the fact that the Great Depression had made it impossible for most women to think about advancing into male-dominated professions. Charles Robb, an unmarried man in New York City, spoke for many when he argued that there were problems more important than the "privilege of being lazy" that accounted for women's "discontent and restlessness." There were economic problems that caused "malcontent" even among the men. Robb was on target. Most women did not enjoy the kind of privilege that Buck mentioned. Working-class women had always worked out of economic necessity as domestic servants and factory workers—this oversight was precisely why Beard criticized that "However brilliantly Pearl Buck has written about *The Good Earth* in China, her writing in *Harper's Magazine* and elsewhere on American women seems to indicate a total loss of memory about the good earth in the new world." Women were far from "idle" during the Great Depression, either. Quite the opposite, women joined the workforce in unprecedented numbers. By the end of the 1930s, some 6 million single women, 4.5 million married women, and 2 million widows and divorcées held jobs outside their

34. Beard, "In Pioneer Days," *Independent Woman*, September 1939, 288–90.

35. DeWitt Wallace to Buck, January 3, 1940, Folder: "'R' Miscellaneous," Box 6, Series 2, RG 1; Pearl S. Buck and Richard J. Walsh Papers, Pearl S. Buck International, Perkasie, Penn. (hereafter PSBI); Buck to Emma Edmunds White, July 18, 1939, Folder: "Emma Edmunds White," Box 10, Nora Stirling Collection, Lipscomb Library, Randolph College, Lynchburg, Va. (hereafter cited as Nora Stirling Collection). See also letters in Folder 14, Box 17, David Lloyd Agency Records.

own homes, although many of them toiled in domestic and personal service positions at low wages.<sup>36</sup>

Working-class women were not the only ones struggling. Unlike Buck herself who could hire domestic help to look after her adopted children, many middle-class mothers found that parental responsibilities occupied a large portion of their time. Bertha Lewis, a mother of two from Brooklyn, told Buck that the condensed article in *The Reader's Digest* made her “angry,” partly because she found her criticism “true” but partly because she found her suggestions “impossible” to implement. Taking care of two school children home for their summer vacation was a nonstop demand from seven in the morning until eight in the evening. “By that time,” she argued using the third person to make herself representative of a larger group, “one is usually too worn out with the necessary obligation of the day to concentrate on a worthwhile job.” Like the “gunpowder women,” she wanted to be more than a mother and a wife, but, unlike the “gunpowder women,” she had no spare time or energy to be anything else. “You are quite right about our being discontent,” Lewis told Buck, “but we do not all read mystery stories at ten in the morning.”<sup>37</sup>

While the “Gunpowder Women” article’s main target audience seemed to be housewives, the most enthusiastic letters came from women without husbands. For many years, Claire Smith from Cleveland, Ohio, had found it impossible to get a job in spite of her desire to do so. As the Great Depression left many men unemployed, married women were often denied jobs to make room for their husbands. After her husband’s death, however, Smith was now attending a “business college” to “equip” herself “further” and eventually become “self-supporting.” She was a “gunpowder woman,” Smith conceded, but she was not discouraged. Buck’s “inspiring” article had given her a “ray of hope.” Likewise, the popular *Washington Post* women’s section columnist Mary Haworth proclaimed that Buck’s article “brilliantly promise[d] ‘every hope’ for the woman who [was] sufficiently alive to her latent possibilities.” Haworth, who had once quit her career as a reporter upon

36. Charles S. Robb to Buck, June 23, 1939, Folder: “R’ Miscellaneous,” Box 3, Series 2, RG 1, PSBI; Beard, “In Pioneer Days,” 290. On women and work during the Great Depression, see Scharf, *To Work and to Wed*; Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work*, Ch. 9.

37. Bertha Lewis to Buck, July 30, 1939, Folder: “L’ Miscellaneous,” Box 1, Series 2, RG 1, PSBI. According to Natalie Colman Walsh, Buck’s stepdaughter, Buck had an “Englishwoman” who took care of her young, adopted children at her home. See Nora Stirling interview with Natalie Walsh Colman, May 8, 1976, Folder: “Coltman, Natalie Walsh,” Box 10, Nora Stirling Collection.

getting married, divorced her husband before joining the *Washington Post*. She recommended Buck's essay to an anonymous "dissatisfied" thirty-five-year-old woman with no husband and no children, as well as other readers of her column who might have felt the same.<sup>38</sup>

Given that Buck appeared to deprioritize the issue of class, it was only natural that the NWP welcomed her essay. In contrast to the maternalist feminists who believed that women's role as wives and mothers should be extended into the public sphere where they could simultaneously improve their societies and women's social standing, the NWP demanded that women be considered as individuals, not as mothers, who deserved equal opportunity with men to compete for professional jobs. Buck's argument strongly resonated with the NWP feminists. "I do not know when I have read a better appeal to women or a better challenge to women than Pearl Buck's article," declared NWP member Alma Lutz, who spent two consecutive columns in *Equal Rights* reviewing it. The article in fact moved Lutz to think about "what could be done by women to rouse themselves out of the apathy produced by too much privilege." Perhaps some adversity would help. If women are "sufficiently discontented," she conjectured, "they will do something about it."<sup>39</sup>

Soon after the publication of the "Gunpowder Women" article, Lutz made a formal attempt to recruit Buck to the NWP. When she asked Buck in 1938 why she resisted the label "feminist," Buck replied, "the only reason why I have not aligned myself with feminism is an incurable, and probably mistaken, dislike of aligning myself with anything." But as time progressed, she became more willing to share her popularity with the struggling feminist organization, even if she never became a member of the NWP. She reviewed the manuscript of Lutz's biography of Elizabeth Cady Stanton for her publisher, and the two women became close. In March 1940, after reading a NWP pamphlet with "a great deal of interest and indignation," Buck composed a letter to Lutz declaring her commitment to the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA).<sup>40</sup>

38. Claire Smith to Buck, July 29, 1939, Folder: "'S' Miscellaneous," Box 3, Series 2, RG 1, PSBI; "Mary Haworth's Mail," *Washington Post*, August 26, 1939, 9. On Mary Haworth's career, see "Mary Haworth Goes Right to the Source," *Virgin Islands Daily News*, August 19, 1966, 5.

39. Alma Lutz, "Pearl Buck's Challenge to Women," *Equal Rights*, August 1939, 103; idem., "More About 'Gunpowder Women,'" *Equal Rights*, September 1939, 112.

40. Buck to Lutz, August 16, 1938, March 2, 1940, and March 22, 1940, Folder: "Buck—Libraries," Box 1, Jane M. Rabb Collection, originally in Alma Lutz Papers, Vassar College,

## BUCK'S PARTNERSHIP WITH THE NATIONAL WOMAN'S PARTY

Buck's endorsement of the ERA marked a new stage in her engagement with feminism. Before, she wrote polemical essays as a lone observer who used her insights from China to illuminate the problems of white middle-class women. By participating in the NWP's campaign for the passage of the ERA, however, she became part of the ongoing struggle that defined post-suffrage feminism.

The NWP leaders believed that by sharing Buck's popularity they could generate popular support for the ERA. When Buck announced her endorsement, Lutz promptly delivered this news to NWP chairwoman Caroline Babcock, claiming that Buck's words proved the "soul" of Elizabeth Cady Stanton was still "marching on." Lutz's claim was hyperbolic, but in 1940, there was a good reason to be enthusiastic about Buck. Although the ERA had been favorably reported by the House Judiciary Committee the previous summer in 1939—for the first time since its introduction in 1923—the NWP had lost much of its vigor. On the international stage, the NWP made significant progress, especially from 1928 to 1933, by getting four countries of the Pan American states to sign the Equal Rights Treaty—a treaty that proposed to accomplish what the ERA proposed, but on an international level. But back in the United States, the Depression years proved particularly difficult for the NWP. The organization struggled to gain support for their feminist program, since it failed to speak to millions of working women's needs for a living wage and job security. By the time Buck endorsed the ERA, the NWP's organ, *Equal Rights*, was on the verge of discontinuation, and it was forced to reduce its circulation from weekly to monthly in order to survive. Hence, as Babcock quickly replied to Lutz, "nothing could be better" at this time than the news of Buck's endorsement. Buck's letter endorsing the ERA was published in *Equal Rights* in April 1940, and Lutz thanked Buck not only for herself but also for "all the women who [were] working for the Amendment."<sup>41</sup>

Buck, however, did not endorse the ERA for the sole purpose of helping the NWP. She believed that the ERA was necessary at a time when there was

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Poughkeepsie, N.Y. (hereafter cited as Alma Lutz Papers). The book would become Alma Lutz, *Created Equal: A Biography of Elizabeth Cady Stanton* (New York: John Day Company, 1940).

41. Lutz to Caroline Lexow Babcock, March 26, 1939, Babcock to Lutz, March 27, 1939, both in Folder: "March 15-30, 1940," Box 115, National Woman's Party Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (hereafter cited as NWP Papers). Buck's letter was published as "Pearl Buck on the Equal Rights Amendment," *Equal Rights*, April 1940, 16. On NWP and the Equal Rights Treaty, see Trigg, *Feminism as Life's Work*, 145-74.

a rising tide of hostility against women working outside the home, especially in the form of legislation to limit married women from working. Just three days before she endorsed the ERA, Buck wrote to U.S. Senator James J. Davis (former U.S. Secretary of Labor, 1921–1930, and a member of the Senate Committee on Education and Labor during the 1930s), as well as U.S. Representative Charles L. Gerlach (a congressman representing her district), asking them to block any bills in Congress that would prohibit married women from working outside the home. Both Davis and Gerlach replied that they had not been informed of such legislation introduced in Congress, but Buck had a legitimate reason to fear of its possibility. Long before she returned to the United States permanently, Congress passed the Economy Act of 1932 which, under Section 213, stipulated that should the government reduce civil service personnel, wives with husbands who also worked for the government should be the first to be dismissed. Various women’s organizations including the NWP fought hard against Section 213, which was finally repealed in 1937. But in 1939, twenty-eight state legislatures received bills proposing to restrict married women’s right to work. As a *New York Times* writer noted that year, this nationwide trend seemed to resemble the “wholesale retrogression of women” taking place in fascist Germany and Italy.<sup>42</sup>

Buck, like many critics of such legislation, associated the rising tide of hostility against women with the rising influence of fascism in the United States. Perhaps she had a personal reason to do so. In August 1940, Buck learned that the follow-up essay to the immensely popular “America’s Gunpowder Women” was rejected by *Harper’s Magazine*. She had been rejected before, but this she took personally, and politically. The same month, *Harper’s Magazine* published an essay by the poet Roy Helton arguing that women’s increasing participation in national politics in “Western democracies” like France had transformed them into “state matriarchies” that crumbled in the face of “a competitive reality.” Germany’s swift victory in France a few months earlier was a case in point, Helton argued, and the United States would face a similar fate to France if it did not restrain the “feminine influence” on national politics. Buck took this publication as a slap in the face. “My feeling about the [rejected] article is that probably no male

42. James J. Davis to Buck, March 21, 1940, Folder: “D’ Miscellaneous”, Box 4, Series 1, RG 1, PSBI; Charles L. Gerlach to Buck, March 25, 1940, Folder: “G’ Miscellaneous,” Box 5, Series 2, RG 1, PSBI; Kathleen McLaughlin, “Shall Wives Work?,” *New York Times*, July 23, 1939, SM5, 19. On Section 213, see Scharf, *To Work and to Wed*, 45–53.

editor will take it," she explained to her agent, "because it expresses a point of view essentially distasteful to the average male and I doubt most editors rate higher than that."<sup>43</sup>

In November, Buck received an opportunity to argue against the sentiment represented by Helton during an important event, the Women's Centennial Congress, organized by Carrie Chapman Catt. Since 1920, Catt had served as the president of the League of Women Voters (LWV), which vigorously opposed the NWP and the ERA. But Catt invited Buck to speak alongside Mary Beard and Margaret Mead to chart the progress of white American women since 1840, the year when a delegation of women led by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott was denied participation in the World Anti-Slavery Convention, and the year when the American feminist movement began according to Stanton. In a brief speech, Buck acknowledged women's progress over the past century in earning their "essential liberty" including their "rights to education, to the ballot, to own property." But she also maintained the position she took in her polemical articles, asking women to do more. "Woman," Buck contended against Helton's thesis, "must penetrate into fields of activity and influence which she has not yet known, must permeate indeed into every part of life, national and international."<sup>44</sup>

As part of her personal campaign to fight against the rising tide of hostility against women working outside the home, Buck also reached out to some fifty exceptional women including Beard, Mead, and Eleanor Roosevelt, whom she believed were the most influential in the United States. She confessed that she was "thoroughly alarmed at the number of women who [found] the tide of discrimination and reactionary feeling rising against them," first in Europe and then in the United States. "I myself am not and have never been a feminist or active in woman's suffrage," she explained her position, "[b]ut I cannot see reactionary opinions rising in our democracy without wondering if something can be done about it."<sup>45</sup>

43. Roy Helton, "The Inner Threat: Our Own Stories," *Harper's Magazine*, September 1940, 337-43; Buck to Lloyd, September 16, 1940, Folder 35, Box 18, David Lloyd Agency Records.

44. Pearl Buck, "Peace—A Dream or a Task?" in *Women Take Stock of Themselves* (New York: Woman's Press, 1941), 25-27. On the Centennial Congress, see Mary Gray Peck, *Carrie Chapman Catt, A Biography* (New York: H. W. Wilson Co., 1944), 464-66.

45. Buck sent an identical letter to some fifty women. The one I quote is Buck to Mildred H. McAfee, October 27, 1940. The twenty-four women who replied to the letter were Mildred McAfee, Lily Pons, Margaret Mead, Dorothy Dunbar Bromley, Virginia Gildersleeve, Rose Wilder Lane, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Mary Ritter Beard, Inez Haynes Irwin, Irita Van Doren, Margaret Bourke-White Caldwell, Laura E. Richards, Anne O'Hare McCormick, Eleanor Roosevelt, Ruth

Yet to her disappointment, two-thirds of the women who replied to Buck's letter did not feel there had been any noticeable increase in discrimination against women. Buck was probably most upset by the letter she received from Mildred McAfee, president of Wellesley College and an editor of the *Yale Review*. After *Harper's Magazine* rejected the follow-up to the "Gunpowder Women" essay, Buck had asked McAfee if the *Yale Review* would publish it instead. But McAfee replied that she and her "colleagues" had seen "no signs of loss" of women's status in the United States and rejected the article.<sup>46</sup>

That two-thirds of the women who replied to her letter did not notice a rise in discrimination, Buck interpreted, meant that most "exceptional women" lived distant from the "average women." They did not realize that their own individual successes were hardly representative of all women's experiences. Buck articulated this problem most forcefully in her letter to Beard, who again accused Buck of being ahistorical in her analysis. "If I can judge at all from history," Buck retorted, "the distance between the exceptional women and the average is much greater now than it was in the American nineteenth century."<sup>47</sup>

Buck was right to point out that examining only a network of exceptional white women would misrepresent the social status of most women during the Depression. But it was ironic that it was she who made this criticism. After all, Buck herself was an exceptional white woman who had struggled to relate to the so-called "average" women. Buck was both celebrated and criticized for approaching the women's problem in ways that an "average" woman could not. While Lutz praised her for having a perspective "the average American woman could not possibly have," the *Ladies' Home Journal* in 1940 rejected one of her essays precisely because it believed "the intellectual approach Miss Buck [took] to the subject would require more concentration than the average woman would be able to give it." Most importantly, the "average" American women in Buck's perception were white middle-class housewives who did not have to worry about earning a living wage (which,

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Benedict, Ada L. Comstock, Marion Park, Freda Kirchway, Helen Keller, Peggy Bacon, Margaret Armstrong, Rosalie S. Morton, Florence E. Allen, and Margaret Sanger. See Richard J. Walsh Jr. to Natalie Walsh Coltman, May 16, 1941, Folder: "Of Men and Women (correspondence concerning)," Box 10, Series 2, RG 1, PSBI.

46. McAfee to Buck, October 27, 1940, Folder 70, Box 2, *Yale Review* Records; Buck to McAfee, December 17, 1940, Folder 70, Box 2, *Yale Review* Records.

47. Buck to Beard, June 2, 1941, Folder: "Of Men and Women (correspondence concerning)," Box 10, Series 2, RG 1, PSBI.

during the Depression, was simply not true). Even as she pointed out the growing distance between exceptional and average women, Buck chose to support the NWP, an organization that was constantly criticized by social feminists for ignoring what the majority of American women needed.<sup>48</sup> But in some ways, it was ironic as well that the NWP solicited Buck's support for the ERA in the first place. Buck, in stark contrast to the NWP, demonstrated a strong commitment to fighting against racism in the United States.

This difference between Buck and the NWP became obvious when she gave a speech at the annual NWP conference in December 1940. The main arguments of Buck's speech at the NWP conference once again depended on her use of China as a foil. For the most part, Buck rehashed her arguments from "America's Medieval Women" and "America's Gunpowder Women," pointing out how white middle-class American women were educated for upward social mobility yet were bound to the domestic sphere later in life; but unlike in these essays, she argued that swift action was necessary against the rising tide of fascism, whose "traditional" attitude toward women was to keep men and women separate. The first step to fighting this "tradition," she suggested, was changing American "education at home." On this front, she believed the "literate" white middle-class American mothers should emulate the "illiterate" Chinese mothers. Unlike the Americans, the Chinese never told their sons to stop behaving "like a sissy girl"; by refraining from such early challenges to boys' manhood at home, Buck contended, American mothers could prevent their boys from developing fear and hatred of women later in life. Outside the home, women, even non-exceptional women, needed to take part in the national government and in international relations—not just as a matter of personal choice, but out of necessity. "Unless women realize their responsibility," she warned, neither the United States nor any other nation would achieve "true democracy."<sup>49</sup>

The NWP appeared to be pleased with the speech. According to the Romeike News Clipping service, hired by the NWP to collect newspaper articles mentioning its name across the country, the speech brought the Party significant national attention for the first time in "a long time." The full text of the speech was reproduced in the U.S. Congressional Record by

48. Lutz, "A Feminist Thinks It Over," 317; Grame Lorimer to David Lloyd, June 16, 1940, Folder 18, Box 21, David Lloyd Agency Records.

49. Buck, "Women's Place in a Democracy" printed in *Appendix to the Congressional Record: Proceedings and Debates of the 77th Congress, First Session, Volume 87—Part 10, January 3, 1941 to March 14, 1941* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1941), A124–126.

a U.S. representative from California who attended the conference, and the NWP ordered 3,000 copies of the full text for distribution as well. Just as Lutz and other leaders of the party had hoped, it appeared that Buck's popularity enabled the NWP to gain renewed attention.<sup>50</sup>

Yet the NWP did not embrace all parts of Buck's speech. When *Equal Rights* printed an excerpt, it kept most of Buck's comparisons between Chinese women and American women, including Buck's argument that "Thanks to an unprivileged existence, unshadowed [sic] by chivalry, Chinese women long ago developed sturdiness of character, independence of judgment, and even a certain ruthlessness." But *Equal Rights* cut out the part where Buck suggested that white middle-class American mothers should emulate the Chinese and stop calling their sons "sissies." If Buck entertained a version of what Judy Wu calls "radical Orientalism"—a bifurcated view of the East and the West that, in contrast to the conventional Orientalism described by Edward Said, perceived the East as a source of inspiration to improve the West rather than as a place for the West to subjugate—the NWP was not willing to do so. The NWP's reliance on Buck's rhetoric stopped at provocative comparisons and did not extend to the suggestion that perhaps white middle-class American women could learn something from Chinese women.<sup>51</sup>

Most conspicuously missing from the excerpt in *Equal Rights* was Buck's insistence that the NWP women should pay close attention to the struggle of African Americans. "Women should understand more than others" what it meant to be a "Negro in the United States," she told the audience at the NWP conference. "Women and Negroes are the two minority groups" whose "discrimination against them [was] curiously similar in several important respects." First, both groups were exploited for low wages; second, both struggled to participate in government politics; and third, both were discouraged from pursuing professional careers. African Americans and white women should not ignore "the plight of the other," she propounded, for "as long as this twofold discrimination goes on," the United States could not call itself a "democracy." But the NWP, in keeping with the organization's

50. Anna Kelton Wiley to Buck, February 3, 1941, Folder: "W" Miscellaneous," Box 9, Series 2, RG 1, PSBI; Carl Hinshaw to Buck, December 13, 1940, Folder: "H" Miscellaneous," Box 5, Series 2, RG 1, PSBI.

51. "Women's Place in a Democracy: Partial Text of Pearl Buck's Speech," *Equal Rights*, December 1940, 37–39; Wu, *Radicals on the Road*.

singular commitment to the ERA, refused to address the race question and cut this part of the speech from the *Equal Rights* excerpt.<sup>52</sup>

Buck's proposal that the NWP fight for African Americans' rights was bold. Yet strangely enough she did not acknowledge the fact that African American women were already engaged in the struggle against what she called the "twofold discrimination." What Buck essentially proposed was that the NWP should fight for African American rights but without joining those who were already engaged in the struggle. She never mentioned the existence of prominent African American women's groups such as the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs (NACWC) which, in contrast to the equal rights feminists of the NWP, not only paid close attention to race issues but also took a maternalist approach focused on uplifting working-class African American women who had a particularly difficult time during the Depression, as they had to compete against white working-class women for jobs that had previously seemed undesirable to white Americans.<sup>53</sup>

Yet even with such shortcomings, Buck continued to draw popular attention to the subject of white middle-class women, by publishing her own writings and speeches as the anthology *Of Men and Women* (1941). *Of Men and Women* included many comparative arguments familiar to readers who had encountered "America's Medieval Women," "America's Gunpowder Women," and her speech at the NWP conference; but the anthology reframed her previous essays on women's discontent as a meditation on the state and future of American democracy. The first chapter, one of the few previously unpublished works, placed the whole book in those terms. In it, she characterized China as a country where women and men shared domestic responsibilities and elaborated on why making women's work separate from men's—a "classless tradition" in the United States—was detrimental for not only women but also men and the nation. Unlike women in China, she argued, women in America lived a life "singularly separate from the lives of men and the nation's work." Because of such a separation, the United States was vulnerable to fascist influences that could potentially undo the gains women had made through decades of political activism. "What we need in our country

52. Buck, "Women's Place in a Democracy," A123. Buck asked African Americans to fight for women's rights as well. See Pearl S. Buck, "Women—A Minority Group," *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life* 18, no. 7 (July 1940): 201–2.

53. Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work*, 270–71. On the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, see Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long?: African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

is not merely an Amendment to the constitution insisting on equality for men and women,” she contended, “but a new education . . . [that] is shaped toward mutual understanding and appreciation between men and women.”<sup>54</sup>

Buck’s insistence on the “classlessness” of American women’s problems elicited the same kinds of criticisms that the NWP received—and deservedly so. Perhaps the most articulate among Buck’s critics was Ida Rauh Eastman. A well-known member of the feminist debate club in Greenwich Village known as the “Heterodoxy,” and a self-proclaimed member of the “militant suffrage movement,” Eastman criticized Buck for believing that women were primarily victims of a “classless tradition” that confined them to the domestic sphere. Representing the socialist strand of feminism that paid close attention to working-class women, Eastman explained, “[w]hen you come to the relation between woman and society,” it was not a “universal, national or individual, but a class reaction.” Eastman argued that “economic realities” made it impossible for many women, especially poor women, to prioritize their sex over class.<sup>55</sup>

While some prominent women such as Margaret Mead and Georgia O’Keefe praised *Of Men and Women* (the former wrote an enthusiastic blurb for the book describing it as a “fresh and original attack” on the problem of “educated American women,” while the latter claimed that she would like to fly across the country with an “airplane full” of Buck’s book and “keep dropping them out all the way across the country”), most reviewers echoed Eastman’s criticism and pointed out Buck’s neglect of class issues.<sup>56</sup> Florence Bullock of the *New York Herald Tribune* remarked that the book was insightful, with “the exception” that Buck wrote “of a classless society.” Every woman in *Of Men and Women* seemed to be “the college-trained woman or [Buck’s] equivalent,” Bullock argued. The anonymous reviewer for the *Saturday Review of Literature* likewise noted that Buck problematically brushed aside “economic factors.” Even Helen Foster Snow, Buck’s friend and a China expert herself, argued that the average woman was not as privileged as Buck believed her to be. “How can idle women ‘choose’ to work or build a career when millions of men are also unemployed and cannot earn a living?,” Snow

54. Buck, *Of Men and Women* (New York: John Day Company, 1941), 17–20, 187–88.

55. Ida Rauh Eastman to Buck, May 14, 1941, Folder: “Of Men and Women (correspondence concerning),” Box 10, Series 2, RG 1, PSBI.

56. *Of Men and Women* advertisement, *New York Times*, August 24, 1941, Sunday edition, 86; Georgia O’Keefe to Maria Chabot, December 14, 1941, in Barbara Buhler Lynes and Ann Paden eds., *Maria Chabot—Georgia O’Keefe: Correspondence 1941–1949* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2003), 25–26.

asked. If Buck was different from the NWP in her insistence on the importance of race in American life, she was not so different in her disregard of class issues in American life—ironic given that she was best-known for her sympathetic portrait of Chinese peasants.<sup>57</sup>

The NWP, of course, had no problem with Buck's insistence on a "classless" problem. Lutz called *Of Men and Women* "a splendid endorsement" of the ERA. She described her *Equal Rights* column as "not a book review" but "an appeal"—"even a demand"—"that every woman who read [her] column read and re-read" Buck's new book. Likewise, the Executive Secretary of the Party's New York City branch, Mildred Palmer, expressed that it was her "duty" to bring the book to the attention of all NWP members as well as every woman she encountered.<sup>58</sup>

But by the time the book was published, Buck did not seem to enjoy such a close association with the NWP. When Mildred Palmer retaliated against a negative review in the conservative *New York Sun*, Buck intervened to make sure that she could be distinguished from the typical endorser of the ERA. While Buck appreciated Palmer's "loyal support," she did not appreciate Palmer's description of her as a "disillusioned" American woman now practicing "thorough going [sic] feminism." Buck argued that she herself was not a "feminist." Furthermore, she explained that she was not disillusioned with her country, which provided its people with "far more happiness and security and comfort than any country I have ever seen."<sup>59</sup>

This statement contradicted what she proclaimed earlier. In the "Gunpowder Women" article, Buck declared that too much privilege and comfort was a problem for women, not a source of pride. But perhaps sensing the coming war against the Axis powers, Buck abandoned these critical comments on American society for more patriotic rhetoric. The change was deliberate. As Karen Leong has argued, Buck believed the war would "test the

57. Florence Bullock, "Careers if Convenient," *New York Herald Tribune*, May 11, 1941, IX 24; "The New Books," *Saturday Review of Literature*, July 5, 1941, 7; Nym Wales (Helen Foster Snow), "China Station," *New Republic*, September 8, 1941, 316. On Snow and Buck's relationship, see Conn, *Pearl S. Buck*, 202–3.

58. Alma Lutz, "A Feminist Thinks It Over," *Equal Rights*, July 1941, 64. Mildred Palmer to Walsh, May 13, 1941, Folder 11, Box 159, John Day Company Archives, Manuscripts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library, Princeton, N.J. (hereafter Day Company Archives).

59. Mildred Palmer to Richard J. Walsh, May 27, 1941, Folder 12, Box 159, John Day Company Archives; Buck to the editor of the *New York Sun*, June 4, 1941, Folder 12, Box 159, John Day Company Archives.

consistency and integrity of the United States' professed ideals of democracy and equality," and she saw it as an opportunity to encourage Americans to live up to those ideals. In this new era of war, perhaps the argument that discrimination against women put democracy at risk would be enough to discourage her readers to pay attention to the problem.<sup>60</sup>

But the change in Buck's rhetoric was not just tied to war. Just a few days before she distanced herself from the NWP in the *New York Sun*, Buck did express her disillusionment with equal rights feminism in a private letter to a NWP member, Helen Bruyere. Bruyere was in charge of organizing NWP meetings in Toledo, Ohio, and she contacted Buck as a "disgusted and disheartened" feminist to a "reknowned [sic] woman leader." Women of Toledo, Bruyere said, could not be "urged, induced, begged or dragged to meetings." In a city of "around three hundred thousand" she could get only ten to show up. She hoped that the author's appearance at one of the meetings would improve the situation. But in reply, Buck confessed that she had "already come to the [same] conclusion" that the NWP had "reached about women in the country." Her appearance at another meeting, Buck wrote pessimistically, would not make a difference. She completely understood Bruyere's frustration, but after more than a year of active interaction with the NWP, Buck's enthusiasm for the ERA seemed to have waned.<sup>61</sup>

In fact, Buck stopped actively writing on the cause of women's rights. By the time *Of Men and Women* was published, she had moved on to different political issues. In March 1941, Buck published an article titled "Warning to Free Nations" in *Asia*, in which she addressed the need for white Americans and other self-professed champions of democracy across the world to extend the benefits of democracy to the "Negroes in the United States" and the "peasants of China." Nowhere in "Warning to Free Nations" did she mention that the United States must provide women and men with equal rights in order to fulfill the country's democratic promise.<sup>62</sup>

#### BUCK'S RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHER WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS

Although she stopped writing new articles on women's rights on the eve of World War II, Buck remained emotionally invested in the issue, and

60. Leong, *China Mystique*, 44.

61. Helen Bruyere to Buck, May 26, 1941 and Buck to Bruyere, May 29, 1941, Folder: "B' Miscellaneous," Box 8, Series 2, RG 1, PSBI.

62. Buck, "Warning to Free Nations," *Asia*, March, 1941, 161.

remained intellectually present in various women's circles. The NWP, for one, continued to appreciate Buck's support of the ERA, which she occasionally endorsed in public during wartime. Mary Wilhelmine Williams, a prominent historian and a former editor of *Equal Rights*, proclaimed that women like Buck needed to run for government offices. Alice Paul, the author of the ERA, expressed her appreciation of Buck's support through the NWP chairwoman Caroline Lexow Babcock as well.<sup>63</sup>

Yet precisely because she disassociated *Of Men and Women* from the NWP's narrow definition of feminism, Buck's writings also reached, and were adopted by, several women's organizations that were opposed or indifferent to the single-issue pressure group. Buck did not appeal to the social feminists, of course. Buck's refusal to consider class issues made her critique unacceptable to many who struggled economically during the Depression. Still, as Buck's writings covered a multitude of subjects that went far beyond the scope of the NWP's program, they served the missions of various women's organizations.

One of the most significant champions of *Of Men and Women* was the American Association of University of Women (AAUW), who voted to oppose the ERA in official policy in 1939 out of a desire to appeal to a broader constituency. When the AAUW leaders encountered the book that Lutz called a "splendid endorsement" of the ERA, they believed that *Of Men and Women* could help inspire college-educated women to enter in greater numbers professions largely dominated by men. Pearl Buck was so pleased by the AAUW's interest that she forewent her writer's royalty to produce a cheap 50-cent edition, which went in print in 1942.<sup>64</sup>

Likewise, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), an organization that had little interaction with the NWP in the United States, found *Of Men and Women* to resonate with their own mission. In September 1941, the official organ of WILPF, *Four Lights*, published two pages from the book that emphasized the unique role women could play in ending wars. "I believe that it is women who must end war if it is to be

63. Buck, "'Equal Rights' by Amendment?" *New York Times*, March 28, 1943, X15; Mary Wilhelmine Williams, "More Women in Public Office!," *Equal Rights*, June 1942, 47; Caroline Lexow Babcock to Pearl Buck, March 30, 1943, Folder: March 21-31, 1943, Box 128, NWP Papers.

64. Walsh to Susan Kingsbury, November 28, 1941, Folder 42, Box 167, John Day Company Archives; "Pearl S. Buck's Book on Women Offered in Fifty-Cent Edition," *Journal of the American Association of University Women* 35, no. 3 (April 1942): 172; Susan Levine, *Degrees of Equality: The American Association of University Women and the Challenge of Twentieth-Century Feminism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 39-41.

ended,” WILPF quoted from *Of Men and Women*. “It is said too often that women have made no notable contribution to humanity except to bear children,” Buck explained, yet women could challenge such a dismissive view of women’s role by campaigning against war and proclaiming that “they will not go on having their work of bearing and rearing [children] wasted by war or even the fear of war.” Women’s anti-war activism, she said, would serve both the women’s rights movement and the anti-war movement. In the process of anti-war activism, Buck wrote a sentence that strongly resonated with WILPF’s mission, that women could “penetrate” into fields dominated by men and “influence government” by “active participation or by group pressure.”<sup>65</sup>

Other readers paid close attention to the parts of Buck’s writing the NWP had refused to endorse. One WILPF member highlighted the connection between the fight for women’s rights and the fight for African Americans’ rights. Caroline Singer, an active white WILPF member in New York who had been advocating for the inclusion of African American women into WILPF membership, introduced *Of Men and Women* to the readers of *Opportunity*, the official organ of the National Urban League. Singer problematized the fact that certain women’s organizations like the NWP chose to award “special privileges only upon the score of sex.” Drawing from a passage from *Of Men and Women*, she argued that white women needed to recognize that advancing only white women’s rights would create an incomplete democracy and that they must take the initiative to make the United States live up to its democratic potential. “No progress toward a solution can be made until a substantial number of enlightened women militantly assume the initiative” to solve the problem of race relations, Singer contended.<sup>66</sup>

Singer’s article eventually enabled *Of Men and Women* to reach a group of women that the NWP, as well as Buck herself, ignored: the African American women of the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs (NACWC). Rebecca Stiles Taylor, who ran a column in the *Chicago Defender* as the “vehicle of exchange” for NACWC members, reviewed Singer’s article and praised that both Buck and Singer had “taken time to stress the hypocrisy in our democracy and urge its total elimination.” Interestingly, Taylor did not

65. Ella Starr Brinton (signed in absence by Rosa Leone) to Buck, July 25, 1941, Folder 12, Box 159, John Day Company Archives; *Four Lights*, September 1941, 1.

66. Caroline Singer, “First Things First,” *Opportunity*, December 1941, 356–58. On Singer, see Joyce Blackwell, *No Peace without Freedom: Race and the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, 1915–1975* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004).

make any comments on the absence of African American women in Buck's writings or the fact that Buck was a champion of the ERA.<sup>67</sup>

Yet not all women's organizations interpreted *Of Men and Women* as Buck wished. In September 1941, one of the most important supporters of the ERA, the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs (NFBPWC), attempted its own comparative argument by pitting Buck against the Indian nationalist leader Mahatma Gandhi to demonstrate how two different cultures perceived the role of women in world politics differently. The NFBPWC's intention was the opposite of Buck's. Gandhi, who believed in separate spheres for men and women, had written that due to the "vital difference" between the two sexes, the "vocations of the two must . . . be different": the man should be "the breadwinner," and the woman should be "the keeper and distributor of the bread." Upon encountering these words, the editor of the NFBPWC's official organ reached out to Buck, explaining that she wanted to contrast Gandhi's "obviously benighted" perspective on the subject with Buck's assessment of "the great potentialities in [the American] civilization in which men and women understood each other and really cooperated."<sup>68</sup>

Buck was outraged by the NFBPWC's proposal. If she was willing to condone the NWP's ignorance of racial issues during her fight for the ERA, she condemned the NFBPWC's attempt to appropriate her words for a racist purpose. She furiously responded to the NFBPWC's suggestion, retorting that there was "no civilization [in the United States] in which men and women underst[ood] each other or cooperate[d] each together." There was only "the contrary," she said in her letter refusing the NFBPWC permission to reprint parts of her book.<sup>69</sup>

On the one hand, one could argue that following her break from the NWP, Buck took a passive stance toward women's activism unless it directly interfered with her new priority—the struggle to end racism at home and abroad. Certainly the NWP and other women's organizations that did not

67. Rebecca Stiles Taylor, "Activities of Women's National Organizations," *Chicago Defender*, December 27, 1941, 18. For information on Rebecca Stiles Taylor's column, see Taylor, "An Open Letter," *Chicago Defender*, April 24, 1937, 3. Taylor reviewed Buck's essay "America's Medieval Women" years later. See Taylor, "Federated Clubs," *Chicago Defender*, March 27, 1948, 17.

68. Josephine Nelson to Lloyd, August 19, 1941, Folder 27, Box 21, David Lloyd Agency Records; Pearl S. Buck and Mahatma Gandhi, "Woman's Role in the World," *Independent Woman*, September 1941, 258–59, 284–85.

69. Buck to Lloyd, August 21, 1941, Folder 27, Box 21, David Lloyd Agency Records.

consider race as an important issue in their definition of feminism would have considered this to be the case.

Yet on the other hand, it could be interpreted that Buck's fight against racism at home and abroad during the war period represented a new stage in Buck's feminism in which she went beyond championing the ERA to work toward greater participation of women in national and international affairs. After all, while organizations such as WILPF and the NACWC refused to identify with the narrow vision of the NWP, they still worked toward the improvement of women's status in the United States and abroad. Likewise, Buck, even if she did not write much on the problem of women's discontent during the war period, did continue to work for women's rights. Indeed, by becoming so active in the areas of race relations and international relations, she came to embody her own ideal of educated womanhood by being such a strong, public advocate for improvements in white-black as well as U.S.-China relations. "Woman," Buck contended at the Women's Centennial Congress in 1940, "must penetrate into fields of activity and influence which she has not yet known, must permeate indeed into every part of life, national and international." Buck might have failed to spark "gunpowder women" into a feminist revolution, but she herself became living proof that American women could make use of their education toward the improvement of the world they inhabited, and toward the improvement of their own social standing in the United States.<sup>70</sup>

#### EPILOGUE: "GUNPOWDER WOMEN" IN POSTWAR UNITED STATES

In 1963, Pearl S. Buck was asked by the publisher W. W. Norton to write a blurb for *The Feminine Mystique*, written by the then little-known author Betty Friedan. Because Buck remained the only American woman to have won the Nobel Prize in literature, it is possible that the publisher simply wished to get an endorsement from one of the most successful American women writers. But the striking resemblance between what Buck identified as the problem of "gunpowder women" and what Friedan identified as "the problem that has no name" suggests something more. Friedan argued that America's middle-class women, in spite of "luxuries that women in other times and lands never dreamed of," remained discontent, in part because of their "education, which naturally made them unhappy in their

70. Buck, "Peace—A Dream or a Task?," 26.

role as housewives,” but mainly because they could not find fulfillment in their role as housewives and mothers.<sup>71</sup>

Friedan never specifically attributed Buck as an influence. The only archival evidence suggesting that Friedan might have been exposed to Buck’s writings is a 1941 essay on *Of Men and Women*, written by a college student named Marcia Smith, that was published in the *Smith College Monthly* when Friedan working as an editor.<sup>72</sup>

Yet the striking resemblance between the two women’s writings is difficult to dismiss. Not only did Buck and Friedan, both proponents of the ERA, blame American women for wasting their educational opportunities and advocate similar visions of women’s fulfillment, they also conflated the lives of white middle-class American women with the lives of all American women, ignoring the challenges faced by working-class white women and non-white women of all classes. None of the shortcomings of Friedan’s book seemed to have bothered Buck, who wrote an enthusiastic blurb for the book. She praised it for illuminating “the heart of the problem of the American woman.” Along with Buck’s praise, *The Feminine Mystique* received widespread popular approval. In an era of economic prosperity when many white women who had once worked outside the home during World War II out of necessity were pushed back to the domestic sphere, Friedan’s critique resonated with far more American women than Buck’s did during the Great Depression.<sup>73</sup>

Unlike Friedan, who successfully presented herself as an ordinary middle-class housewife despite her professional background in journalism, Buck never seemed to be able to extricate herself from criticisms of her exceptionalism, even in the postwar years. In 1958, she was criticized for claiming that “most women make their homes their graves,” a claim that seemed

71. Conn, *Pearl S. Buck*, 349; Betty Friedan, *Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1963).

72. Marcia Williams, “Shades of Susan Anthony,” *Smith College Monthly*, May 28, 1941, 10, 20–21, quoted in Daniel Horowitz, *Betty Friedan and the Making of the Feminine Mystique* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 65.

73. W. W. Norton advertisement, *Chicago Tribune*, March 10, 1963, K8. For class and race blindness of *The Feminine Mystique*, see Stephanie Coontz, *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of 1960s* (New York: Basic Books, 2011); bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (New York: Routledge, 2015). For contemporary reception of *The Feminine Mystique* see Coontz, *A Strange Stirring*; Plant, *Mom*, 146–77; Jessica Weiss, “Fraud of Femininity: Domesticity, Selflessness, and Individualism in Responses to Betty Friedan,” in Kathleen Donohue, ed., *Liberty and Justice for All: Rethinking Politics in Cold War America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 2012), 124–53.

particularly provocative considering that, as many Americans in the postwar period knew, Buck had turned her own home into a place of social activism through adoption of orphaned mixed-race children. Although she did not use the term “gunpowder women,” it seemed like a déjà vu of the Depression years: housewives, she argued, were wasting their talented minds being confined at home, never living up to their potential to make a difference in national and international affairs. The backlash was familiar, too, and this time it came from a man on TV. The journalist Mike Wallace, in an interview with Buck, reminded her that with children to look after, “husband to console,” and “the infinite number of chores,” most women did not have the time and energy to engage in “current affairs” as Buck advocated. Moreover, “an awful lot of families” already had women working outside the home to earn extra money for their families. “[You] truly, undoubtedly are not an average American woman,” he told her. According to Wallace, Buck was “obviously an exception [who] speaks and acts for herself.”<sup>74</sup>

Yet it was her exceptionalism that made her relevant to feminist struggles in the first place. The fact that the first American woman to win the Nobel Prize spoke so unapologetically about the problem of white middle-class women’s search for fulfillment prompted the NWP to recruit her, and made so many readers take her critique, as well as the problem, seriously. Capitalizing on her status as the foremost popular expert on China and marketing herself as an American with a foreign perspective, she was able to generate popular interest in the issue by making provocative comparisons with Chinese women, who primarily served as foil to highlight the race and class privileges of white middle-class American women.

Pearl Buck’s struggle with feminism was a struggle to navigate through the intersection of gender, class, and race. Although she rejected the “feminist” label for herself, it was a struggle that feminists of all kinds—from equal rights feminists, social feminists, to African American feminists—grappled with during Buck’s lifetime. In this, she was no exception.<sup>75</sup> Buck seemed more interested in provoking conversations than prescribing solutions.

74. “Pearl Buck,” *The Mike Wallace Interview*, February 8, 1958. In addition to adopting mixed-race children herself, Buck also advocated international and interracial adoption by establishing the Welcome House in 1949. See Conn, *Pearl S. Buck*, 312–13.

75. It is notable that even the prominent African American activist Eslanda Goode Robeson, whose conversations with Buck was published as *An American Argument* (1949), used the term “American women” to refer to white, middle-class woman. To describe women of different races and classes, she used the term “women.” See Barbara Ransby, *Eslanda: The Large and Unconventional Life of Mrs. Paul Robeson* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2013), 147.

Indeed, her most important contribution is not that she spoke for so many women but that she was able to generate a series of serious conversations on the status of women in popular culture, at a time when few outside small feminists circles gave sustained attention to the question of how women's educational privilege should lead to women's sense of fulfillment as human beings. ■

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