

GORDON, DAVID

Professor and Chair, Shepherd University, History Department, USA

Panel 2.1: Empowering Women, Strategies for the Home, Workplace and Community

Duty First: Pearl S. Buck's Assessments of Japan

While Nobel Prize-winning American author Pearl S. Buck wrote primarily about China, she spent significant periods in Japan and focused on it in several works, fictional and non-fictional, between the 1930s and 1960s. Her overall approach is that "duty" dominates Japanese life and decision-making. Such duty, she maintains, is rooted in a hostile geographical environment, receives reinforcement in the various groups Japanese belong to, and shapes even putatively modern, rebellious Japanese youth. Duty's pervasiveness means that innocent happiness can never endure, as onerous obligations rapidly trigger fatalistic despair. Japanese people's sense of duty, she holds, leads them to cherish cleanliness, beauty, and social order. It also coexists well with superficial adaptive change (such as modernization). Negatively, it can lead to spiritual emptiness, humorlessness, self-deception, and an inability to understand alternate points of view. She often contrasts Japan with China, which in her view is democratic, individualistic, easygoing, and highly complex.