

[Japan Society-New York: Documents Project. (1890-1930, Culture/Art/Literature)]

Document 48: “Guard against laxity and self-indulgence.” Boshin Imperial Edict, 1908.

Only a short while has passed since the war, and governmental administration is increasingly in need of new vigor and discipline.

We desire that all classes should be united in mind and spirit, devoted to their callings, diligent and frugal in their work, faithful, and dutiful. They should cultivate courtesy and warmheartedness, avoid ostentation and adhere to simple realities, guard against laxity and self-indulgence while undertaking arduous toil

The heritage of our divine ancestors and illustrious history of our nation shine like the sun and stars. If our subjects cleave to that tradition and sincerely strive for its perfection, the foundations for national development will largely have been secured.

Source: Oka Yoshitake, “Generational Conflict after the Russo-Japanese War,” in Tetsuo Najita and J. Victor Koschmann, eds. *Conflict in Modern Japanese History: The Neglected Tradition*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982, 217.

Context.

During Japan’s 1904-05 war with Russia, common citizens had sacrificed themselves to the national endeavor, giving up personal comforts in their efforts to assure a Japanese victory. In the following years, as the war fever cooled, people began taking up normal pursuits and pleasures again, and individualistic, liberal groups began to flourish. Officials and nationalistic politicians worried, as a result, that the nation was losing its moral core and that their own



control was slipping away. To counter the trend, they issued this short, Confucian-style imperial rescript in 1908, calling on people to be loyal to the country, diligent, and devoted to the imperial family. Sometimes referred to as the “diligence and frugality rescript,” the Boshin Edict ranked next to the 1890 Imperial Rescript on Education as the official basis of moral education in early twentieth century Japan.

Questions.

1. Why might liberal and individualistic ideas have begun to grow in the post Russo-Japanese War years? How does growth that compare/contrast to what happened following America’s 20th century wars?
2. Why might the rise of individualism and liberalism have prompted officials to prepare an edict such as this?
3. What impact would you expect such an edict to have had on Japan’s young students, who heard it recited on important occasions? Might it have curtailed freedom?

Terms.

Boshin. The ancient Chinese calendar, based on a sexagenary (60-year) cycle, was employed widely in premodern Japan. Although it gave way to the Western calendar in the Meiji period (1868-1912), it still was used in ceremonial ways. The 45th year in that cycle, called *boshin*, came in 1908—and was attached to this edict as a way of emphasizing the need to recapture traditional values.

The war. The Russo-Japanese War, 1904-05.