

[Japan Society-New York: Documents Project. 1890-1930, Politics]

**Document 29: “Our subjects united in loyalty . . . the source of our education.” The Imperial Rescript on Education, 1890.**

**Document 30: “The purpose of the Rescript is to strengthen the basis of the nation.” Inoue Tetsujirō’s commentary on the Imperial Rescript, 1891.**

*Know ye, Our Subjects:*

Our Imperial Ancestors have founded Our Empire on a basis broad and everlasting, and have deeply and firmly implanted virtue; Our subjects ever united in loyalty and filial piety have from generation to generation illustrated the beauty thereof. This is the glory of the fundamental character of Our Empire, and herein also lies the source of Our education. Ye, Our subjects, be filial to your parents, affectionate to your brothers and sisters; as husbands and wives be harmonious, as friends true; bear yourselves in modesty and moderation; extend your benevolence to all; pursue learning and cultivate arts, and thereby develop your intellectual faculties and perfect your moral powers; furthermore, advance public good and promote common interests; always respect the Constitution and observe the laws; should emergency arise, offer yourselves courageously to the State; and thus guard and maintain the prosperity of Our Imperial Throne coeval with heaven and earth. So shall ye not only be Our good and faithful subjects, but render illustrious the best traditions of your forefathers.

The way here set forth is indeed the teaching bequeathed by Our Imperial Ancestors, to be observed alike by Their Descendants and the subjects, infallible for all ages and true in all places. It is Our wish to lay it to heart in all reverence, in common with you, Our subjects, that we may all attain to the same virtue.

**Source:** Wm. Theodore de Bary, Carol Gluck, and Arthur E. Tiedemann, comp., *Sources of Japanese Tradition*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. Vol. 2, part 2. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006, 108-109.

*Commentary on the Rescript*

In the world today Europe and America are of course great powers, while the countries settled by the Europeans have all prospered as well. Now only the countries of the East are capable of competing with the progress of these nations. Yet, India, Egypt, Burma, and Annam have already lost their independence; Siam, Tibet, and Korea are extremely weak and will find it difficult to establish their autonomy. Thus in the Orient today Japan and China alone have an independence stable enough to vie for rights with the powers. But China clings to the classics and lacks the spirit of progress. Only in Japan does the idea of progress flourish, and Japan has it within its means to anticipate a glorious civilization in the future.

Japan, however, is a small country. Since there are now those that swallow countries with impunity, we must consider the whole world our enemy. Although we should always endeavor to conduct friendly relations with the powers, foreign enemies are watching for any lapse on our part, and then we can rely only upon our forty million fellow countrymen. Thus any true Japanese must have a sense of public duty, by which he values his life lightly as dust, advances spiritedly, and is ready to sacrifice himself for the sake of the nation.

But we must encourage this spirit before an emergency occurs. “Making a rope to catch a thief only after he shows up” is obviously foolish. The purpose of the Rescript is to strengthen the basis of the nation by cultivating the virtues of filiality and fraternal love, loyalty and



sincerity (*kōtei chūshin*) and to prepare for any emergency by nurturing the spirit of collective patriotism (*kyōdō aikoku*). If all Japanese establish themselves by these principles, we can be assured of uniting the hearts of the people.

**Source:** Carol Gluck, *Japan's Modern Myths: Ideology in the Late Meiji Period*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985, 129-130.

**Context:**

Japan had made remarkable progress toward modernity by 1890, but its leaders worried about the threat of Western imperialism, even as they harbored fears that the democracy established in the Meiji institution might make citizens unruly. It was in that context—explained in vivid commentaries by the nationalistic scholar Inoue Tetsujirō—that they decided to issue an imperial rescript intended to strengthen patriotism among school children. Recognized as one of modern Japan's most important documents, it was memorized by school children and recited at all important occasions for half a century, until Japan's 1945 defeat in World War II.

**Questions.**

1. Drawing on Inoue's commentary, explain what world trends might have induced Japanese officials in the late 1880s to be convinced that patriotism needed to be strengthened.
2. Compare the Rescript on Education to the U.S. Pledge of Allegiance (which was written two years later), in terms of both content and the way it was used in the schools.
3. The Rescript drafters drew on the ideas of both Confucianism and modern state theory. Explain which elements of the document reflect each of those.



**Terms.**

*Filial piety.* Loyalty to one's parents (and, by extension, to those in authority) lies at the heart of traditional Japanese ethics. It was a tenet shared by all of the China-oriented countries of east and southeast Asia.

*Annam.* The name refers specifically to central Vietnam as a colony of the French in the 1800s and early 1900s; it also was used often to refer to the whole of Vietnam.

*Siam.* The colonial name for Thailand.