

To Nurture A Noble Spirit

The Power of the Imperial Rescript on Education

The Imperial Rescript on Education as an Ethical Model—Post-War History

In 1945, defeat in the war left Japan's educational system no choice but to go through a transformation. The General Headquarters (GHQ) of the occupying Allied powers defined Japan's education policy in order to "sweep away all measures of militaristic ultranationalism", but they did not criticise the Rescript at all in this process. Even the report from the US Educational Mission did not go beyond saying that "The ceremonial use of Imperial Rescripts ... we consider undesirable in the development of personality and incompatible with public instruction in a democratic Japan".

The Japanese authorities accepted these recommendations, and on October 8th 1946 the Ministry of Education issued a directive on "The Treatment of Imperial Rescripts", which said "The Imperial Rescript on Education must not be taken as the sole fount of education in our country, but rather the foundations of education must be sought in the Imperial Rescript alongside a wide range of ethical, philosophical, and religious principles from across the world and throughout history". In other words, there was no criticism of the content of the Rescript, but rather it was taken as one example of the wisdom of the past.

Nevertheless, in May 1948 GHQ suddenly asked the Diet to take appropriate steps to make it clear that the Imperial Rescript on Education was no longer in force. Given that the Education Ministry had already issued the directive described above and settled the status of the Rescript, there was no need for the Diet to make a declaration at this point, but under pressure from GHQ both houses passed resolutions stating that the Rescript had no force.

Through these two resolutions, it was reaffirmed that the Rescript was not the sole guiding principle for education in Japan, but this left it as a pure ethical model, as one historical document among others. In other words, this constitutes a recognition by the Diet of the Education Ministry's position that there was no obstacle to using the Rescript as an ethical model in schools, as the "Seventeen Article Constitution" of Shōtoku Taishi and the Analects of Confucius are used today.

When people hear that the Rescript was repealed or set aside, they are prone to thinking that this extended to its content, but in fact there is nothing in the content that deserves to be criticised. On the contrary, we can say that the correct attitude to the Rescript is to be guided by the truths that it contains.

Summarised from "On the repeal process of the Imperial Rescript on Education" in *The Heart of the Imperial Rescript on Education for Today* (in Japanese)

Now is the right time to revisit the Imperial Rescript on Education

It is not too much to say that it has become difficult to pass on traditional values in post-war Japan, in the face of a wide variety of changes such as the transformation of the economic structure, massive population movements, a shift to nuclear families, and a falling birth rate.

Thanks to many technological revolutions, we are blessed with free time and material prosperity. However, can we not say that, in the midst of the apparent wealth of these days, as we compare the quality and quantity of our visible material possessions with those of others, we are neglecting the things that we cannot see: the ease of the spirit, or the quality of our happiness and the values we bring to the world — things that we cannot compare with other people.

The Imperial Rescript on Education is little more than 300 Japanese characters, but it distils the virtues that we are in danger of forgetting. Revisiting the ideals given in the Rescript and nurturing noble spirits will also help to pass the beautiful traditions and character of Japan on from our ancestors to our descendants.

Considering Virtue

When Meiji Tennō came to consider education, he cast his mind back to the ancient times of the first ancestor of the Imperial line. His words capture the way in which his spirit looked back to the generations of his ancestors, carrying their principles forward as the foundation for the actions through which he worked to build a bright future.

In 1985, Shōwa Tennō wrote the following poem, in which we can see that this spirit still burns:

My heart recalling
The history of this land
Of Yamato ruled
By my many ancestors,
I go forward through this day.

The Imperial Rescript on Education was translated into English, French, and German when it was first issued, and it was widely praised throughout the world, its excellence noted by intellectuals in Europe and America. Although the times have changed, these unchanging principles are something we should accept from the past.

Harmony -Value the Bonds of Family-



Filial Piety • Fellowship • Marital Harmony • Trusting Friendship

When you are leaving someone to go on a trip, do you ever feel as though you are leaving them for ever? Trains and planes are convenient and safe, and while you are moving you read, or doze ... Back at home, your waiting family are surely not thinking that they might never see you again.

“My journey is long.
I see it in all this dirt
Clinging to the coat
That is now a mirror of
My loving and waiting wife.”

This poem from the eighth-century Man'yōshū was written by a husband who had left on a journey wearing a coat given to him, with her love, by his wife. For him, the coat was his wife, and reminded him of the days that had passed since he parted from her. It shows us that the love between spouses has been deep since the distant past, and that our ancestors held those bonds to be important.

The word “jin” means consideration, or hearts that are mutually close. Starting with mutual consideration for the people close to you in your family — spouses, children, parents, siblings — your ties spread to friends and acquaintances, the first step towards a society in which we trust and support one another.

Respect -Respect for Others and Self-Effacement-



Humility • Charity

One country creates military bases on artificial islands in the South China Sea in flagrant disregard for international law, oppresses the people of Tibet and Inner Mongolia, and moves to steal liberty and democracy from the people of Hong Kong, while another is developing nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles. The world sees no end to conflicts between countries that constantly assert the correctness of their actions in the name of national interest.

Some time ago, the famous historian and philosopher Arnold Toynbee said that the origin of peace, and the origin of war, were found in the interior life of each individual. He believed that the fate of the human race depended on the war with selfishness we each wage within ourselves.

The more we reflect on whether parents, siblings, and spouses have been completely genuine with each other, on whether friends trust each other, the more ashamed we become. That moment when you think you have been completely genuine may be the point when you cease to be. The whole world is calling for people to show this virtue.

Wisdom -Teach the Importance of Study-



Study and Training • Knowledge and Enlightenment

Young children only see what is right in front of them. As they mature, their knowledge broadens, and they develop an interest in the wider world. Maybe we can even say that becoming an adult simply is broadening your horizons.

I want to do well for my parents; I want to do everything I can for my hometown; I want to contribute to my country; I want to make a difference to the people of the world. As you grow older, as you learn about your own country, you realise that the people near you and the people of other countries are all in the same position as you.

Based on the knowledge you have acquired, you can tell other people what you think. Whether you agree with them, or disagree with them, and why. We must not let our feelings be ruled by the opinions of others. Rather, we must learn enough to examine ourselves without flinching, and deal with others as we really are. Study has a great influence on a person's abilities and the formation of their character.

The achievements of each individual should build on their own efforts and those of others to advance the development of their society, their nation, and their world.

Service -Working for the People of the World-



Upholding Virtue • Working for the General Good

Even among people who are called intellectuals, we frequently see one fiercely criticise others using foul language. Their words may be a vessel for their character.

The Analects say that one devotes oneself to study at 15, becomes independent at 30, becomes sure of one's path at 40, knows one's purpose at 50, becomes able to calmly listen to what people say at 60, and finally, at 70, one's free actions are naturally in accord with the moral law. This account is not really a description of each age, but rather of the maturation of the spirit.

Kitasato Shibasaburo, the father of Japanese microbiology, discovered the plague bacillus, developed a treatment, and made many great contributions to the prevention of infectious diseases. He never received the Nobel Prize, but he said "It is not enough to simply perform research. You must also think how it can be made a benefit to mankind". We should refine our characters through study, and put the fruits of that process to work for the benefit of the people of the world.

Duty -Defending Others-



Respect for the Law • Courage in the Service of Justice

These days, we see a lot of people who insist on nothing but their own rights. People tend to think that asserting one's rights under the law is the essence of democracy, but we must not forget to fulfil our duties and responsibilities.

Young children just say whatever they want, but a mature adult is expected to consider both the effects that their words might have on the whole situation, and what might happen if they do not speak out. Can we not say that a truly democratic society arises when such people gather?

The democratic activists in Hong Kong are putting themselves on the line to defend liberty and democracy. Similarly, we in Japan have an urgent duty to defend ourselves in the face of the development of missiles or activities around the Senkaku Islands. Further, there is still no sign of a solution to the issue of the abductees in North Korea. We must prepare our spirits to do what is necessary to defend our society.

We live in a country that past generations chose to defend at the cost of their lives. If we are to defend our nation, the times call for us to find the courage to accept their mantle and take the first steps to an independent and truly Japanese Japan.