

THE CHARTER OATH (OF THE MEIJI RESTORATION), 1868

Introduction

The Charter Oath was a short but very important public document issued in April 1868, just months after the Meiji Restoration brought an end to the Tokugawa shogunate and installed a new Japanese government. Issued in the name of the Emperor Meiji (who was only 15 years old at the time), the text was written by a group of the young samurai, mainly from domains in southwestern Japan, who had led the overthrow of the Tokugawa and the “restoration” of imperial rule. The Charter Oath appeared at a time of considerable uncertainty in Japanese society, as people throughout the country were unsure of the intentions and priorities of the new regime governing Japan.

Document Excerpts with Questions

From *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, edited by Wm. Theodore de Bary, Ryusaku Tsunoda, and Donald Keene, 1st ed., vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), 137. © 1964 Columbia University Press. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher. All rights reserved.

The Charter Oath (of the Meiji Restoration), 1868

By this oath we set up as our aim the establishment of the national weal on a broad basis and the framing of a constitution and laws.

1. Deliberative assemblies shall be widely established and all matters decided by public discussion.
2. All classes, high and low, shall unite in vigorously carrying out the administration of affairs of state.
3. The common people, no less than the civil and military officials, shall each be allowed to pursue his own calling so that there may be no discontent.
4. Evil customs of the past shall be broken off and everything based upon the just laws of Nature.
5. Knowledge shall be sought throughout the world so as to strengthen the foundations of imperial rule.

Questions:

1. Why did the leaders of the Meiji Restoration feel it necessary to issue the Charter Oath?
2. How would you have reacted to this document as a Japanese samurai at the time? What if you were a warrior from the Tokugawa clan? What if you had been a peasant or urban merchant?

Primary Source Document with Questions (DBQs) on

THE CHARTER OATH (OF THE MEIJI RESTORATION), 1868

3. What do you think the authors of this document meant by “deliberative assemblies” and “public discussion”? Does this suggest a commitment to democratic rule?
4. What did the authors of the Charter Oath believe to be the “evil customs of the past”?
5. From your further study of the history of Meiji Japan, did the new government live up to the goals established in the Charter Oath?