From the Imperial Rescript to Yasukuni Shrine: Promotion of Japanese Nationalism via Confucianism and Shinto in the Prewar Period

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Abstract

The Imperial Rescript on Education of 1890 was far more than a simple decree outlining educational priorities. Rather, it was a defining document that sought to describe for the first time what it means to be Japanese. Drawing heavily upon traditional values of Confucianism, the Imperial Rescript lays out the meaning of national identity and morality in the view of the Japanese government. In doing so, the Rescript sets the stage for unification of the nation behind a common cause of becoming a more powerful force on the world stage. A major part of achieving greater recognition both within East Asia and in the eyes of the West was rapid militarization, a significant undertaking that was made possible by rallying the enthusiasm of the people through participation in rituals derived from traditional Shinto beliefs. Combined with presentation of propaganda, these efforts to garner support for the government’s causes via indoctrination of beliefs resulted in the construction of a deep sense of nationalism that has long outlived the militarism it was once used to justify and, in some respects, persists to this day. This thesis will recount the process by which traditional beliefs were adapted to engender nationalism and eventually fuel direct militaristic action. Though nobly dying for the emperor on a battlefield and becoming a war god is an idea of the past, some Confucian and Shinto sentiments from prewar nationalist messaging still have a place in defining Japanese identity. It is important to gain an understanding of this consequential, yet somewhat taboo prewar time as history can serve as an important reminder to not repeat mistakes of the past.
This thesis will examine Japanese nationalist messaging and prewar mobilization, with a primary focus on the Imperial Rescript on Education. This three-hundred character-long document was promulgated in 1890 during the Meiji Period, shortly after the formal implementation of Japan’s new system of government which was characterized by a national Constitution and the Diet, a Western-like political assembly. The Imperial Rescript was a fixture of daily life for Japanese school children, as it was read at all major school events. In addition, children were required to study the text and commit it to heart. It shared the spotlight with the imperial portrait as a symbol representing the best qualities of the Japanese state.\textsuperscript{1} Due to its prominent role in society and the fact that it was written by political officials but presented as the divine words of the emperor, the document provides a great perspective through which to examine the mid to late Meiji Period. It clearly reveals the ideas that the government wished to instill in Japanese school children. On its surface, this document explicitly stresses the importance of education for advancement of the prewar Japanese state, prominently referencing ideals of Confucianism and calling upon the people of Japan to practice moral behaviors and thus carry on the traditions of their ancestors. However, in addition to these heavily Confucian explicit messages, the document also carries with it some very important implicit messages consequential for understanding the Japanese government’s nation-building strategy.

Before examining reflections of Confucianism in the Imperial Rescript, it is important to note that Confucian influence on Japanese political ideology and morality was not a novel phenomenon at the time of the Imperial Rescript’s promulgation. Confucianism was introduced to Japan in the first millennium CE, though some scholars assert that it did not exert significant

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\textsuperscript{1} Marius B. Jansen, "Education, Values and Politics in Japan." \textit{Foreign Affairs} 35, no. 4 (1957), 668.
influence on Japanese culture until the emergence of Neo-Confucian and Ancient Learning ideologies in the seventeenth century under the Tokugawa Shogunate. However, meaningful influence of Confucian values on Japanese politics is evident as early as the sixth century, with Prince Shotoku’s *Seventeen Article Constitution* being an early example of Confucian-influenced ideals for behavior. Though Confucianism has never been the sole, prevailing ideology in Japanese society since its introduction, it has always been in an interplay with Buddhism and Shintoism for shaping politics and behavior. In addition, it has long played a prominent role in the Japanese education system. This dynamic in which Confucianism has exerted meaningful influence on many aspects of Japanese society without gaining much overt recognition is summed up by the scholar Edwin O. Reischauer, who argues that, “Behind the wholehearted Japanese acceptance of modern science, modern concepts of progress and growth, universalistic principles of ethics, and democratic ideals and values, strong Confucian traits still lurk beneath the surface . . . Almost no one considers himself a Confucianist today, but in a sense almost all Japanese are.” Through its ubiquitous impact on everything from politics and science to “interpersonal relationships and loyalties,” we can see that Confucianism plays a substantial role in forming the very underpinning of what it means to be Japanese in a moral sense.

At the time of the Imperial Rescript’s promulgation in the late Meiji Period, Japanese national identity was still in the process of taking shape. As the Japanese archipelago was home

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3 Ibid, 115.
5 Ibid, 112, 117.
7 Ibid.
to numerous distinct groups of people who spoke different languages and dialects, forming a cohesive, singular national identity for this collection of people who had been separate for over a thousand years was not an automatic process. Prior to the Meiji Restoration in 1868, Japan was still essentially, “a collectivity of persons whose sense of identity was focused not on the state but upon local communities.” The Meiji government wrote the Imperial Rescript on Education with the aim of establishing “a sense of nation” by appealing to the notion of broadly shared ancestry and tradition. Though the concept of a unified state had been brewing since the times of feudal domains prior to the Meiji Restoration, the state was only formally established with the promulgation of the Constitution in 1889 and opening of the Diet in 1890. Only then did Japan become “a nation among civilized nations” or bunmeikoku no ikkoku 文明国の一国. Yet, any nationalist sentiment that began to take hold in the first two decades since the Meiji Restoration in 1868 was weak, and even with the writing of the Constitution and restoration of the emperor’s power to establish the state legally and symbolically, there was still not sufficient driving force “to weld a people into a nation.” This meant that something more would be required to unify the Japanese archipelago, which in its thousand-year history had never been anything but a collection of different groups of people and to define a shared Japanese identity for the people of this relatively new island nation.

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To achieve this essential task in the process of nation-building, “the premise that national education should serve the state”\textsuperscript{10} was established with the promulgation of the Imperial Rescript, and ideologues insisted that a renewed focus on moral education was required to protect existing nationalism or \textit{kokutaishugi} 国体主義 and to produce “a people who are not ashamed to be Japanese.”\textsuperscript{11} In addition to the promulgation of the Imperial Rescript, Inoue Tetsujiro, a professor at the University of Tokyo, wrote an official state commentary on the Imperial Rescript, \textit{Chokugo engi}, which was distributed to schools alongside the main document.\textsuperscript{12} In this accompanying text, Inoue applied Shinto ideas of morality to form a secular sense of “national morality,” a phenomenon also referred to as State Shinto.\textsuperscript{13}

Confucianism would come to serve as “the primary basis for the curriculum of national morality” and as a sort of “civil religion,”\textsuperscript{14} a vehicle for delivering this message of national morality. This highlights the interplay between Confucianism and other ideologies in Japan, with the more broadly East Asian Confucian ideals complementing rather than dominating the endemic ideology of Shinto. In fact, as this paper will explore later, Confucianism and Shinto also complemented one another in Japan’s nationalist messaging campaign.

Through an appeal to traditional values of Confucianism, the Imperial Rescript calls upon the people of Japan to empower themselves with knowledge and to faithfully serve the interests of the state. The featuring of Confucian ideals in a document that defines what it means to be

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid, 102-103.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid, 115-116.
\textsuperscript{12} Kiri Paramore, ""Civil Religion" and Confucianism: Japan's Past, China's Present, and the Current Boom in Scholarship on Confucianism." \textit{The Journal of Asian Studies} 74, no. 2 (2015), 274.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{14} Robert Bellah in Paramore, “Civil Religion and Confucianism,” 275.
Japanese in the eyes of the government gives credence to the notion that Confucianism plays an important role in forming the underpinning of Japanese identity and nationalism. This thesis will highlight the degree to which Confucianism and nationalism are intertwined in the Meiji government’s attempt to define Japanese identity, while also exploring the idea that Confucianism is presented as a more palatable ideology than fervent nationalism.

The following close reading of the Imperial Rescript on Education of 1890 will primarily focus on the deployment of Confucianism to construct a notion of Japanese identity and even superiority. It will reveal much about the document’s construction and effective delivery of a strong nationalist message. This careful analysis will examine the English translation provided by Japan’s Ministry of Education line-by-line for explicit and implicit references to Confucian ideology. However, this section will first begin with analysis of the original Japanese text, highlighting how the linguistic features of the Imperial Rescript position it to powerfully deliver its Confucian-influenced nationalist content.

The Japanese of the original document is quite different from modern, everyday Japanese. One major distinguishing feature is that the original text is written entirely in kanji and katakana with a high proportion of kanji whereas even formal academic documents in modern Japanese are written primarily in kanji and hiragana. This reflects an overall shift that has occurred in Japanese from meaning-based writing with kanji to a more phonetic system.²

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This shift is associated with the *genbunitchi* 言文一致 movement which sought “to replace the difficult literary styles used in the Tokugawa period with a simple style which approximated the spoken language.” See “The Genbunitchi Movement. Its Origin, Development, and Conclusion” by Nanette Twine for more information.
Furthermore, the distribution of kanji and hiragana is much more even in modern Japanese documents, compared to the Imperial Rescript where the balance is approximately seventy percent kanji compared to a minority of characters in katakana. In addition to the sheer number of kanji which results in a challenging read, many of the kanji used are sophisticated characters with high stroke counts and are rarely encountered in a normal context. Two examples are present in the very first sentence, where the characters 惟 and 肇 are used instead of 思 and 始, respectively. The use of these sophisticated characters to convey the same meaning does not only reflect differences in written Japanese between the late nineteenth century and the present day; it also helps elevate the document to a high level befitting of delivering the words of the emperor.

Going beyond the extensive use of complex kanji, the old-fashioned syntax of the Imperial Rescript also distinguishes it from modern Japanese. Reading aloud an annotated version of the original text, the words sound quite different both from spoken Japanese and academic Japanese. In fact, parts of the document are incomprehensible to me (a near-native level speaker of present-day Japanese) unless I hear it alongside a translation into modern Japanese or with reference to the characters for meaning. The result of these features is an elite document that could likely only be read and fully understood by highly literate individuals, which would have contributed to the image of the Imperial Rescript as a special document associated with the divine. This inaccessibility and sense of superior status helps position the document to deliver a powerful nationalist message, given that the basis for opposition would be a deep understanding of the text. Combining this with the high likelihood that what few individuals who could understand and object to the Imperial Rescript would have been strongly
pressured to not speak out, it follows that the words would be perceived as the gospel truth by children who recited the document regularly in school. The language usage of the Imperial Rescript helps to maximize its potential to indoctrinate the children and inculcate nationalist belief.

These linguistic features set the stage for the heart of the Imperial Rescript: the content itself, which leans heavily upon references to Confucianism to deliver its messages. Much of the Confucian influence on the Imperial Rescript is explicit in the statements on morality made throughout the text. This is apparent from the very first sentence, which has been translated as, “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 opening line sets the tone for the whole text in two ways. First, the mentions of loyalty and filial piety, two of the fundamental virtues of Confucianism, immediately establish the Imperial Rescript as a text outlining proper morals and behavior based on Confucian ideals. Adherence of subjects to these standards of loyalty to their “Imperial Ancestors” and filial piety toward their parents is described as a basis for the beauty of the empire. Second, the invocation of loyalty and filial piety to support the notion of multi-generational beauty demonstrates the deployment of Confucianism for building nationalist sentiment. Another intriguing aspect of the first sentence is this allusion to a long, shared history, with the use of words such as “our” and “generation to generation” attempting to emphasize the common roots of the diverse groups of people living within Japan, dating all the way back to the mythical beginnings of the Japanese people as told in the Kojiki and

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Nihonshoki. This aspect appeals to yet another important pillar of Confucianism, ancestor worship, as the Imperial Rescript calls on the people of Japan to pay respect to their ancestors by living morally. Though in reality the sense of shared ancestry may have been weak at the time of the Imperial Rescript’s promulgation, we can see the writers’ desire to implant this sense of unity in the Japanese people, whether it was artificial and forced or not.

The text then continues, “This is the glory of the fundamental character of Our Empire, and herein also lies the source of Our education.” In order to interpret this sentence, we must first establish what in the preceding sentence “this” is referring to as the “glory” of the empire. The most probable antecedent in this context is the virtues of loyalty and filial piety that had been passed from generation to generation, or in other words, Japan’s Confucian traditions. Though Confucianism and Confucius himself are not explicitly mentioned here or elsewhere in the Imperial Rescript, their presence is implicit in the clear-cut references to the pillars of Confucianism. Thus, we find in this line the designation of Confucianism and Confucian teachings as the guiding light for the path of education for Japan moving forward as a unified nation.

The following sentence, which reads, “Ye, Our subjects, be filial to your parents, affectionate to your brothers and sisters; as husbands and wives be harmonious, as friends true,” also supports this notion of Confucianism being posited as the model for an ideal, state-oriented Japanese education. These instructions on how to conduct oneself in interpersonal

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18 “Imperial Rescript on Education.”

19 Ibid.
relationships match almost word for word the five morally important human relations as described in the Confucian classic, *Mencius*: “to be filial to parents, affectionate to siblings, true to friends, harmonious as spouses.” This is consistent with the earlier example of Prince Shotoku’s *Seventeen Article Constitution* which also references these five important relationships. Thus, in the Imperial Rescript we see the emphasis being placed on a moral-based education as the future of Japan and as a blueprint on which to build Japan’s national identity as a newly unified state. This two-pronged approach to establishing Japan’s identity as a moral nation, first describing a history of loyalty and filial piety as the source of the nation’s beauty and then explicitly instructing future generations to practice such behavior, demonstrates the determination of the Imperial Rescript’s writers to force upon Japanese people unity across the nation under Confucian values.

Following these Confucian opening lines, the Imperial Rescript begins to extend Confucian ideals from engaging harmoniously in direct personal relationships to a more nationalistic message of serving Japanese society at large. The words “bear yourselves in modesty and moderation; extend your benevolence to all; pursue learning and cultivate arts, and thereby develop intellectual faculties and perfect moral powers” serve as a smooth transition from the personal level to a national level. References to virtues and morals still feature prominently in this line, but the message becomes more expansive with the use of the phrase “extend your benevolence to all.” Further, personal development in the form of furthering learning, cultivating the arts, and developing “intellectual faculties” and “perfect moral powers”

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22 “Imperial Rescript on Education.”
are pitched as ways in which people should contribute to building the strength of the Japanese state from the ground up.

Following this transition to outlining expectations for citizens to behave in ways consistent with Confucian ideals and thus contribute to the advancement of the Japanese empire, the text takes a more directed nationalistic tone in the subsequent lines. The next section reads, “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.”23 These words mark a significant departure from the rather abstract, morality-based opening section by giving more concrete instruction on how a Japanese citizen should directly contribute to promoting the nation’s development. These orders to respect and obey the Constitution and laws are decidedly un-Confucian in their nature, and to the contrary have more of a Legalist character. Furthermore, the demand for citizens to offer themselves to and perhaps even sacrifice themselves for the good of the nation is an even more notable departure from the earlier Confucian commentary on interpersonal relationships. What exactly is meant by the term “emergency” will be discussed later, but suffice to say, these demands are deeply nationalistic and arguably even sound a bit militant. Such instructions expose the true intentions behind the writing of the Imperial Rescript, to advance and inculcate nationalist sentiment and thus fortify the state under the veil of promoting a Confucian, moral-based education.

After the brief excursion from the shelter of Confucianism, the text begins its retreat to moral commentary resembling the beginning of the text. In the sentence, “So shall ye not only be

23 Ibid.
Our good and faithful subjects, but render illustrious the best traditions of your forefathers,” the writers return to Confucian virtues and the notion of a multi-generational tradition of sound conduct and morality. This return to Confucian ideas is still nationalistic in nature but returns to the firm footing of Confucianism and morality, delivering a message stressing the importance of loyalty and ancestor worship. We find another appeal to ancestor worship in the following line, “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.” The use of the word “Way” in this translation might constitute a reference to “the Way” described in early Confucian texts like the Analects, as in “the Way of the junzi (superior individual).” However, examination of the original Japanese text suggests that the character 道 (michi) could simply be referring instead to the moral path of proper conduct set forth earlier in the text. The Imperial Rescript concludes, “It is Our wish to lay it to heart in all reverence, in common with you, Our subjects, that we may thus attain to the same virtue,” marking a return to the virtues outlined in the opening lines.

Thus, we see that the nationalistic messaging of the Imperial Rescript begins and ends on the premise of Confucian sentiment, with some non-Confucian, overtly nationalistic mandates embedded in the middle. This seems to reflect the writers’ desire to maintain a delicate balance between advancing an agenda of nationalism to engender a sense of unity and devotion to the new nation without alarming citizens with direct, explicitly nationalistic statements. They were

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24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 Paul Smith, email to Scott Kozarsky, April 27, 2020.
27 “Imperial Rescript on Education.”
rather successful in achieving this balance, as the Rescript received favorable reception from journalists and educators alike.\textsuperscript{28} In combination with Inoue Tetsujiro’s accompanying document \textit{Chokugo engi}, the Rescript was successful in bringing about its intended effect, sparking ultra-nationalism in Japan to the point of triggering attacks on liberals and Christians.\textsuperscript{29}

In addition to sparking nationalism, the promulgation of the Imperial Rescript reflects several other objectives of the nation-building endeavor. It reinforced the concept of national polity, or \textit{kokutai 国体}, employing a heavily Confucian-based moral education to “establish the foundations of the \textit{kokutai} and teach the way of patriotism and ethics” with the previously mentioned goal of “producing a people who are not ashamed to be Japanese.”\textsuperscript{30} Beyond this contribution to a sense of national identity, however, the Rescript also aided more concrete, immediate causes including justification of the imperial restoration and fortification of the new Constitution and Diet-based form of government. Following the precedent set by requiring members of the armed forces to memorize and recite the Imperial Rescript to Soldiers and Sailors, the Imperial Rescript on Education likewise was to be recited in schools for the purpose of indoctrinating children with the essence of the revived emperor-centered system of government.\textsuperscript{31} In order to accomplish the goals of justifying the imperial restoration and strengthening the emperor’s position, the Imperial Rescript on Education draws heavily from the mythical connection between the imperial family and deities as told in the \textit{Kojiki} and \textit{Nihonshoki} to promote “the idealistic notion of a revived Imperial Japan.”\textsuperscript{32} In terms of fortifying the

\textsuperscript{28} Gluck, \textit{Japan’s Modern Myths}, 124.
\textsuperscript{29} Paramore, "Civil Religion" and Confucianism,” 274.
\textsuperscript{30} Gluck, \textit{Japan’s Modern Myths}, 115.
\textsuperscript{31} Victoria Eaves-Young, "Priming the Country for War: Imperial Rescripts as Fortifiers of the Kokutai," 70.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid, 71.
government’s new political system, the Rescript not only contributed to building the *kokutai* as a moral nation guided by the Constitution and Diet, but it also helped fuel militarism. Though primarily aimed at children in schools, the Rescript emphasizes necessary qualities for the armed forces, including “loyalty to the point of death.” Such a message, though it is found in an education-focused document for schools, clearly has militaristic implications applicable not to children but to the military. This becomes even more clear upon examining the progression of Japanese history, where the Imperial Rescript was later deployed to foster, “indoctrination, repression, and militarism, culminating in the Pacific War.”

Another message that the Imperial Rescript gave rise to is the notion of putting Japan on a pedestal as a morally superior nation while “scorn[ing] other nations as morally inferior.” The Imperial Rescript’s assertion of uniquely Japanese values as the foundation of the nation’s superiority was applied in the 1930s to form this paradigm in which Japan was placed a notch above the rest on the world stage. This superiority was in turn harnessed domestically to justify, “suppression of feminists, liberals, pacifists, unionists, and social democrats, as well as radicals,” thus advancing the Meiji government’s agenda. This notion of Japanese superiority and other nations’ moral inferiority based upon the Imperial Rescript was also complemented by other media. One example is a poster included in the May 1942 issue of *Manga*, one of the few approved magazines at the time under the Japanese government’s censorship, entitled “Purging One’s Head of Anglo-Americanism.”

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33Ibid, 72.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
Targeted specifically at attacking the values of the United States of America, the subtitle of this poster translates to, “Get rid of the dandruff encrusting your head.” The words falling out of the woman’s hair as flakes of dandruff include, “Anglo-American ideas, […] extravagance, selfishness, hedonism, liberalism, materialism, money worship, and individualism.” These concepts and ideologies, which run counter to the moral values of selflessness and loyalty to the nation outlined by the Imperial Rescript as the basis of Japan’s “deeply and firmly implanted virtue,” are represented as filthy contaminants of which people must be cleansed in order to

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38 “Imperial Rescript on Education.”
achieve cleanliness and beauty. Thus, we see that the Imperial Rescript is not the only vector by which a notion of Japanese exceptionalism was propagated through Japanese media.

Another arm of the Japanese government’s efforts to propagate nationalism can be identified upon exploring the complementary role of State Shinto in the prewar period. As described earlier, the introduction of Confucian ideology to Japan did not pose an existential threat to Shinto; rather, it supplemented Shinto in the Japanese belief system by entering a dynamic interplay of mutual influence. Perhaps what makes Shinto amendable to and compatible with influence from Confucianism is in its very nature. Though Shinto is a well-recognized phenomenon, it is somewhat unclearly defined and as described by Helen Hardacre, both “maddeningly” and “conveniently” vague. It is “maddeningly vague” in that scholars struggle to precisely define it yet simultaneously “conveniently vague” because it can be defined by politicians in a way that suits their needs (such as appealing to tradition). At its core, Shinto has been described as “the way of the gods” and also as “the indigenous religion of the Japanese people,” though some scholars have likened it more to a cultural identity rather than a religion.39

When describing Shinto, it is important to draw a distinction between Shrine Shinto and State Shinto, the two variants which are most relevant to a discussion of Japanese nationalism. Shrine Shinto, or jinja Shinto 神社 神道, most closely corresponds to the core of Shinto and consists of worshipping the vast assortment of shrines distributed across Japan which serve local and regional communities.40 Shrine Shinto also comprises part of the foundation of State Shinto, the collective name given to aspects of Shinto that were under a high degree of governmental

control. The Kokutai Cult, an umbrella term for the “complex of values, symbols, beliefs, institutions and practices through which the Japanese people participated in the sacred center of Japanese life (state-nation-emperor),” encapsulates much of what is considered to be State Shinto.\textsuperscript{41} This in turn includes Imperial Household Shinto (Kôshitsu Shinto 皇室神道), which consists of the rituals performed by the Imperial Family in worship of Amaterasu-o-mikami, past emperors, and “kami of heaven and earth,” as well as the shrines of Ise and shrines for the war dead.\textsuperscript{42} The prominence of State Shinto between 1868 and 1945 has led scholars to name this time the State Shinto Period. It was during these decades that Shinto worship was most under the control of the Japanese government “which systematically utilized shrine worship as a major force for mobilizing imperial loyalties on behalf of modern nation-building.”\textsuperscript{43}

It is clear that State Shinto contributed to a sense of nation and Japanese exceptionalism in concert with the Imperial Rescript. Shinto, which has long been a fixture for the people inhabiting the islands of present-day Japan, was a convenient choice for the Japanese government to enlist as a unifying force. This is because Shinto was truly something that Japanese people shared in their history regardless of belonging to distinct communities in the past. The separate groups of people who eventually came to be known as Japanese spoke quite different languages and dialects and had their own histories, making the appeal to shared ancestry described earlier in analyzing the Imperial Rescript seem rather forced. Though this appeal might still have been a convenient overextension even with the legacy of Shinto, it is

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid, 552.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid, 554.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid, 548.
nevertheless apparent that Shinto had true potential to help fortify this construction of a “shared past” narrative.

Furthermore, the potential of Shinto to serve the needs of the Japanese state went far beyond simply providing a platform for constructing a national identity. With its adaptation to meet more directly the demands of the time, Shinto also offered a tool by which the Japanese government could advance a nationalist agenda and justify its actions. The imperial family’s worship of its ancestors and Amaterasu-o-mikami through shrine rituals on the grounds of the Imperial Palace reinforces the line of descent from the divine, helping to solidify the emperor’s mandate to rule over Japan. This was especially significant in the years following the Meiji Restoration in 1868 given that restoring the emperor to power was surely not an insignificant matter. In a similar vein, the Ise Grand Shrine also serves as a reminder of this divine connection given that this complex of shrines too is principally dedicated to worship of Amaterasu-o-mikami.\(^44\) Thus, the people of Japan had a place to practice worship of the sun goddess, the experience of which would only help to ingrain belief in the divine connection and therefore the imperial mandate to rule.

Finally, those who went to serve the nation in war at the emperor’s instruction and gave their lives to him in the process were honored at shrines for the war dead, highlighting the nobility of their actions. These shrines were designated by the government for “enshrinement of the spirits of the war dead” so that those who had given their lives could be “called back from the spirit world to receive the homage of the living.”\(^45\) There were 148 of these shrines where people could go to worship those that had fallen in combat, further helping to reinforce the notion of

\(^{44}\) Ibid, 554.
\(^{45}\) Ibid.
noble sacrifice and fortifying support for future service. The most notable of these shrines was the Yasukuni Shrine, which was established in 1869 by the Meiji emperor as *Shokonsha* but later renamed to bear its current title.46 Yasukuni Shrine would come to play an important role in promoting militarism by reinforcing “the idea of honorable war death” among the Japanese people.47 In fact, by the start of the Russo-Japanese War in 1904, many people were familiar with the idea that those who sacrifice their lives fighting for the emperor are enshrined as war gods at Yasukuni Shrine.48 However, as important as the physical existence and accessibility of Yasukuni Shrine were for propagating the notion of honorable war death, equally or perhaps even more important was the meaning of enshrinement at Yasukuni Shrine to people who could not visit, or in other words, “belief in the absence of access to the site.”49

This deeper symbolic meaning which transcended the physical existence of Yasukuni Shrine alongside the significance of the emperor was the premise on which militarism was built up during the prewar period. As described by Akiko Takenaka:

> In this [prewar] period we … see the beginnings of a nationwide network that disseminated ideals associated with the emperor and Yasukuni Shrine to all of Japan: an ideological network that utilized a range of tools from conscription and funerals to victory celebrations and school rituals, with which all Japanese—regardless of where they lived—had an obligatory relationship. This network became more institutionalized in later decades through the construction of gokoku jinja (nation-protecting shrines) and war memorials and through organized visits to Yasukuni Shrine by bereaved family members. Live radio programming enabled some rituals to take place simultaneously


48 Ibid, 76.

49 Ibid, 75.
throughout the Japanese empire, further reinforcing the network. Yasukuni Shrine was central to this network.”

Thus, we see how Yasukuni Shrine represents an important part of the application of State Shinto for fostering belief in militarism across the nation. Arguably, the rest of State Shinto including the aforementioned rituals to Amaterasu-o-mikami and imperial ancestors rests upon the foundation laid by ideas associated with Yasukuni Shrine and the emperor. Such rituals as well as later customs of visiting Yasukuni Shrine and other war memorials all contributed to militarization by forcing the people of Japan to internalize the associated beliefs. Subsequent construction of additional State Shinto places of worship such as *gokoku jinja* (nation-protecting shrines) too would only contribute further to the network across Japan helping to make support for militarism prevalent throughout the nation.

Another noteworthy example of State Shinto lies in the funereal practices of the time which revered fallen Japanese soldiers. Funerals for Japan’s fallen warriors were elaborate, highly public events which would be organized by the entire town or village of the deceased. Residents of all ages, from young schoolchildren to older adults, would attend services in large numbers such that even a relatively low-ranking soldier might draw thousands of people. Though at first glance this level of community engagement to honoring the loss of a local is truly impressive, this practice was not truly of the people’s own accord. Instead, the orders of prefectural governments for local leaders to make these funerals as “grand” as possible is the best explanation for why even soldiers of lowly stature had such prominent funerals. To further increase the pressure for each funeral to be such a major event, the prefectural governments would go so far as to require mayors and village heads to submit detailed reporting on the

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50 Ibid.
funerals carried out in their local communities, ensuring that the war dead would be revered on a large scale. One can only imagine the powerful effect that having massive funerals on a regular basis would exert on the beliefs of the people concerning honorable war death. Accounts exist of men visiting local shrines and contemplating whether they too would be enshrined as war gods there or at Yasukuni Shrine if they perished in combat, demonstrating both the effect of reverence for the war dead and far-reaching influence of Yasukuni Shrine. These elaborate funerals were truly “central to propagating support at home for imperialist wars”51 in what can be described as a system of “institutionalized grief.”52

All of these applications, from worship at Ise Grand Shrine and Yasukuni Shrine to elaborate funereal practices, most certainly fall into the category of State Shinto as they are manipulations of Shinto to serve the state’s purposes. Yet, they are all firmly rooted in traditional Shinto, thus showing the utility of this enduring fixture of Japanese history for advancing a nationalist agenda. However, there were additional practices during the prewar period that lacked the same degree of explicit connection to State Shinto but still contributed to the indoctrination of militarism. Military events such as victory celebrations as well as sending troops to war and welcoming them home were also influential contributors to the nationalist campaign; the excitement and emotional weight of these events likely would have helped to increase enthusiasm for imperialist causes. Furthermore, non-military practices such as, “recitation of the Imperial Rescript on Education, celebration of imperial holidays, and paying tribute to the imperial portrait,” were also fundamental in gathering sympathy for the government’s actions. Together, these practices “gradually instilled in participants the idea of proudly dying for

51 Ibid, 76.
52 Ibid, 83.
emperor and nation.” Though in hindsight these examples seem a bit removed from Shinto ideology, at the time it likely would have been difficult to separate these practices from the collective set of customs the people followed, many of which firmly belong under the umbrella of State Shinto.⁵³

These cultural events with varying degrees of association to State Shinto in turn fed into the government’s direct actions toward mobilization of the nation’s forces. No practice more clearly exemplifies this than conscription, which began in 1873 shortly after the construction of Yasukuni Shrine (which was still called Tokyo Shokonsha at the time). The introduction of conscription “was by far the most significant step in the process of militarizing the young nation.” This institution enabled Japan to not only amass “a supply of young men” who could be trained for combat but also enabled the government “to gather and collect detailed information on every male Japanese.” Furthermore, conscription helped to instill in Japanese men a “sense of their obligation to serve the emperor and the nation as a soldier and possibly die in the process.” This in turn provided a clear goal for the aims expressed in the Imperial Rescript on Education regarding preparation for the duty to serve the state; women were to focus their efforts on “having and raising healthy sons eligible for conscription.” Even the mandatory process of enlisting for conscription “became a rite of passage” and an important reminder of the reality “that being male meant it was necessary to consider the possibility of dying for Japan.”⁵⁴

The process of conscription was not limited to simply completing paperwork; it also included a fitness examination that in effect further increased the pressure placed upon Japanese mothers to raise healthy sons. This physical examination, conducted at age twenty, divided men

⁵³ Ibid, 77.
⁵⁴ Ibid.
into five ranks based on their fitness to serve. This single event was a momentous occasion for every Japanese male as it carried high stakes; apart from men placed into the fifth rank due to ill health who could retake the examination later in life, “a man’s ranking did not change throughout his life.”\textsuperscript{55} The importance of the fitness examination resulted in the construction of “an ideal male image” which men and mothers alike felt a responsibility to pursue. Under the system of conscription, an ideal Japanese male was one who earned placement within the top two ranks and met the physical requirements for conscription. There was yet another layer of prestige in this ranking system, as only fifteen percent of males achieved the highest rank. This elusive honor incentivized commitment by the Japanese people to an effort which would in turn strengthen the nation’s military might. Furthermore, this merit-based process “transformed the process of becoming a soldier from one based on birth to one based on effort,” which in turn increased regard for young men who achieved high ranks. This culminated in a widespread phenomenon that would persist in Imperial Japan’s history of wanting to faithfully fulfill obligations despite any personal risk: “Men wanted to achieve the highest rank in the physical exam even though that increased the probability of military service and war death; schools wished to become eligible for the imperial portrait; local governments aspired to obtain permission to build war memorials.” The degree to which men felt compelled to accept personal risk in service of the nation is highlighted by the efforts of schools to instill in young men a “desire for enshrinement at Yasukuni Shrine,” which of course was only possible via the most extreme personal sacrifice: death.\textsuperscript{56}

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid, 78.
This brings us full circle to the earlier discussion of the aims of Confucian ideology in the Imperial Rescript on Education and State Shinto in which Yasukuni Shrine plays an important role. A platform comprised of Confucianism and State Shinto served as a foundation upon which nationalist ideology and systems could be constructed. We can now see the complete chain of how ideology was converted into action: traditional beliefs with some adaptation served as the premise for people to engage in rituals and events emphasizing nationalist causes; commitment and enthusiasm borne out of these events were then channeled into direct nationalistic action. The Imperial Rescript was instrumental in advancing the concept of honorable war death as “recitation of the Imperial Rescript on Education … instilled in participants the idea of proudly dying for emperor and nation.” This practice of reciting the Imperial Rescript in tandem with worship at Yasukuni Shrine and other war memorials brought about commitment to readying for conscription and then offering faithful service to the nation and emperor, deeply militaristic causes. One practice alone may not have been enough to produce such a substantial effect. For instance, Yasukuni Shrine “was only one part of a larger system in which mass media, education, and rituals played key roles.” It is the combined effect of all these practices and factors that resulted in large-scale mobilization to a degree unprecedented in Japanese history.

This leaves us with one last question: what if any of this powerful campaign which indoctrinated belief and led to militarism survived after the end of World War II? The militaristic actions of the government and people clearly did not survive, as Japan was forced to renounce war in the new constitution implemented by Douglas Mac Arthur and the Allied powers during

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57 Ibid, 77.
58 Ibid, 75.
the postwar occupation. In Article 9 of the constitution, Japan not only forfeited the right to wage war but also to maintain armed forces including land, sea, and air forces. Therefore, the nation was forced to surrender its militaristic ways, and thus has not been involved in war for over seventy-five years.

Then, what became of the ideology that had been so deeply ingrained into the Japanese people for over half a century before the war? Could the multi-faceted, deep, and powerful message of Japanese nationalism produced by the Imperial Rescript, State Shinto, and propaganda media simply have vanished? Looking at the Imperial Rescript and Yasukuni Shrine, two of the most significant prewar symbols of nationalism, we see that the fate of the prewar nationalist messaging and implicated delivery mediums has generally been relegation to taboo status. Yasukuni Shrine carries a highly negative reputation due to its association with prewar nationalism, as evinced by the “outrage” in China and South Korea at Former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s visit to the shrine in 2013. Even in the United States, despite amicable relations between the two nations, “disappointment” was expressed at Abe’s visit to this symbol of Japan’s militaristic past. The Imperial Rescript has met a similar fate, as despite emphasis on morality and Confucian values, in practice its nationalistic elements have dominated the narrative and thus have made the document part of the taboo associated with Japan’s pre-World War II nationalism. Yet, despite its postwar fate of becoming taboo, an interesting case study

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suggests that the Imperial Rescript and accompanying components of the Japanese prewar nationalist campaign have left a lasting impact. In 2017, novelist and classics scholar Genichiro Takahashi produced a very casual translation of the Imperial Rescript. Takahashi took approximately an hour to write his modern translation of the Imperial Rescript in casual, spoken-style Japanese. Perhaps the most noteworthy part of Takahashi’s work is how he translated the middle section of the Rescript. My translation of Takahashi’s interpretation of the middle section is as follows:

This might seem obvious, but be sure to carefully follow the Constitution that I established, and also understand that it is absolutely not acceptable to do things that would violate the law. Got it? Now, on top of that, if something were to happen, or, to put it more bluntly, if a war were to happen, please be courageous and serve for the public good. Or, perhaps I should say, please go to war to preserve the eternity of my imperial family. This is the righteous thing to do, or, “the right path for a man.”

The most striking aspect of Takahashi’s text is that he translated the call for people to offer themselves to the state as being not just for any emergency, but rather, for the potential of a war. He uploaded this remarkably direct, simplified translation to his Twitter account in 2017, causing a stir in the social media world. His translation was criticized both for its parodical tone and for leaping to assumptions, leading to its labelling as “toilet scribble.”

Despite the Imperial Rescript’s relegation to taboo status, Takahashi’s translation of the Rescript clearly struck a nerve within some Japanese people. Why did people take issue to his translation? As evinced by his explicit translation of the threat of war, he plainly stated many of

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the underlying messages that he perceives in the Rescript. Though history supports his assumption that the threat of war is implicit in the call to serve the state in the case of an emergency, it is nevertheless a major accusation to lay against the words of the emperor. Though the emperor is now officially only a figurehead and the dangerous prewar zealous worship of the imperial family as deities has faded, the emperor is still a deity-like figure and important state symbol who many Japanese people treasure to this day.\textsuperscript{64} This helps to explain why Takahashi’s casual translation drew criticism despite the document itself falling out of favor; some believe that the Rescript, as the official words of the emperor, should still be respected as such, making a parody unacceptable.\textsuperscript{65}

Perhaps another reason for objection to Takahashi’s translation is a desire to value the Imperial Rescript not as a product of warmongering, but rather, as a Confucian-based moral commentary on Japanese identity. Undoubtedly, associations with prewar ultra-nationalism and aggression have not faded, thus keeping the Imperial Rescript a taboo part of Japanese history. This was put on display in a relatively recent scandal in which children in Osaka schools were taught the Imperial Rescript. When news of this practice was shared, “much of the Japanese media and public was . . . dismayed at televised footage of little children reciting the rescript in the operators’ kindergarten.” Yet, some present-day politicians in conservative circles continue to embrace the Rescript for the potential of its moral commentary to define Japan as a nation. Such conservatives argue that this morality-defining aspect is the true “spirit of the rescript” and

\textsuperscript{64} See Agustin De Gracia’s article, “Japanese emperor, a state symbol with scant political power,” \textit{Agencia EFE}, April 30, 2019, \url{https://www.efe.com/efe/english/life/japanese-emperor-a-state-symbol-with-scant-political-power/50000263-3964383} for information on the emperor’s current role in Japan.

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid.
outlines a path for Japan as a moral nation, not as a war-mongering nation.”66 Thus, we can see that while the fervent ultra-nationalism which ultimately fueled Japan’s mobilization for two World Wars has become a thing of the past, the Confucian ideal-based sense of national identity outlined in the Imperial Rescript has lived on and continues to represent a part of Japanese identity to this day.

In summary, the Japanese government employed Confucianism within the Imperial Rescript on Education and State Shinto belief tied to Yasukuni Shrine to instill Japanese nationalism and drive militaristic action. The Imperial Rescript on Education draws upon association with the divine emperor as well as Confucian fundamentals to covertly convey a strong nationalist message emphasizing unity and commitment to the state. The divine association is highlighted by linguistic features that make the Imperial Rescript a document of extremely high status, with complex, special Japanese worthy of being ascribed to the emperor. Close analysis of the text reveals direct references to classic Confucian values such as filial piety and loyalty. These virtues, which are referenced in the opening line of the Imperial Rescript, are fundamental both to Confucianism and to the concept of moral behavior outlined by the Rescript. Further examination reveals that the Imperial Rescript at times almost directly borrows from Confucian classics such as Mencius, as exemplified by its reference to the five important human relations: “be filial to your parents, affectionate to your brothers and sisters; as husbands and wives be harmonious, as friends true.”67 Such explicit and implicit references to Confucian principles throughout the text help construct a sense of nation, while also providing some cover

66 O'Dwyer, “What's so bad about Imperial Rescript on Education anyway?”
for more directly nationalistic statements in the middle section. This sense of cover, whether intended or not, is aided by the structure of the Imperial Rescript which helps it convey its underlying nationalist message smoothly and effectively; a middle section with non-Confucian, explicitly nationalistic sentiments is book-ended by a Confucian, morality-based beginning and ending.

Concurrently, traditional Shinto beliefs were expanded by the Japanese government to fulfill nationalist aims. Shinto beliefs were used as a premise for introduction of State Shinto rituals such as worship of war gods at Yasukuni Shrine and large, elaborate funerals for all fallen soldiers which forced Japanese people to internalize nationalist belief through their participation. In a way, Confucian ideals in the Imperial Rescript and the Shinto basis of military-related State Shinto practices might be viewed as twin trojan horses for delivery of nationalistic and militaristic messaging. Though there is no direct evidence of intent to conceal these messages, it is nevertheless apparent that nationalism and militarism are more palatable when viewed through the veil of traditional values and beliefs. The powerful statement of Japanese morality and identity in the Imperial Rescript and enthusiasm engendered by State Shinto rituals were harnessed to drive important developments in nation-building and later to mobilize Japan for war. Though explicit militarism came to an end with Japan’s renunciation of war, lasting support for the Imperial Rescript within conservative circles and the reaction to Genichiro Takahashi’s parody show that some of the original nationalist sentiment persists to this day.
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