

## The Significance of The “Charter Oath” in The Formation of the Modern State in Meiji Japan

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**Abstract:** This article analyzes the historical and conceptual significance of the “Charter Oath” (五箇条の御誓文), proclaimed in 1868, in the process of the formation of the Meiji state. The study examines this document as an initial ideological foundation of the Meiji era and highlights the role of the principles it advanced – mutual consultation, social cooperation, the abolition of outdated feudal customs, and the pursuit of “knowledge throughout the world” – in the construction of a modern state. The article interprets the Charter Oath as a means of reshaping political legitimacy and as an important document expressing the balance between tradition and modernization. Furthermore, its influence on political centralization, social reforms, the education system, and the formation of national state institutions is revealed through a historical-analytical approach. According to the findings, the Charter Oath functioned not only as a programmatic document of Meiji modernization but also as an ideological foundation of modern Japanese statehood.

**Keywords:** Meiji Restoration, Charter Oath, political legitimacy, state building, imperial authority, abolition of feudalism.

### INTRODUCTION

The Meiji Restoration represents a profound political and social transformation in Japanese history that led the country from a feudal order to a centralized modern nation-state. Amid the crisis of the Tokugawa shogunate, growing internal social dissatisfaction, and increasing pressure from Western powers, Japan faced the urgent necessity of preserving its national unity and strengthening its international standing. In such a complex historical context, the new government felt the need to formulate a programmatic document that would redefine political legitimacy and establish the ideological foundations of state building.

The “Charter Oath,” proclaimed in 1868, emerged as the ideological manifesto of the Meiji state. This document served not merely as a political declaration but as a conceptual framework guiding Japan’s modernization. It advanced ideas of deliberative governance, cooperation among social strata, the abolition of outdated feudal customs, and the pursuit of knowledge from across the world. These principles enabled modernization to be understood not only as a technical or economic process but as a comprehensive restructuring of both state and society.

At the same time, although the Charter Oath called for the formation of modern political institutions, it preserved the idea of political unity centered on the Emperor. Thus, the document possessed a dual ideological structure that reflected a complex balance between tradition and modernization. This very feature enhances its significance in the formation of the Meiji state.

This article analyzes the ideological content of the Charter Oath, its role in reconstructing political legitimacy, and its conceptual importance in shaping modern state institutions. It also explores the document’s place in Meiji-era reforms and in the broader development of Japanese national statehood through a historical-theoretical approach.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research focuses on analyzing the role and historical significance of the Charter Oath in the construction of a modern state during the formation of the Meiji state, employing both classical and contemporary methods of historical scholarship.

A historical-comparative method was used to compare the political and social principles articulated in the Charter Oath with other reform directions of the Meiji period, including land-tax reform, the system of military conscription, educational policy, and centralized administrative structures. In addition, the content of the Oath was compared with the views of leading political figures of the era in order to clarify its ideological orientation. Through this approach, the Charter Oath was interpreted as a programmatic document of modern state building.

Within a source-critical framework, the official text of the 1868 Charter Oath, imperial edicts, correspondence of contemporary political figures, and both Japanese and Western historiographical studies were analyzed in an integrated manner. Particular attention was given to how scholars

from different periods and academic traditions evaluated the document, enabling a reassessment of its historical meaning and ideological direction. This approach made it possible to identify how the Charter Oath was interpreted over time and how its political-ideological content evolved.

Analytical and logical generalization methods were also employed to systematize the political, social, and ideological aspects of the Charter Oath and to present scholarly conclusions regarding its conceptual and historical importance in Meiji modernization.

## DISCUSSION

Following the Meiji Restoration, the first central government established in Japan appeared formally provisional and structurally simple; however, real power was effectively concentrated in the hands of young samurai from powerful domains such as Satsuma, Choshū, Tosa, and Hizen. These individuals were former feudal retainers – experienced, disciplined, and imbued with a strong military ethos.

Although official councils (the Grand and Small Councils) existed, they possessed little actual political authority. In June 1868, the governmental system was reorganized, and an important political declaration – often regarded as the first constitution of modern Japan – was proclaimed in the name of the Emperor<sup>1</sup>.

This document, announced on April 6, 1868, as the “Charter Oath” (Gokajo no Goseimon), established the principal directions of Meiji policy. An accompanying imperial statement explained the goals of the Restoration in relation to the international situation, emphasizing that continued rule by the bakufu would diminish Japan’s prestige abroad and expose the country to various disadvantages. It stressed the necessity for the Emperor to assume political authority in order to conduct relations with Western powers on an equal footing. The Oath was signed by approximately 500 nobles from various domains<sup>2</sup>. The five articles of the Charter Oath stated:

- The establishment of deliberative assemblies and the resolution of all matters through public discussion.
- Cooperation between all classes, high and low, in the administration of state affairs.
- Freedom of occupation for common people, as for civil and military officials, to prevent discontent.
- The abolition of evil customs of the past and governance based on the principles of natural justice.
- The pursuit of knowledge throughout the world to strengthen the foundations of imperial rule.

The general language of the Oath reflected the principal demands of reform. The first article, concerning deliberative assemblies and public discussion, was particularly significant with respect to the future status of the military class. While the text expressed “public discussion” in a broad sense of political participation, contemporary figures interpreted it more concretely: Yuri Kimimasa contrasted it with “private consultation,” whereas Fukuoka Takachika understood it as an assembly of feudal lords. Thus, the term “public,” however abstract, implied a space not limited to closed, private deliberations<sup>3</sup>.

The notion of the “unity of all classes” did not signify the complete abolition of the class system or the establishment of absolute equality. Rather, it suggested softening rigid social boundaries while preserving hierarchical structures. The aim was not radical social leveling but the reduction of sharp disparities and the mitigation of internal conflicts through gradual integration.

The document also emphasized that “common people” should receive fair and respectful treatment from civil and military officials who previously enjoyed privileged status. This indicates that Meiji political discourse prioritized reforming existing structures to maintain social stability rather than pursuing revolutionary social transformation.

The call to abolish “evil customs” was grounded in Confucian notions of natural order. It did not imply total cultural rupture but rather moral purification and adaptation to contemporary needs. The most distinctive element – the pledge to “seek

<sup>1</sup> Sansom, G. *The Western World and Japan: A Study in the Interaction of European and Asiatic Cultures*. – New York : Alfred A. Knopf, 1951. – 317 p.

<sup>2</sup> Suzuki, J. *Ishin no koso to tenkai [Vision and Process of the Meiji Restoration (History of Japan, vol. 20)]*. – Tokyo : Kodansha, 2002. – P. 12–15.

<sup>3</sup> Fukuoka, T. *Gokajo goseimon to seitaisho no yurai ni tsuite // Meiji kensei keizai shiron / ed. by Kokka gakkai*. – Tokyo : Kokka gakkai, 1918. – P. 44-45.

knowledge throughout the world” – symbolized openness to foreign science and experience. Yet this idea was not entirely new; late Tokugawa intellectuals had already criticized Japan’s “dual power structure” of imperial court and shogunate as inefficient and internationally disadvantageous.

Thus, the pursuit of knowledge represented an evolutionary continuation of earlier intellectual currents rather than a sudden innovation. Its primary purpose was to strengthen the institutional foundations of imperial authority<sup>4</sup>. The fourth article, emphasizing modernization and the rejection of feudal customs, underscored the necessity of transforming not only political and economic structures but also social consciousness and values.

The fifth article was closely connected with educational development and the principle often summarized as “Western technology, Eastern spirit” (Wakon Yosai)<sup>5</sup>. In line with this approach, wisdom and talent were to be sought globally and mobilized to reinforce imperial institutions. In 1871, the National Department of Education was established and later transformed into the Ministry of Education. In 1872, the Education Code (Gakusei) was adopted, modeled on the centralized French education system, marking the first institutional stage in introducing a modern educational framework in Japan.

The success of the Charter Oath lay largely in its use of broad and flexible language, which allowed for reinterpretation and expansion under changing political and social conditions. Initially conceived within a narrow circle, it gradually evolved into a comprehensive political program and a key source of governmental legitimacy. Its adaptability reflected the strategic flexibility of Meiji political thought and the long-term state-building vision of reformist elites.

In general, the Charter Oath served as the ideological foundation for subsequent major reforms of the Meiji government, including constitutional governance and the establishment of a parliamentary system. Through this document, relations among the state, society, and citizens were reconceptualized, laying the groundwork for a new form of social contract in Japan.

<sup>4</sup> Jansen, M. *The Making of Modern Japan*. – Cambridge (Mass.) ; London : The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002. – 339 p.

<sup>5</sup> Hall, R. K. *Education for a New Japan*. – New Haven : Yale University Press, 1949. – P. 221.

## CONCLUSION

The Charter Oath stands as a programmatic document of considerable ideological and political importance in the formation of the Meiji state. It provided the ideological basis for redefining political legitimacy, renewing social structures, and modernizing state institutions during Japan’s transition from feudalism to a centralized modern nation-state.

The study demonstrates that the principles articulated in the Oath – deliberative governance, the abolition of outdated customs, and the pursuit of global knowledge – were closely linked with the political, administrative, and social reforms implemented during the Meiji era. The document framed modernization not merely as a technical or economic shift but as a comprehensive reorganization of state and society.

At the same time, the Charter Oath embodied a complex balance between tradition and modernization. While acknowledging the necessity of adopting Western knowledge, it simultaneously emphasized national unity around imperial authority. This dual orientation contributed to the formation of a distinctive national model of modernization.

Overall, the Charter Oath can be regarded as the ideological cornerstone of Meiji modernization and the conceptual starting point of modern Japanese statehood. It remains a key theoretical lens through which the transition between tradition and modernity in Japanese history can be understood.

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