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## **The Birth of Reiki and Psycho-spiritual therapy in the 1920s–1930s Japan: The influence of “American metaphysical religion”**

This article aims to demonstrate that reiki was born as a result of transnational exchanges of various religious discourses, especially those between the U.S. and Japan. Reiki is a technique of transmitting “vital energy” to bodies with the hands; it is meant to heal the mind and body or effect self-improvement. It is frequently regarded as a mystic practice based on the wisdom of the East. Mikao Usui 臼井甕男, a Japanese therapist who invented reiki in 1922, insisted that reiki was entirely his production and that he created it after becoming a disciple at a Buddhist temple. However, it is obvious that reiki is an alternative medicinal practice, called *seishin ryōhō* 精神療法 (psycho-spiritual therapy) that existed in pre-war Japan. *Seishin ryōhō* mainly consisted of methods to cure disorders of mind and body by harnessing the “power of mind (*seishin*).” In creating them, therapists studied the knowledge and techniques derived from many eras and countries and combined them for their convenient use. Among them, ideas and techniques of American metaphysical religion had an especially strong influence on them.

*Keywords:* reiki – healing – metaphysical religion – alternative medicine – modern Japanese religion – spirituality

### *Introduction*

Reiki is a healing practice thought to be practiced by several million people throughout the world. It became popular as a New Age trend. Its practitioners believe that they can cure diseases or improve the health of body and mind by laying their hands on the body.

Although there are now a great variety of discourses about reiki, there are two common topics that are discussed throughout the reiki community: the first is about

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vital “energy” filling and flowing over the universe. Reiki practitioners try to connect the bodies of people suffering from disorders with this “energy” or to transmit it by applying their hands. The second is about the founder, Mikao Usui 臼井甕男 (1865–1926), who is said to have created *Reiki Ryōhō* 霊気療法 (reiki therapy) in 1922. The legends of his inquiries into the supreme wisdom of life and the creed left by him are repeatedly discussed within the community of reiki practitioners. They tell that Usui travelled both within and outside Japan and studied all kinds of theories about human life. He insisted, in his writings, that he had created *Reiki Ryōhō* completely on his own after becoming a disciple in a Buddhist temple. However, some people believe that Usui had visited Tibet and China and integrated the theories of *qi* or *prana* into Japanese religious traditions such as Zen. Because of this, reiki is often regarded as an integration of the mystic wisdom of the East.

However, it is difficult to accept such stories at face value. One question immediately arises: is it possible that reiki is Usui’s “original” creation? Can it be thought of as a Japanese traditional practice? What kind of context was there in creating reiki? Today, we know that in the 1920’s, when Usui created *Reiki Ryōhō*, Japan had already experienced rapid and severe social change as a result of the process of modernization and had exchanged all kind of knowledge and technology with the West.

This article aims to address the questions above and will demonstrate that reiki was born as one result of these transnational exchanges, especially those between the U.S. and Japan. For this purpose, we shall first examine a group of practices called *seishin ryōhō* 精神療法 (psycho-spiritual therapy), a type of alternative medicine popular in 1920’s - 30’s Japan and from which reiki originated.

### 1. *Reiki and Transcultural Exchange of Spiritual Knowledge and Practices*

Reiki was brought to the Hawaiian Japanese community in 1937 by a Nisei woman, Hawayo Takata 高田はわよ (1900–1980). Having struggled to promulgate the practice inside and outside the Japanese community for several decades, it spread through the U.S. and Europe during the 1980’s - 90’s. Melton (2001) describes this process as an example of how recent religious phenomena, especially from the New Age movement, were transmitted across borders. He writes that the New Age movement “created the public that understood and valued what Reiki practitioners could provide” in both Western countries and Japan (Melton 2001: 77).

In this article, Melton calls reiki a kind of “spiritual healing” that uses “*chi*, *qi*, *prana*, *od*<sup>1</sup>, cosmic energy or universal energy” (Melton 2001: 75), and points out

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1. Od is a power hypothesized by German scientist Karl von Reichenbach (1788-1869), who argued that od is emitted by everything in the universe and affects various phenomena, including mental processes.

that “the Western esoteric culture at least since Mesmer” (Melton 2001: 77) has made it possible that such healing systems could be accepted by Western people of the late twentieth century. In other words, we can see how, in the process of the spread of reiki, transcultural exchange of spiritual knowledge and practices has occurred.

On the other hand, Melton mentions that reiki is rooted in Chinese thinking about the body and mind, thinking that is also linked to acupuncture and qigong (Melton 2001: 75). However, recent research has clarified that ideas and practices, which were thought to be rooted in Eastern religious traditions and became popular with the New Age movement, sometimes turned out to be products of modern society. Recent research focusing on “modern yoga” is a good example of this. De Micheles (2004) explores how Western esoteric ideas influenced the formation of modern yoga in the late nineteenth century. Singleton also argues that yoga practice emphasizing posture (asana), which, since the twentieth century, has become the mainstream form of yoga worldwide, is “the result of a dialogical exchange between para-religious, modern body culture techniques developed in the West and the various discourses of ‘Modern’ Hindu yoga” (Singleton 2010: 129). In short, these scholars present two important questions about yoga: first, what does “traditional” or “religious” actually mean in this case; and, second, how did the transcultural exchange of spiritual knowledge and practices occur prior to the New Age movement?

We should ask the same questions about reiki. For example, Melton’s claim that Usui’s *Reiki Ryōhō* includes elements that are rooted in Chinese traditional knowledge should be examined. In addition, we should consider the possibility that the invention of reiki was influenced not only by Japanese or the other Eastern (religious) traditions, but also by the concepts and practices of other cultural and social fields. However, it is difficult in the case of reiki to inquire further into those kinds of questions because there are hardly any materials detailing Usui’s life, especially how he created *Reiki Ryōhō*. He worked as a therapist for only four years, and the membership in the organization that he established decreased remarkably after World War II. We cannot find any direct evidence about what Usui used to create reiki, though present reiki practitioners eagerly seek information about him.

With this in mind, this article looks for another way to describe reiki’s early history. In the following section, to begin, I will introduce a group of practices called *seishin ryōhō* 精神療法 (psycho-spiritual therapy). This is a distinct type of therapy that was popular in 1920s – 1930s Japan.

Second, I will examine the social background of *seishin ryōhō*. It is necessary to consider the relation of *seishin ryōhō* to both “tradition” and to modern medicine. From the beginning, *seishin ryōhō* was positioned as an alternative to modern medicine. Contrary to the case of yoga, *seishin ryōhō* was not regarded as the successor of any particular traditional practice by the practitioners at the time.

Instead, *seishin ryōhō* therapists insisted that they had created a totally new technique for curing diseases by combining diverse thinking about body, mind, and spirit collected from a variety of periods and places. Religious ideas and practices from Japanese traditions were only a part of them.

Finally, I will demonstrate the relationship between *seishin ryōhō* and Usui's *Reiki Ryōhō*. Usui's *Reiki Ryōhō* was influenced by contemporary *seishin ryōhō*, especially by a group that had close relations with "American metaphysical religion."

## 2. Hypnotism's Impact on the Birth of Japanese Psycho-spiritual Therapy

In present-day Japanese, *seishin ryōhō* translates as "psychotherapy," a psychiatric (not psychological) technical term. It is a method of curing mental disorders, not by using drugs but through dialogue between a doctor and a patient. However, in 1920's - 30's Japan, the term *seishin ryōhō* had a meaning different from contemporary usage, especially for non-medical professionals. The term *seishin ryōhō* at the time, as Shin'ich Yoshinaga describes, meant the methods for healing physical and mental disorders by controlling the mind or spirit (Yoshinaga 2007).

Yoshinaga states that *seishin ryōhō* was born in Japan as a result of the importation and integration of hypnotism, as well as the transformation of physical practices and concepts in Japanese religions, especially in Buddhism (Yoshinaga 2015: 2518). Though it is certainly true that many *seishin ryōhō* methods were created based on Japanese traditional and religious practices, the knowledge and practices imported from abroad (especially the West) were essential elements of *seishin ryōhō*. Among them, hypnotism was the most important because it laid the basis for *seishin ryōhō*'s popularity.

According to Hirotaka Ichinyanagi, hypnotism was brought to Japan in the late nineteenth century. At first, it was mainly adopted by medical doctors as an efficient method of curing mental disorders. However, it was not long before interest in hypnotism spread among non-medical professionals. Ichinyanagi points out that there were two booms in hypnotism in Japan: the first around 1887 (Meiji 20) and the second in 1903 (Meiji 36) (Ichinyanagi 1997: 16, 64-68).

The latter was more intense, so that many non-academic books on hypnotism were published in the early twentieth century and quickly became popular. More than a hundred books were published in this field between 1903 and 1912. At the time, there were a number of hypnotism teachers throughout Japan. They often established their own organizations for teaching hypnotism and recruited students by advertising that their theories and methods of hypnotism could improve people's health and their whole lives in general.

This peak in interest soon came to an end when the government started regulating the practice of hypnotism. Some doctors criticized therapists for presenting methods of curing diseases without either scientific knowledge or

medical licenses. In 1906, a group of doctors and jurists took counsel together and submitted a proposal to the government to regulate hypnotism. In 1908, the Department of Home Affairs promulgated an ordinance<sup>2</sup> that included specific penalties for abuse of hypnotism (Ichiyanagi 1997: 118).

However, by this time, new approaches to mind and body had already been introduced into Japanese popular culture from hypnotism as well as other kinds of “Western” knowledge that had already been imported. Yoshinaga (2015) points out that hypnotism was introduced by intellectuals who had Western knowledge, especially regarding medical science, psychology, or philosophy, and had various interests and purposes. For example, in the 1870’s–1880’s, researchers from the University of Tokyo’s Faculty of Letters lectured about psychology by using contemporary scholarship written in English that dealt with hypnotism. Enryō Inoue 井上円了 (1858–1919), a representative scholar of philosophy and Buddhism of the Meiji Era who had studied there, was also interested in psychology, including hypnotism, for the purpose of defining “‘true religion,’ specifically ‘true Buddhism,’ by eliminating its superstitious elements” (Yoshinaga 2015: 2742). He thought that religious miracles such as faith healing should be seen in the view of psychology; what is more, modern science regarded it as an effect of the workings of the mind on the body.

This type of knowledge about hypnotism that was introduced by intellectuals spread outside academia until the beginning of the second hypnotism boom in the 1900’s. Much of this knowledge related profoundly to approaches to mind and body. In terms of the influence on *seishin ryōhō*, among them, three are particularly pertinent. The first is the dichotomy between body and mind or spirit; mind or spirit is termed *seishin* in Japanese. The second focuses on the way *seishin* and the body interact with one another. Many differing explanations concerning the forces or elements mediating between the mind and body were propounded by contemporary psychologists, doctors, and hypnotists. The final approach suggested that an individual’s personal *seishin* could be manipulated by both the individual themselves and by other people.

These stances were essential for the belief that hypnotism was an effective method to cure diseases. It was thought that if *seishin* could be brought under control, it would be possible to cure not only mental disorders but also physical diseases by manipulating the mind, since the mind and body interact with each other. Belief in this idea was so widespread that, even after hypnotism became regulated, many therapists continued to offer methods of curing physical and mental disorders through the manipulation of *seishin*. These practitioners named their therapy *seishin ryōhō*, as *ryōhō* means “therapy” in Japanese.<sup>3</sup>

2. *Keisatsu han torishimari rei* 警察犯取締令 (Ordinance against Minor Offenses).

3. In translating “mind” in Japanese, *seishin* 精神 and *shinri* 心理 have been used since the

### 3. Creation of “Mind Power” Theory with Wisdom from Across the World

While *seishin ryōhō* therapists partially agreed with hypnotists as far as the healing of diseases was concerned, they also developed wider-ranging theories on the interaction of *seishin* and the body. They collated ideas and techniques from the whole history of mankind and from across the globe, whilst also taking contemporary science and their own experiences into account, in order to create an all-encompassing treatise on the healing of disease and the relationship between the earth and humankind and between humankind and the makeup of the cosmos.

According to a book published at the time,<sup>4</sup> there were 30,000 *seishin ryōhō* therapists in 1928 (*Reikai kakusei doushi kai* 1928). Although most of them had their own original theories and methods, they shared some common characteristics. *Taireidō* 太霊道, which was the *seishin ryōhō* organization created by Morihei Tanaka 田中守平 (1884–1929), is a prime example. Tanaka was the most famous and influential of the *seishin ryōhō* therapists and his *Taireidō* was frequently regarded as a synonym for *seishin ryōhō* from the 1910's to the 1920's. Through seminars and publications, it aimed to encourage the use of supernatural power in the performing of psychokinesis, clairvoyance, telepathy, and the healing of disease. Tanaka advanced the theory of *tairei* 太霊, which means “great spirit.” After practicing meditation, fasting and studying various philosophies and religions from across the world, he claimed that *tairei* was the origin of everything that existed on earth. He also claimed that both visible substances and invisible existences (such

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nineteenth century. Occasionally, the term *seishin* was also used in translating “spirit” in early modern Japanese. In addition, *rei* 霊 was frequently used to translate “spirit.” Accordingly, *seishin ryōhō* was sometimes called *shinri ryōhō* 心理療法 or *shinrei ryōhō* 心霊療法 by outsiders. Later *seishin ryōhō* therapists also called their methods *reijutsu* 霊術, as *jutsu* 術 means “art” or “technique.” In the rest of this article, only *seishin ryōhō* will be used. *Seishin ryōhō* can be translated as “mind cure” in English. However, in order to avoid confusion with “Mind Cure” in the American historical context, it is not used as a translation of *seishin ryōhō* in this article.

The relationship between the hypnotism boom and *seishin ryōhō* was first pointed out by Imura Koji (1984: 156-162). After that, Ichiyanagi (1997 157-200) and the works of Yoshinaga (see the References section) also referred to it in detail.

4. At the time, several books that listed *seishin ryōhō* therapists and criticized them were published. Among them, *Reijutsu to Reijutsuka* 霊術と霊術家 (*Reijutsu* and *Reijutsu* Therapists) is the best-known today. Some 312 therapists were listed there and 146 of them were evaluated in detail. There is no information about the editor of the book entitled *Reikai kakusei doushi kai* 霊界廓清同志会 (Association for Members Aiming to Purify the Spiritual World); however, Hidenori Shimizu 清水英範, an influential *seishin ryōhō* therapist, was thought to be its editor (Tanabe 1989: 82-83).



as the thoughts of mankind or energy) were made up of *reishi* 霊子, which were extremely tiny amounts of the *tairei*. Tanaka believed that it was possible to improve the condition of both our body and mind by controlling *reishi*. He even asserted that one could control, influence, or heal other people or objects from a long distance by using the power of *reishi*. He frequently advertised in newspapers, claiming that the theory of *Taireidō* was not a type of religion, but that it stood above the study of philosophy, religion, and science in its importance. As a result, *Taireidō* became widely known and it is estimated tens of thousands of people became followers from the 1910's to the middle of the 1920's (Yoshinaga 2008: 40).

There are also theories about an invisible substance or vital energy pervading the universe, like the theory of *tairei* and *reishi*, and the methods of controlling it in other *seishin ryōhō*. Chiwaki Matsumoto 松本道別 (1872–1942), another leading practitioner of *seishin ryōhō*, later established the theory of *Jintai Hōshanō Ryōhō* 人体放射能療法 (Human Body Radioactivity Therapy). After studying Buddhism, science, and other alternative therapies throughout the 1910's<sup>5</sup>, he concluded that human bodies emit a certain energy. He named this *jintai hōshanō* 人体放射能, meaning “human body radioactivity.” He explained that *jintai hōshanō* was “the prime mover” in our lives and that it encompassed the “working of *seishin* and the power of spontaneous cure.” He continued as follows:

It (*jintai hōshanō*) is the equivalent of what ancient Indian Brahmins and yoga sutras called *prana*, Chinese Taoists and medical doctors termed *qi*, and what Mesmer of Austria named *animal magnetism*. In *Taireidō*, this is called *reishi*. According to our knowledge of science today, this energy seems to equate either to alpha waves radiating from radioactive elements or to the anode rays inside radio valves...<sup>6</sup>

He postulated, as did Tanaka, the existence of this invisible vital force and regarded it as both *seishin* (mind) and the energy working on physical objects. He developed a method to harness and manipulate *jintai hōshanō* by combining concepts drawn from a wide range of periods and places.

Tanaka and Matsumoto divided all that exists in the world into “the visible,” which means matter including human bodies, and “the invisible,” which means that which cannot be touched, for example, energy or the mind. They also devised fundamental theories that explain the way “the visible” and “the invisible” interact with each other. In addition, they insisted that one can improve body and mind by using their methods to harness the “the invisible,” in short, the power of the mind (*seishin*).

5. *Jintai Radium Ryōhō Kōgi Daiissatsu* 人体ラジウム療法講義第一冊 (Lectures on Jintai Radium Ryōhō Volume 1, published in 1921), p. 21.

6. *Reigaku Kōza Daiissatsu Shūyō Hen* 霊学講座第一冊修養篇 (Lectures on Study of the Spiritual Volume 1: Book of Self-Cultivation, published in 1927), p. 2.

As shown above, the dichotomy between the visible (body) and the invisible (mind), the attempt to explain how they interact with each other, and the invention of methods to control the mind were all found in hypnotism. This suggests the close relationship between hypnotism and *seishin ryōhō*. Indeed, some *seishin ryōhō* therapists, such as Ten'nen Kuwabara 桑原天然, were originally hypnotism teachers.<sup>7</sup> However, *seishin ryōhō* therapists were so creative that they succeeded in elaborating the more sophisticated monistic theories while they accepted the dichotomy between body and mind or “the visible” and “the invisible.” Those fundamental theories were often extended to explain the relationship between the cosmos and mankind. There was a wide variety of explanations, depending on the therapist's personality and career. This is because *seishin ryōhō* therapists studied ideas about body and mind from all areas of the world, as Tanaka and Matsumoto did, and combined them for their convenient use.

On the other hand, the techniques that they devised for controlling “the invisible” were not as diverse. Most of the therapists taught sedentary body posture, breathing techniques, and meditation. It is surprising that the practices that appeared in the photos in *seishin ryōhō* books and magazines are, at first glance, very similar to the traditional practice of Japanese religions, such as Zen. However, the purpose of those was considerably different.

For example, the practice of *Taireidō* appeared in its official textbook. It included instruction on how to sit correctly, perform *gasshō* 合掌 (joining palms together), and chanting. However, it was named *zashiki kendō sayō* 座式顫動作用 (a sitting style practice to activate *reishi*) and described as not only cultivation of mind, but also empowerment for the working of *reishi* inside the body of practitioners. *Taireidō* explained that if *reishi* were activated successfully, the practitioner's body would move spontaneously.<sup>8</sup>

Other therapists also taught their followers that, by following such practices, their power of *seishin* would increase and that, once they succeeded in activating their mind power, supernatural events, such as *senrigan* 千里眼 (clairvoyance) and *reidou* 靈動 (spontaneous body movements or psychokinesis) would occur. The therapists also said that if *seishin ryōhō* practitioners harnessed the strengthened mind power and made it work adequately, they could improve their own health. What is more, according to these therapists, if practitioners transmitted this mind power from their body to others, they could heal the disorders of another person's body and mind.

7. For Ten'nen Kuwabara, see Yoshinaga (2015: 2810-2826).

8. *Taireidō oyobi Reisijutu Kōjuroku* 太靈道及靈子術講授録 (The Textbook of Taireidō and Reisijutu, published in 1921), p.51-54.



#### 4. The Social Background of the Popularity of Seishin Ryōhō

Every *seishin ryōhō* therapist created their own philosophy, but the main reason that so many people were interested in their work was the therapists' effectiveness at healing. At the time, many modern Western developments in medical care were still met with mistrust. Although people could gradually access modern and scientifically-based medical care, especially after the Japanese Medical Practitioners Act was enacted in 1906 and the system of training doctors in medical universities was established, many diseases still could not be treated by doctors fully qualified in the latest methods. Thus the urgent need for medicine in early twentieth-century Japan is another reason for *seishin ryōhō*'s popularity.

Miyoko Kojima, a historical demographer, demonstrates that from 1914 to 1924 (from Taishō 3 to 13), the period when *seishin ryōhō* became popular, the Japanese mortality rate was high compared to previous and subsequent periods. In the previous era, the prevalence of tuberculosis had been a serious social problem and the Spanish flu epidemic from 1918 to 1920 claimed around 500,000 lives throughout Japan. From 1914 to 1920, the Japanese mortality rate often exceeded the birth rate, so that Kojima named this period the "Taishō mortality crisis" (Hayami and Kojima 2004: 61, 117-119). The Great Kanto Earthquake (*Kantō Daishinsai* 関東大震災), which occurred in 1923, made the situation worse, the number of dead from this disaster being estimated at over 100,000.

After entering the Shōwa period (1925), the mortality rate decreased slowly. However, even in 1930, the mortality rate of individuals in their early twenties was roughly fifteen times that of the present day for men and thirty times that for women (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research 2003). It was natural that people were extremely interested in health care and effective ways of curing diseases in a situation where their daily lives were very close to death. Indeed, *seishin ryōhō* therapists believed and advertised that they could meet their demands for effective treatments.

In general, *seishin ryōhō* therapists acquiesced to the doctors' superior knowledge in the modern medical sciences, while at the same time criticizing them for using purely physical approaches and seeing diseases only as disorders of an organ or organs. They insisted that scientifically-based and "Western" medicine was only a symptomatic treatment, while their methods used more holistic approaches and improved the power of the human body to cure itself more effectively by using not only physical methods but also strengthened vital energy (such as mind power). In other words, from the beginning *seishin ryōhō* was regarded as an alternative to modern and Western medicine, either working in parallel with or substituting for the scientifically-based and authorized medicine supplied by doctors. For example, Reisen Ōyama 大山靈泉 (act. 1918–1930?), another famous *seishin ryōhō* therapist,

gave the following description:

Since people have a tendency to perceive easily what they can touch with their hands and see with their eyes and not to perceive psychic phenomena (*seishin genshō* 精神現象) which cannot be recognized with the senses,...they are attaching more importance to physical treatments (*bushitsu ryōhō* 物質療法), especially treatments using drugs (*yakubutsu ryōhō* 藥物療法), regarding medicine as techniques for curing diseases with drugs, and seeing doctors as those who cure illness with drugs. However...we cannot cure diseases if we ignore the influences of the acts of the mind (*seishin*). Therefore, neither physical treatments ignoring *seishin ryōhō* nor *seishin ryōhō* ignoring physical treatments can be the true way of curing diseases.<sup>9</sup>

To consider the popularity of such early alternative medicine in more detail, we should focus on another important social factor, that is, the increase in the number of highly educated citizens and the growing publishing market that it inspired. Since the Japanese compulsory education system had begun in 1872, the literacy rate in Japan continued to rise and, at the beginning of the Taishō period (1912), the enrollment rate for elementary school attendance reached almost 100 percent. The rate of students continuing on to higher education also rapidly increased. The number of students attending high school doubled for boys and trebled for girls between 1912 and 1913 (Hayami and Kojima 2004: 25-26).

The rising education levels naturally resulted in the expansion of the social stratum of white-collar workers. Many *seishin ryōhō* therapists belonged to this stratum (which also included, for example, public servants or company employees). Though most of them had no professional qualifications or specialized knowledge of medicine, they had received an above-average level of education and could read books about a wide range of subjects.

The general growth of higher-level education also supported the development of the publishing industry from the 1910's to the 1920's. This created a large market for specialized books, including translations from foreign languages. Because of this, if *seishin ryōhō* therapists were not able to read books written in foreign languages, they now had fewer problems in acquiring a wide variety of knowledge of the body and mind collected from around the world.

This increase in the number of highly educated citizens in the Taishō period had another effect on *seishin ryōhō*: it generated clients. As shown in a previous section, people at the time were constantly threatened by disease. In addition, highly educated urban citizens had been forced to adapt to the rapid lifestyle changes

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9. *Reishōjutsu Kyōju Zensho* 霊掌術教授全書 (Complete Book of Lectures on the Spiritual Hand Healing Technique, published in 1928), p.49–51. Ōyama's system consisted of both psycho-spiritual therapy and manipulative treatments such as chiropractic care or osteopathy.

associated with urbanization and the Japanese industrial revolution. Because of these challenging and stressful circumstances, people often complained of disorders of the body and mind.

On the other hand, as Harry Harootunian described, citizens living in cities in the 1920's were the pioneers of Japanese consumer culture. They could enjoy new commodities that supported their new lifestyles, known as *modan raifu* モダンライフ (modern life) (Harootunian 2000: 396-867). *Seishin ryōhō* therapists offered those modernized citizens fascinating services to improve not only their health, but also all of their *modan raifu*. They often claimed that their methods could serve self-improvement and “cure people of their vices” (悪癖矯正 *akuheki kyōsei*). In this case, “vices” meant the bad habits that could mar the *modan raifu*, for example, a melancholy disposition or addiction to alcohol or smoking.

In most cases, people could receive *seishin ryōhō* treatment by paying a fee each time. They could also learn *seishin ryōhō* methods to maintain their health or cure diseases, but only if they became a member of the organization that *seishin ryōhō* therapists had established. Once they became a member, they needed to pay a regular membership fee to receive the organization's magazine or to attend seminars.<sup>10</sup>

Advertisements for *seishin ryōhō* books and seminars often appeared in newspapers at the time. Although *seishin ryōhō* books and seminars included complicated theories and jargon from various fields, their followers would not have had a problem in understanding these books and seminars because they had been fully educated.

While some citizens had been disappointed with “scientific” and “modern” medicine because of its ineffectiveness, they were fond of what fitted their *modan raifu*. Therefore, although *seishin ryōhō* therapists used practices similar to those of Japanese traditional religions, they reinterpreted them by giving new meanings based on the various novel theories. In addition, they insisted that their therapies surpassed the latest medical sciences and that their mechanisms for curing disease would be explained in the future even if it was now impossible to understand it.

In the situation as shown above, *seishin ryōhō* became popular over the course of the 1920's. As a result, *seishin ryōhō* gradually became an established part of alternative medicine. Its name frequently appeared in newspaper and magazine

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10. For example, according to the *Taireidō* magazine *Reikōroku* 霊光録 (Record of Spiritual Light) published in 1910, *Taireidō*'s entrance fee was ¥5 and an annual membership fee was ¥15. The basic monthly salary for an elementary school teacher in those days was ¥40-50. Its members could receive textbooks and be sent official magazines once a month. In order to become a “Special regular member” who could participate in the 10-day course, members were required to pay ¥200 or make a “special contribution” to *Taireidō*.

articles that dealt with alternative medicine. The following article excerpt introducing the Japanese health insurance system in July 1926 suggests this, listing *seishin ryōhō* as an example of a practice not covered by insurance benefits, alongside acupuncture, moxibustion, bone-setting, massage, and faith healing.<sup>11</sup>

“The Coverage of Insurance Benefits under the National Health Insurance Act”  
Insurance benefits of the National Health Insurance Act...will be announced on July 1 with the General Order for Enforcement...Those who can accept patients covered by health insurance will be restricted to licensed medical doctors, dentists, and pharmacists. Treatments practiced by people without medical licenses, such as acupuncture, moxibustion, bone-setting, massage, crimson flower therapy, faith healing, and *seishin ryōhō*, will be excluded from insurance benefits coverage.

### 5. American Metaphysical Religion in *Seishin Ryōhō*

As shown above, *seishin ryōhō* therapists gathered various kinds of knowledge about the body and mind by reading books and created their original system, including theories and methods for healing and self-improvement. As shown in Chiwaki Matsumoto’s writings about the energy present in the human body, this information ranged from modern sciences such as physics or physiology (even if in non-academic writings) to the body-based practices of Eastern religious cultures.

Of course, it should also be noted that these systems were also developed based on Japanese religious traditions. Koji Imura, a pioneer of *seishin ryōhō* research, pointed out that *seishin ryōhō* therapists took on the role of *yamabushi* 山伏, priests who performed mysterious healing practices before modern medicine spread to the general populace (Imura 1984:118-151, 2014: 14-26). References to Zen, especially *Yasen Kan’na* 夜船閑話 (Quiet Conversations Chat on an Evening Boat) of Hakuin 白隠 (a Zen monk in the Edo period), were frequently seen in *seishin ryōhō* therapists’ writings. They used the thoughts and practices of *Yasen Kan’na* as models of spiritual healing and self-cultivation practices using bodily postures and breathing exercises.

However, it should be emphasized that the translations of books originally published in English-speaking countries had an especially profound influence on *seishin ryōhō*. A variety of knowledge, even derived from the East (such as yoga), was imported and spread through the translation of books written in English.

Among these, American “metaphysical religion”<sup>12</sup> formed an integral part of most *seishin ryōhō* practitioners’ study of the body and mind, since it provided

11. “Kenko hoken hō ni motodsuku iryō kyūfu no han’i” 「健康保険法による医療給付の範囲」 (The Coverage of Insurance Benefits Based on the National Health Insurance Act), *Asahi Shimbun* 朝日新聞, June 23, 1926.

12. Of course, “metaphysical religion” is so broad a concept to understand as an aspect of

practitioners with a model of a “modern” style of explaining how *seishin* and the body interact with each other and how they connect to the universe.

Albanese demonstrates that American metaphysical religion derived from early Modern European esoteric traditions, such as mesmerism, Swedenborg’s theology, and spiritualism that spread to America in the nineteenth century. There it spawned various related forms, such as Christian Science and New Thought. She describes the central feature of American metaphysical religion as a type of “mental magic” (Albanese 2007: 6). Metaphysical religion had a “preoccupation with the mind and its power” (Albanese 2007: 13) and ideas commonly encountered within it referred to “a stream of energy flowing.” From Western esoteric tradition, it adopted the notion that the “human world and mind replicate a larger, often more whole and integrated universe, so that the material world is organically linked to the universe” (Albanese 2007: 6). This relationship was believed to be mediated by an omnipresent perpetual flow of energy, which appeared as both a physical force on objects and also through a person’s will or thought. Metaphysical religion aimed to both deliver the body from physical sickness and to heal maladies of the soul and mind (Albanese 2007: 15).

As we have already seen, similar notions were also present in *seishin ryōhō*, as seen in sources such as *Taireidō* and *Jintai Hōshanō Ryōhō*. In addition, the ideas and concepts of mesmerism, spiritualism, and theosophy were frequently referred to in those publications. Elements belonging to the tradition of “metaphysics” were familiar and shared broadly among the practitioners.

As for the introduction of the “metaphysics” tradition to *seishin ryōhō*, the work of Goro Takahashi 高橋五郎 (1856–1935), a scholar of English and a translator, should be especially noted. He wrote many books about this topic and translated books concerning religions (especially Christianity) and the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson. He also contributed an article about spiritualism to the official magazine of *Taireidō*.<sup>13</sup> Many *seishin ryōhō* therapists later referenced Takahashi’s book.

In some cases, American metaphysical thoughts or religions were introduced more intensively. Bizan Suzuki 鈴木美山 (act. 1914?–1930?), a *seishin ryōhō* therapist

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American religious tradition that it seemed to be inadequate for the argument about Japanese alternative medicine that existed only in a specific, short period of time. However, it is an effective category to grasp the phenomena that influenced *seishin ryōhō*. This is because *seishin ryōhō* therapists simultaneously accepted various ideas and practices of the metaphysical tradition that existed in different periods. For this reason, it is difficult to describe the relationship of metaphysical religion to *seishin ryōhō* by focusing on specific figures or ideas. However, as shown below, some writers and writings were especially influential.

13. “Hyōiron” 憑依論 (An argument about Possession) in *Taireidō* 太霊道 vol. 4(7), published in 1920.

who created *Kenzen Tetsugaku* 健全哲学 (The Philosophy of Wholesomeness) and rose to fame on the back of a large-scale newspaper advertising campaign in the 1910's, later stated that Christian Science was his most important influence. He gave lectures on Christian Science and seminars on *Kenzen Tetsugaku*. The books of Ramacharaka,<sup>14</sup> whom Mark Singleton refers to as a "New Thought yogi" (Singleton 2010: 2558), were also translated and published at this time. Many *seishin ryōhō* practitioners read these books and later referenced them as well as Takahashi's writings.

These cases demonstrate that metaphysical religion, through the publication and reading of books, had an indirect influence on *seishin ryōhō* and this is the most notable point in considering the background context of reiki's birth.

### 6. Reiki as a Form of Seishin Ryōhō and the Influence of Metaphysical Religion

Mikao Usui 臼井甕男, who is now considered to be the father of reiki, created *Reiki Ryōhō* during the golden age of *seishin ryōhō* in 1922.<sup>15</sup>

Very few of Usui's writings have survived to the present day, but a transcript still exists of his *Kōkai Denju Setsumeisho* 公開伝授説明書 (Opening Lecture for the Uninitiated).<sup>16</sup> Research on the present members of *Reiki Ryōhō*,<sup>17</sup> has revealed that this practice seemed to consist mainly of breathing techniques, meditation, the application of hands on the body, among other things.

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14. Ramacharaka is a pseudonym of William Walker Atkinson (1862–1932), an American teacher and writer of New Thought movement.

15. Though the details of his life are unknown, according to contemporary materials (for example, the monument raised by his disciples in 1927 and the memoir of another disciple Gizo Tomabechi 苦米地義三), it is certain that Usui worked as a therapist in Tokyo in the early 1920's and established *Shinshin Kaizen Usui Reiki Ryōhō Gakkai* 心身改善臼井靈氣療法学会 (Association for the Improvement of Mind and Body by Usui Reiki Ryōhō), called *Usui kai* for short.

16. It was published as a part of *Reiki Ryōhō Hikkei* 靈氣療法必携 (*Reiki Ryōhō Handbook*) by *Usui kai*. According to the publication data of *Reiki Ryōhō Hikkei* which *Usui kai* distributes to its members, its first edition was published in 1922 and its fifteenth edition was published in 1939. *Kōkai Denju Setsumeisho* also appeared in some other editions published before the fifteenth edition. It is unknown whether it was written entirely by Usui or edited by another person; however, it is likely that it contained the basic ideas of Usui, or at least those of the early members of *Usui kai*.

17. *Usui kai* continued their activity after Usui's death and still had a few hundred members throughout Japan. I have been attending their meetings since 2009 with their permission and have been given some materials about *Reiki Ryōhō* from the pre-war period.



In *Kōkai Denju Setsumeisho*, Usui insisted that he had created his system entirely on his own.<sup>18</sup>

My *Usui Reiki Ryōhō* is a creation which no one has ever before found and there is nothing on earth with which it can be compared.

...It is a way or art to save *rei* 霊 (spirit or mind) and *niku* 肉 (body), which I acquired by intuition after intensive ascetic training over many years.

...Although it can be called *shinrei teki ryōhō* 心靈的療法<sup>19</sup> (psycho-spiritual therapy), it can also be called *butsuriteki ryōhō* 物理的療法 (physical therapy), because practitioners of this therapy emit *ki* 氣 (vital energy) and *hikari* 光 (light) from any part of their body.

...It does not only cure physical diseases, but also mental diseases, that is, *akuheki* 悪癖 (vices or bad habits) such as *hanmon* 煩悶 (agony), *kyojaku* 虚弱 (feebleness), *yujufudan* 優柔不斷 (indecision), and *shinkeisitsu* 神経質 (nervousness) (Shinshin Kaizen Usui Reiki Ryōhō Gakkai 1925).

After applauding the effects of reiki as above, he assures the reader that “the day will naturally come when *Reiki Ryōhō* is an accepted science, although today people cannot define what Reiki is according to available science.”

In the above sentences, he denies that he was influenced by other healing thoughts or methods (including any religions, “the Eastern ancient wisdoms,” or even other contemporary healing systems), but nonetheless those descriptions themselves suggest that it was very likely that Usui was deeply affected by contemporary *seishin ryōhō* therapists.

First of all, in *Kōkai Denju Setsumeisho*, we see the dichotomy that divides the human into a physical body and a spirit or mind, and the invisible existence called *ki* (vital energy) and *hikari* (light), which mediates the interaction of body and mind. He also insists that this energy or light works on both body and mind and will especially help people to overcome the bad habits or vices (*akuheki*) of modern life. We have already seen similar discourses that include such a dichotomy, an assumption of something mediating body and mind, and a proposition of methods to improve modern life in the descriptions written by *seishin ryōhō* therapists.

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18. However, it is also clear that *Reiki Ryōhō* had some unique characteristics. For example, in Usui's methods, practitioners performed some ceremonies called *reiju* 霊授 (giving spirit) for harnessing reiki (vital energy) adequately. They also chanted *gyosei* 御製, the poems composed by Emperor Meiji, during their meetings for the purpose of self-improvement. They are not seen in other extant *seishin ryōhō* books.

19. It must be noted that, in *Kōkai Denju Setsumeisho*, Usui used psychiatric terminology where *seishin ryōhō* meant psychological and hypnotic treatments for mental disorders. In that transcript, he called contemporary psycho-spiritual therapy *shinrei teki ryōhō* (See footnote 3 in this article).

He also argues that his therapy made use of the "psycho-spiritual ability that permeates the universe" 宇宙間の霊能 (*uchū kan no reinō*) and follows up by stating:

We should first heal our mind and then make our body healthy in order to live as virtuous people. If your mind follows its true path in life and remains in good condition, your body will also naturally become healthy (Shinshin Kaizen Usui Reiki Ryōhō Gakkai 1925).

In other words, he says that the purpose of *Reiki Ryōhō* is to make people's minds and bodies correspond to the "psycho-spiritual ability of the universe." It could relate to "the energy or light" that he says flows through the human body. Usui would say that people's health and self-improvement would come about by synchronizing their bodies and minds with the psycho-spiritual ability of the universe. Of course, such a theory of aligning humans with the universe is one of the most common characteristics of *seishin ryōhō*.

Usui did not give any name to this life energy or light in the text of *Kōkai Denju Setsumeisho*; however, the "energy or light" must be called *reiki* 霊気, a part of the name of his system. In fact, the term *reiki* was also commonly used amongst *seishin ryōhō* therapists. Even though the flow of life energy and its elements was sometimes expressed using other terms, including *seiki* 生氣 (vitality), *prana* プラナ (prana), and *aura* アウラ (aura), the basic concept was the same.

When Usui was an active practitioner in the 1920's, *reiki* was sometimes used to translate "prana" and "aura" into Japanese. An example of this can be found in the translation of Ramacharaka's book, *Saishin Seishin Ryōhō* 最新精神療法 (The Latest Psycho-Spiritual Therapy)<sup>20</sup>, published in 1916, which translated "prana" as *reiki*.

Certain healing techniques from Usui's *Reiki Ryōhō* were also similar to those of other *seishin ryōhō*'s. As demonstrated above, using the methods to connect with the flow of vital energy by breathing, meditation, and the application of hands to the body with hands was very common in *seishin ryōhō*.

Furthermore, methods which are mostly or completely identical to Usui's methods can be encountered in certain *seishin ryōhō* books. For example, Shin'ichi Yamada 山田信一 (act. 1916–1922?), who developed Ramacharaka's method and created *Purana Ryōhō* プラナ療法 (Prana Therapy), used the term *reiki* as a translation of "prana" in a book published in 1920.<sup>21</sup> In this text, he insists that people could emit *prana* (or *reiki*) not only through the application of hands, but

20. This is thought to be a translation of *Science of Psychic Healing* (1906) (Yoshinaga 2004: 38).

21. *Yamadashiki Seitaijutsu Kogi Daiikkan Purana Ryōhō* 山田式整体術講義第一巻 プラナ療法 (Lectures on Yamada Manipulative Therapy Volume One: Prana Therapy). The *seishin ryōhō* therapists after the mid-1920's combined psycho-spiritual therapy and "physical therapy" which is what they called, for example, gymnastic exercises or

also through *koki* 呼吸 (breathing) and *gyōshi* 凝視 (gazing). This terminology is identical to that used in Usui's *Reiki Ryōhō*. In addition, his *Purana Ryōhō* included a breathing and meditation technique known as *Seijō Kokyū hō* 清浄呼吸法 (Self-Purification through Breathing), the name and form of which are very similar to Usui's *Jōshin Kokyū hō* 浄心呼吸法 (Mind-Purification through Breathing).

Usui instructed his followers to chant a poem known as *gokai* 五戒 (five precepts) for self-cultivation. However, a very similar poem can be found in Suzuki Bizan's book, *Kenzen no Genri* 健全の原理 (The Principle of Wholesomeness), which was published in 1913.

*Jintai Aura Reiki Jutsu* 人体アウラ 霊気術 (The Art of Human Body Aura Reiki) created by Hidesuke Takagi 高木秀輔 (1919–1936?) also contained many sections very similar to Usui's *Reiki Ryōhō*. Takagi used the term *reiki* as a translation of “aura” in a book published in 1925<sup>22</sup> and also taught healing techniques using it. Once again, a very similar poem to Suzuki's one is featured in the book.

These similarities demonstrate the possibility that Usui made use of concepts and techniques taken from other *seishin ryōhō* to create his own therapy. Among them, the therapies which were influenced more profoundly by the thoughts and concepts derived from “metaphysical” culture in the U.S. seem to relate most strongly to Usui's *Reiki Ryōhō*. Not only did the *Purana Ryōhō* or *Jintai Aura Reiki Jutsu* adopt Ramacharaka's breathing technique of New Thought

Table 1. Comparison of three poems that appeared in *seishin ryōhō* books.

**Usui's *Gokai* (1922 – 1925?)**

「今日だけは 怒るな 心配すな 感謝して  
業にはげめ 人に親切に」

(Just for today, do not get angry, do not worry, be grateful, work hard at your duties, be kind to others)

**Bizan Suzuki (1914)**

「今日だけは 怒らず 恐れず 正直に 職務を励み 人に親切」

(Just for today, do not be angry, do not be afraid, be honest, work hard at your duties, be kind to others)

**Hidesuke Takagi (1925)**

「今日だけは、怒らず、怖れず、正直に、仕事を はげみ、人に親切」

(Just for today, do not be angry, do not be afraid, be honest, work hard at your job, be kind to others)

\*Although some words are replaced, these three poems mostly have the same meaning.

manipulative practices like chiropractic or osteopathy. For example, Yamada combined Ramacharaka's *purana* therapy and osteopathy in his system. Another good example of such a combination is Reisen Ōyama's *Reishōjutsu* (see footnote 9 in this article).

22. *Danjikihō Oyobi Reikijutsu Kōgi* 断食法及霊気術講義 (Lectures on Fasting Methods and the Art of Reiki).

style yoga, but *Kenzen Tetsugaku* also referred to the thoughts of Christian Science.<sup>23</sup> This evidence suggests that, in considering the birth of Reiki, we should not overlook its relationship with the American “metaphysical religions.” However, we should note that reiki’s relationship with these American ideas was not direct; it would come indirectly through the use other *seishin ryōhō* books made of the translations of Ramacharaka and the writings of Bizan Suzuki.

### Conclusion

People often say that Reiki was invented in Japan, spread to Hawaii and later gained mass popularity thanks to the New Age trend of the 1980’s. Today, it tends to be regarded as an exotic practice based on Eastern traditional wisdom. However, based on the arguments presented above, it should rather be considered as an offshoot of alternative medicine that was influenced by a great variety of different practices and knowledge from across the world, including American metaphysical religion.

This suggests that the path Reiki followed is not a single path from the East to the West or even from a pre-modern to a modern society. It was a winding route passing through a variety of “modern societies.” As such, it might be said that the reason Reiki gained popularity so widely across the world is not because it embodies mystical “Eastern” wisdom, but because it was originally invented as a way of meeting the spiritual or physical needs which people living in the various “modern societies” have in common.

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23. See section 5 of this article.

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