

*Reframing the Early History of Reiki:
A Chronological Reconstruction
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ABSTRACT

For decades, Reiki has commonly been understood as a spiritual healing practice founded *ex nihilo* in 1922 by Mikao Usui. This article proposes a revised chronological reconstruction of Reiki’s early history based on a methodological shift from *founder-centered* to *process-centered* historiography. Rather than interpreting Reiki as the sudden creation of a single isolated founder, the article situates its emergence within the broader religious, intellectual, and psycho-spiritual environment of Meiji, Taishō, and early Shōwa Japan.

Particular attention is given to the possible formative relationship between Rev. Tokio Yokoi and Mikao Usui, following discoveries and discussions that emerged between 2022 and 2026 concerning biographical parallels between Yokoi and the oral narrative transmitted by Hawayo Takata. Within this reconstruction, Yokoi appears as a plausible theological and spiritual precursor, while Usui emerges as the central public transmitter through whom Reiki became historically visible.

The article further argues that early Reiki developed at the intersection of several converging traditions, including the Japanese Holiness Movement, Pure Land Buddhism, ritual practices such as *chinkon kishin*, and broader currents of spiritual healing and self-cultivation circulating in Taishō Japan. Particular attention is given to the polarity between embodied “self-power” and metaphysical “other-power”, interpreted as a conceptual framework helping to illuminate the emerging structure of Reiki practice. In this context, Reiki is understood not merely as a healing technique but as a mediating practice integrating ethical cultivation, ritual transmission, receptive spirituality, and embodied transformation.

Rather than replacing one founder narrative with another, the article proposes that Reiki emerged through a layered historical process involving overlapping actors, traditions, and retrospective forms of institutional memory. Reiki’s early history is therefore best understood not as a fixed origin event, but as an evolving process of spiritual formation, articulation, and canonization.

INTRODUCTION

Reiki is a contemporary CAM (Complementary and Alternative Medicine) modality, best known for its practice of laying on of hands. For decades, Reiki has commonly been understood as a spiritual healing practice founded *ex nihilo* in 1922 by Mikao Usui.

This article presents a chronological reconstruction of Reiki's early history based on a methodological shift that emerged after 2022, moving from a founder-centered approach toward a process-centered approach (Jonker 2026c). Such an approach aligns with broader historiographical perspectives within the History of Religions that emphasize the role of retrospective narrative construction and historical imagination in the formation of religious traditions (Hanegraaff 2017). Rather than interpreting Reiki as the sudden creation of a single isolated founder, the article situates its emergence within the broader religious, intellectual, and psycho-spiritual environment of Meiji, Taishō, and early Shōwa Japan (Jonker 2025a).

Particular attention is given to the possible formative relationship between Rev. Tokio Yokoi and Mikao Usui (Jonker 2025b), together with the interaction between Christian, Buddhist, and Japanese ritual traditions that may have contributed to the emergence of early Reiki (Jonker 2024).

1. 1980–2026: A CHANGING HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

When Hawayo Takata died in 1980, her oral narrative about Reiki's founder became the dominant story transmitted throughout the international Reiki community. Takata consistently described the founder of Reiki as a Christian minister, fully ordained minister, President of Dōshisha, who studied in the United States and experienced spiritual awakening after a retreat involving fasting and meditation (Jonker 2016).

Beginning in the early 1990s, researchers started to verify elements of this narrative historically. In 1990, William Lee Rand contacted Dōshisha University to ask whether Mikao Usui had served there (Jonker 2025a). The answer was negative. As a result, many researchers as well as practitioners increasingly interpreted Takata's story as legendary or symbolic rather than historically accurate.

In 1993, the Australian Reikimaster Elizabeth Latham personally visited Dōshisha. She initially received the same answer. Later that year, she experienced a visionary dream in which an unknown Japanese man reportedly told her: "I am the one you are looking for. I am Usui."

In early 1994, while revisiting Dōshisha archives, Latham recognized the face from her visionary dream in a historical publication. The man was Rev. Tokio Yokoi. From that moment onward, she gradually developed the hypothesis that the person described by Takata was not primarily Mikao Usui from Taniai, but Tokio Yokoi, whose biography closely matched Takata's narrative. She worked out a hypothesis that the name Usui may have been a pseudonym used by Yokoi at the time of spreading Reiki. Around 2022, she informed me about her findings so far (Latham 2023, Jonker 2024).

Between 2022 and 2026, this discovery increasingly reshaped scholarly discussions. A methodological shift occurred from *founder-centered reconstruction* toward a *process-centered* understanding of Reiki's development (Jonker 2026c). In 2025, the discovery of Usui's 1904 *curriculum vitae* in Taiwan started to shine light on the picture by confirming that Usui himself also had Christian educational connections (Jonker 2025a).

2. 1857–1875: TOKIO YOKOI AND EARLY CHRISTIAN FORMATION

Hereafter, when referring to the bibliography of Rev. Tokio Yokoi, I paraphrase and summarize my earlier work (Latham 2023, Jonker 2024), Rev. Tokio Yokoi is born in 1857 as the son of Yokoi Shōnan, one of the important advisors connected to the early Meiji state. During Japan's transition from feudal isolation toward modernization, Christianity gradually re-entered Japanese society after centuries of prohibition.

As a young man, Yokoi came under the influence of the American educator Leroy Lansing Janes, who introduced him to Christianity, English education, Confucian ethics, and broader intellectual currents. Around the age of eighteen, Yokoi reportedly experienced a profound spiritual experience on Mt. Hanaoka, which later became central in reconstructions of his spiritual development. This experience appears to have initiated a lifelong search concerning divine healing, spiritual transformation, and direct experience of the sacred. The Biblical themes of healing through the laying on of hands, Pentecost, and Baptism with the Holy Spirit became increasingly important within his theological orientation. All these were themes in the Japanese Holiness Movement imported from the US and can retrospectively be recognized in Reiki practice when it emerged around 1922.

3. 1877–1896: DŌSHISHA, MINISTRY, AND COMPARATIVE RELIGION

During the late nineteenth century, Yokoi studied at Dōshisha and later served as an ordained Protestant minister in Imabari and Tokyo. He became associated with the Hongō Church where he was minister and increasingly participated in intellectual discussions concerning the indigenization of Christianity within Japanese culture.

In 1893, Yokoi represented Japan at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago. This exposed him to broader global discussions about spirituality, comparative religion, healing, and mystical experience. Around the same period, he also became familiar with ideas surrounding *prāṇa*, comparative mysticism, and East–West religious synthesis.

Between 1894 and 1896, Yokoi studied theology at Yale University. During these years, he also became increasingly involved with comparative religion study groups and spiritual discussion circles in Japan. These circles explored direct spiritual transmission, mystical realization, ritual practice, and methods of spiritual cultivation. Within this context, ideas later associated with Reiki's essential core become increasingly visible.

4. 1896–1918: HOLINESS MOVEMENT, RITUAL TRANSMISSION, AND SPIRITUAL HEALING

By the late 1890s, Yokoi had become president of Dōshisha. His resignation following conflicts concerning religion, nationalism, and educational direction later became one of the strongest parallels with Takata's oral narrative.

Research increasingly associates Yokoi with theological currents connected to the Holiness Movement. These currents emphasized sanctification, divine healing, purification of spirit, and direct spiritual experience. Rather than focusing exclusively on doctrine, the Holiness tradition emphasized transformation through spiritual experience (Mullins 2003, Sonntag 2012).

Around this period, Yokoi also participated in comparative religion and spiritual study groups exploring direct spiritual transmission and ritual mediation. Such discussions intersected with Japanese traditions including *chinkon kishin*, *kaji kitō*, and broader forms of spiritual empowerment. The relation with Reiki practice starts to emerge: healing (laying on of hands; *teate*), spiritual transmission (initiation ritual; *reiju*),

purification of the mind and ethical self-cultivation (Reiki precepts; *Gokai*), and ritual empowerment (Reiki symbols; *reiki no shirushi*).

Within this context therefore, those elements of Reiki practice can be interpreted not as isolated inventions but as part of a wider attempt to formulate an indigenous Japanese mode of spiritual transmission. Christian ideas surrounding Baptism with the Holy Spirit increasingly converged with Japanese ritual concepts emphasizing direct spiritual influence and transformation.

Meanwhile, Mikao Usui appears within Christian educational environments connected to missionary schools in Tokyo (1899-1904). The rediscovered 1904 *curriculum vitae* suggests that Usui moved within circles geographically and socially close to locations where Yokoi had previously worked and taught at the Hongō Church. It became clear that Usui and Yokoi lived and worked in each other's proximity (Jonker 2025a).

5. 1919–1922: FORMATION OF REIKI

The years between 1919 and 1922 increasingly emerge as the crucial formative phase in Reiki's development (Jonker 2025b, -c).

Japan's rejection at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919—particularly the refusal of the proposed Racial Equality Clause—intensified disillusionment toward Western universalism and contributed to broader spiritual, political, and ideological shifts within Japanese society. For many Japanese intellectuals and religious thinkers, the rejection exposed tensions between Western claims of universal human values and the geopolitical realities of racial hierarchy and imperial power. This growing disappointment toward the West formed part of the wider atmosphere in which new searches for indigenous spiritual identity and alternative forms of moral and cultural authority emerged during the late Taishō period. It is plausible that both Yokoi and Usui either temporarily or permanently turned away from Christianity. Around the same period, Tokio Yokoi suffered a stroke and reportedly received students and visitors privately while largely confined to his home.

Within the reconstructed process-centered model, this situation provides the historically most plausible context for a teacher–student relationship between Tokio Yokoi and Mikao Usui. Rather than assuming that Reiki emerged suddenly and fully formed in isolation, the model proposes a gradual transmission of ideas, healing concepts, ethical principles, and ritual practices from Yokoi onto Usui (Jonker 2025b).

This reconstruction also offers a possible historical context for the “Zen monk” motif preserved in Hawayo Takata's oral narrative. While no evidence presently confirms that Yokoi formally belonged to a Zen institution, the teacher–student setting described here may later have been remembered, translated, or symbolically reframed within Buddhist terminology familiar to Japanese spiritual culture and more understandable to Western audiences. In this interpretation, the “Zen monk” motif may preserve the memory of a spiritual mentor relationship rather than refer literally to monastic ordination or institutional Zen affiliation (*ibid.*).

The emphasis therefore shifts from institutional identity to function: a spiritually experienced teacher transmitting methods of discipline, purification, healing, and realization to a student during a formative phase preceding Reiki's later public emergence.

At the same time, Japan already contained multiple healing systems based on *teate*, or healing through the hands. Publications such as Kawakami Matajirō's *Reiki Ryōhō* and

Tanaka's *Taireidō* demonstrate that psycho-spiritual healing practices circulated publicly before the canonical 1922 founding date later associated with Usui (Jonker 2026a).

The famous 1922 retreat on Mt. Kurama must therefore be interpreted within this broader context. Whether historically literal or partially symbolic, the retreat narrative represents a transitional moment, a *rite-de-passage*, in which Usui moved from student or seeker toward public spiritual healer and teacher. The themes of fasting, purification, surrender, and spiritual breakthrough parallel both Buddhist and Christian ascetic traditions.

These historical developments also raise a broader question concerning the spiritual grammar underlying early Reiki (*ibid.*).

6. SPIRITUAL CULTIVATION AND HEALING AGENCY

One of the distinctive characteristics gradually emerging within early Reiki appears to have been the attempt to integrate two complementary spiritual orientations widely present in Taishō-period Japan. On the one hand stood traditions of ethical and spiritual cultivation involving meditation, purification, ritual discipline, and the refinement of mind and body. On the other hand stood forms of receptive spirituality in which healing and transformation were understood as arising through surrender to a greater-than-self spiritual activity.

Within Pure Land Buddhism, particularly Jōdo-shū traditions (as practiced by Usui), this polarity was expressed through the distinction between *jiriki* 自力 (“self-power”) and *tariki* 他力 (“other-power”). Rather than attaining liberation solely through personal effort, the practitioner ultimately entrusted themselves to the compassionate activity of Amida Buddha operating beyond the ego. Transformation therefore emerged not simply through self-cultivation alone, but through receptive participation in a greater spiritual reality.

Similar tensions between discipline and surrender also appeared within the Japanese Holiness Movement, where sanctification involved both ethical purification and openness to the transforming action of the Holy Spirit. In both traditions, spiritual realization depended neither exclusively on human effort nor entirely on passive dependence, but on an interaction between cultivation and receptivity.

Within this broader religious environment, early Reiki appears to have emerged as a mediating practice positioned between these two orientations. Reiki practice involved ethical cultivation, meditation, ritual discipline, and spiritual training, while simultaneously emphasizing receptivity to a healing activity experienced as acting through the practitioner rather than being produced solely by personal effort.

This polarity may also help illuminate the inner structure of the term Reiki itself. The element *rei* 霊 can be interpreted as referring to transcendent spirit or sacred reality, while *ki* 気 points toward embodied vitality and the human sphere of lived experience. In this perspective, Reiki practice may be understood as participation in the interaction between transcendent spiritual activity and embodied human existence, resembling in structural terms the relationship between *tariki* and *jiriki*.

Comparable patterns already existed within Japanese religious culture. Rituals such as *chinkon kishin* 鎮魂帰神 (“calming the soul and returning to the divine”) sought to quiet ordinary consciousness so that a greater spiritual reality could manifest itself through the practitioner. Such practices reflected a worldview in which human beings did not merely generate spiritual power themselves but became receptive participants within a larger sacred process (Jonker 2016, Beeler and Jonker 2020). Earlier studies (Jonker

2016) described *chinkon kishin* as a potential source for the *reiju* ritual, structured around a tri-partite relationship between Reiki master, student, and a transcendent spiritual presence or activity. This broader spiritual grammar also resonates with the God–man ideal present within certain Christian and Holiness-related currents influential in Meiji and Taishō Japan, where divine spirit and transformed human existence were understood as entering into closer union through sanctification and spiritual empowerment.

In this perspective, Reiki did not emerge *ex nihilo* as an isolated invention but crystallized within a wider Japanese search for forms of healing and spiritual realization capable of integrating self-cultivation, receptive surrender, ritual transmission, divine or spiritual influence, and embodied transformation into a single practical path.

Against this broader religious and psycho-spiritual background, Reiki gradually entered public visibility during the years following 1922.

7. 1922–1927: PUBLIC EMERGENCE AND INSTITUTIONAL CONSOLIDATION

After 1922, Reiki increasingly entered public visibility under the name Usui Reiki Ryōhō. Within the revised historical model, this phase represents not the absolute beginning of Reiki but the beginning of its public articulation and institutional consolidation (Jonker 2026b).

Usui became the visible public representative of Reiki. During these years, treatment methods, ethical teachings, transmission forms, and instructional structures gradually stabilized. Reiki students were trained, and the foundations for later institutional memory emerged.

The memorial stone erected in 1927, functioning partly as a response to changing regulations during the Taishō–Shōwa transition and helping to guarantee the legitimate continuation of the Usui Gakkai—which until then appears to have functioned largely as an informal network connected to naval and social elites—became the first major public text organizing these developments into a coherent founder narrative centered on Mikao Usui. Rather than reading the stone only as a neutral historical record, the process-centered interpretation understands it as part of a canonization process through which earlier developments were retrospectively stabilized into an institutional memory (*ibid.*).

This process parallels developments found in many religious and spiritual traditions, where later generations organize complex formative histories into coherent narratives centered around founders and key events.

8. 1930S–1980: HAYASHI, TAKATA, AND GLOBAL TRANSMISSION

Following this initial phase of institutional consolidation, Reiki entered a new stage through the transmission activities of Chujiro Hayashi. Hayashi became one of the central mediators through whom Reiki was transmitted beyond its early Japanese context.

During the 1930s, Hayashi trained Hawayo Takata, who later introduced Reiki to Hawaii and the United States.

What is particularly significant in hindsight is not only what Hayashi transmitted, but also what appears to have been left behind. In the form of Reiki transmitted to Takata, explicit references to the institutional structure of the Usui Reiki Ryōhō Gakkai were largely absent.

The transmission also no longer emphasized the Meiji Emperor's *waka* that later became associated with Reiki pedagogy inside Japanese institutional contexts. Likewise, the memorial stone erected in 1927 does not appear to have played a central role within Takata's transmission lineage. Hayashi's later biography furthermore suggests that he consciously gravitated toward a more humanitarian and therapeutically oriented utilization of Reiki. The establishment of his Reiki clinic, together with the selective form of transmission passed on to Takata, indicates a gradual distancing from institutionally codified, nationally framed, and imperially associated elements of prewar Japanese Reiki culture in favour of a more universal and practice-oriented form centred on healing, care, discipline, and spiritual development (Jonker 2026b).

This selective transmission may have had important historical consequences. By reducing explicit association with Japanese nationalist symbolism, imperial moral education, and institutionally codified memory culture, Reiki became more adaptable to an international context after the geopolitical ruptures of the 1930s and 1940s. What survived through Takata was therefore not a complete reproduction of prewar Japanese Reiki culture, but a streamlined and universalized form centered primarily on healing, spiritual development, ethical cultivation, and hands-on practice, nowadays recognized as 'holistic'.

This process also marked the point at which Japanese Reiki, as transmitted through the Usui Reiki Ryōhō Gakkai, and Western Reiki, as transmitted through Takata, gradually developed along different historical trajectories. Rather than one preserving the other unchanged, both evolved into distinct expressions emerging from a shared historical root.

Within the process-centered interpretation, this does not represent corruption or loss, but a historical transformation through which Reiki detached itself from specifically Japanese ideological frameworks and became transmissible across cultures. Takata's lineage therefore preserved one particular historical layer of Reiki while other layers—especially institutional and national-symbolic elements—remained largely within Japanese contexts or disappeared from international transmission altogether.

The form of Reiki transmitted through Takata no longer strongly emphasized the institutional context of the Gakkai or possible formative influences involving Tokio Yokoi. Instead, the narrative became increasingly centered on Usui as singular founder.

At the same time, Takata preserved remarkable details corresponding closely with Yokoi's life: Christianity, ordained minister, Dōshisha, theological study, and conflict surrounding faith. Rather than dismissing these elements as fabrication, recent historiography increasingly interprets them as traces of a more layered historical memory.

Through Takata's efforts, Reiki survived internationally and became detached from specifically Japanese institutional and political contexts. Reiki thereby evolved into a global spiritual healing practice practiced across religious, cultural, and national boundaries.

CONCLUSION

The early history of Reiki appears increasingly complex when reconstructed chronologically across the wider religious and political transformations of Meiji, Taishō, and early Shōwa Japan.

Rather than reducing Reiki's emergence to the actions of a single isolated founder, the process-centered model recognizes overlapping contributions by multiple actors operating within a dynamic spiritual landscape. Within this reconstruction, Tokio Yokoi appears as a major theological and philosophical influence and might be recognized as Reiki's originator, while Mikao Usui emerges as the central public transmitter and organizer through whom Reiki became historically visible.

The resulting historical picture does not eliminate Usui, nor does it simply replace him with Yokoi. Instead, it suggests that Reiki emerged through interaction between Christianity, Buddhism, Japanese spiritual culture, psycho-spiritual healing movements, ritual experimentation, and broader geopolitical transformations affecting Japan during the early twentieth century.

This chronological approach also helps explain why later narratives, memorial texts, oral histories, and institutional memories preserve overlapping layers of both historical fact and retrospective interpretation. Reiki's history is therefore best understood not as a fixed founder narrative, but as an evolving historical process.

These historiographical implications also have consequences for contemporary discussions within the Reiki community.

The outcome of this study may create space for greater mutual respect between differing perspectives within the contemporary Reiki community concerning Reiki's early history. The Japanese perspective has generally preserved a lineage-centered memory in which Mikao Usui functions as the primary historical founder and source of transmission. By contrast, the perspective preserved through Hawayo Takata appears to retain traces of a broader humanitarian and spiritually hybrid line of development potentially connected to figures such as Tokio Yokoi and theological currents associated with the Holiness Movement.

Rather than requiring one perspective to invalidate the other, the present reconstruction suggests that both may preserve different historical layers of Reiki's early formation and transmission. In this way, the study may contribute to reducing long-standing polarization surrounding questions of origin, lineage, and authority within discussions on Reiki's history.

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Because this article functions as a chronological synthesis of insights developed across a series of studies published after the appearance of two influential books—Elizabeth Latham's *Samurai Reiki Master* (2023) and Jojan L. Jonker's *Tokio Yokoi: From Japanese Christianity to Universal Reiki* (2024)—the bibliography below is intentionally selective. Readers seeking the broader scholarly framework, supporting discussions, and additional source material are referred to the publications listed here.

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