

WRITING REIKI:

The Evolution of the Term *Reiki* in the Japanese Language

by Colin Powell, Reiki Master

Originally published as two articles on Pamela Miles' ReikiCentral blog
February 25, 2012 <http://reikiinmedicine.org/communicating-reiki/reiki-writing> and March 3, 2012 <http://reikiinmedicine.org/communicating-reiki/reiki-kanji-meaning>.

Each of the images below can be read as the term *Reiki* by most Japanese people. The image most Reiki practitioners in the West are familiar with is the middle one, which is used on many book covers, websites, publicity material, and even the logos of many of the largest Reiki Professional Organisations, including the Reiki Association and UK Reiki Federation here in the UK, where I live.

Which image do you think would be the one most familiar to the general public in Japan?

Evolution of the word Reiki in Japanese

Old (Pre-1940s) Kanji

Modern Kanji

Modern Katakana

Interestingly, it would be the one on the right, the modern Katakana way of writing the term Reiki. Before I explain why that is, let's look at how the Japanese language is written.

There are three main alphabets -- or more correctly, syllabaries, or character sets -- used in the Japanese language,¹ kanji, hiragana, and katakana. Let's look at each one.

Kanji

Kanji is the oldest character set. Kanji actually consists of Chinese characters (hanzi) that were imported into Japan, where they became known as kanji, around the 5th century CE. Today only around 2,000 of the 5,000 to 10,000 original kanji are in regular use, as the result of revisions of the Japanese language in 1946 and 2010. Many kanji are based on stylised pictograms, and their component parts (or radicals) can have their own meaning. Many kanji can be read with both a Japanese pronunciation (kun yomi) and a Chinese pronunciation (on yomi), depending upon the context.

Hiragana

Hiragana is a syllabic script in which each character represents the sound of a syllable. This was not always the case. Hiragana was once a script used only by women, derived from the kanji, and having several different characters representing a single syllable. The simplified one-to-one syllable correspondence was finalised as late as 1946.

Katakana

Katakana is also a syllabic script, originally considered "men's writing." It is based on characters that were used by Buddhist monks as an aid to correct pronunciation of Chinese texts.

Today katakana is used mainly to write non-Chinese loan words, onomatopoeic words, foreign names, telegrams and for emphasis (the equivalent of bold, italic or upper case text in English). Prior to the 20th century many foreign words (especially Portuguese) were actually written in kanji..²

Why would most modern Japanese people be more familiar with the katakana way of writing Reiki? The answer is that, although the practice of Usui Reiki Ryoho became quite popular in parts of Japan before World War 2, such practices declined after the war, only surviving in isolated locations, and the term *Reiki* slipped out of use.

In the 1980s, when people such as Mieko Mitsui, a student of one of Hawayo Takata's Master students, Barbara Ray, traveled to Japan to research the roots of Reiki practice, they found few people who had even heard of Reiki healing.³

As people from the West began to teach Reiki practice in Japan, some students did not even recognise the term *Reiki* as being Japanese, so it became written as an imported term, using the phonetic characters *re*, *i*, and *ki* in katakana. An article about Reiki practice in a Japanese magazine from 1986 has an ad for Barbara Ray's book, with *Reiki* written in large katakana and romaji (Western letters) rather than kanji (right).

心身改善
白井 靈氣療法教義

招 萬 今 心 業 朝 心 口
福 病 日 配 を 夕 に
の の 丈 す は 合 念
秘 靈 け な げ 掌 じ
法 藥 け は 感 して
は 怒 謝 人 親 切
に な て 切 切
に

Let's Study REIKI

家族の健康管理
ストレス解消
美容に

THE OFFICIAL REIKI HANDBOOK

強力な自己治療テクニック

今アメリカヨーロッパの最先端のレイキは安全で強力な自然セラピーです。現代物理学は、すべての物質はエネルギーでできている。つまり私たちの心、感情、身体はすべてがエネルギーの塊です。このエネルギーの振動が、私たちの健康や幸福に大きな影響を与えています。レイキは、このエネルギーの振動を調整し、私たちの健康や幸福を向上させるための強力な自己治療テクニックです。

★時間 レクチャー 午前10時～正午 クラス(ワークショップ)午後3時～5時
30分(午後6時～8時、20分(午後10時～午後11時)午後3時～5時)

★セミナー開催地と料金表

開催地	クラス	料金
東京	4月12日	12,000円
大阪	4月19日	12,000円
名古屋	4月26日	12,000円
福岡	5月3日	12,000円
札幌	5月10日	12,000円
仙台	5月17日	12,000円
新潟	5月24日	12,000円
金沢	5月31日	12,000円
富山	6月7日	12,000円
石川	6月14日	12,000円
福井	6月21日	12,000円
山梨	6月28日	12,000円
長野	7月5日	12,000円
岐阜	7月12日	12,000円
愛知	7月19日	12,000円
三重	7月26日	12,000円
滋賀	8月2日	12,000円
京都	8月9日	12,000円
奈良	8月16日	12,000円
和歌山	8月23日	12,000円
鳥取	8月30日	12,000円
徳島	9月6日	12,000円
高松	9月13日	12,000円
香川	9月20日	12,000円
岡山	9月27日	12,000円
広島	10月4日	12,000円
山口	10月11日	12,000円
福岡	10月18日	12,000円
佐賀	10月25日	12,000円
熊本	11月1日	12,000円
大分	11月8日	12,000円
宮崎	11月15日	12,000円
鹿児島	11月22日	12,000円
沖縄	11月29日	12,000円

★資料請求先
東京都目黒区郵便局私書箱第94号
レイキ・セミナー・オブ・ジャパン 三井三重子

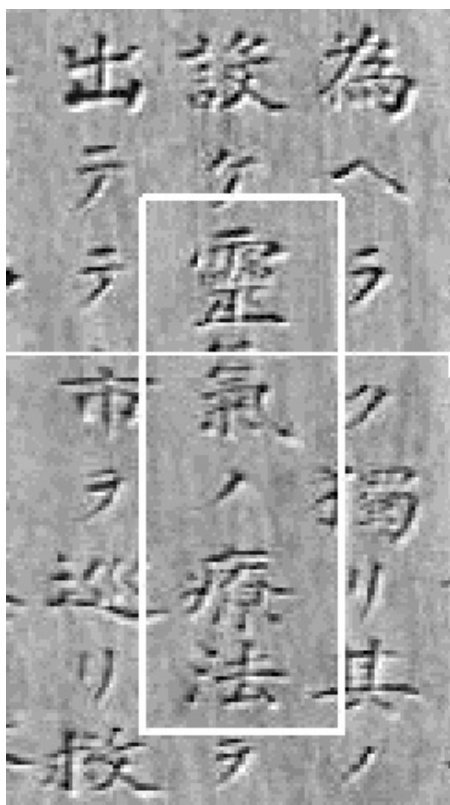
このころ、白井博士に直接あるいは間接に接した人々の証言が、レイキの効果を証明している。白井博士は、レイキの力で、多くの病気や悩みを解決し、多くの人々を救った。レイキは、私たちの健康や幸福を向上させるための強力な自己治療テクニックです。

白井博士がよりリアルな立場で、軍の人物が関わるという話は、ありふれたことではない。レイキは、私たちの健康や幸福を向上させるための強力な自己治療テクニックです。

不思議な体験レポート

レイキの力で、多くの病気や悩みを解決し、多くの人々を救った。レイキは、私たちの健康や幸福を向上させるための強力な自己治療テクニックです。

Meanwhile, even some Japanese Reiki practitioners in that bastion of Usui Reiki Ryoho, the Gakkai,* were now using modern kanji to write the term *Reiki*, as can be seen in Japanese copies of their handbook, which was published in the mid-1970s (left).



If we look at Usui's Memorial Stone (left) or early Reiki certificates from the 1930s, we see the phrase *Reiki Ryoho* written in the original kanji characters. This is how Mikao Usui and Chujiro Hayashi would have written it. Some of the more traditional Japanese styles of Reiki are now using the original kanji, or at least teaching about it.

There is, however, some reluctance to use the original Reiki kanji in publicity material in Japan because, although the memory of Usui Reiki Ryoho all but disappeared after World War 2, an awareness of Reiki has resurfaced in an unusual way. Many Japanese people, especially the younger generations, have become aware of Reiki through popular entertainment.

Japanese anime films and manga comics portray Reiki as a magical force or a sword of great power, even though the actual kanji used is different. Between that popular misrepresentation of Reiki and a meaning of the original Reiki kanji that carries connotations of spirits, ghosts and psychic

phenomena, Reiki teachers in Japan have to be careful not to give potential students the wrong impression about Usui Reiki Ryoho.

That brings us to the question, what does the original kanji for Reiki actually mean in regard to the practice of Usui Reiki Ryoho?

REIKI KANJI MEANING

In the kanji for *rei* (below), we see the canopy of heaven from which four drops of rain (*ame*) are falling into three containers or mouths (*kuchi*). The symbolism of water is very significant spiritually in that it is endlessly adaptable. Water is responsive, changes form, and flows easily around obstacles, but when necessary, water also has the capacity to slowly dissolve obstacles and carry them along.

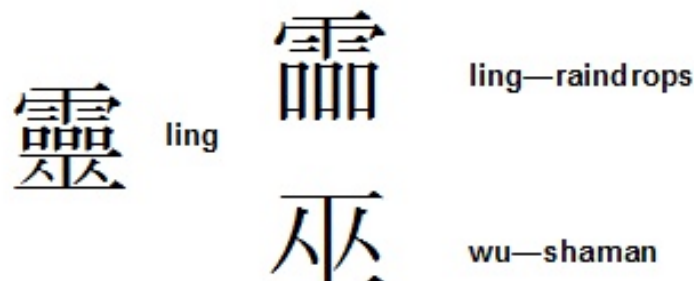
Below the rain and containers, a shaman, usually a female (*miko*), stands on the earth, arms outstretched and tassels hanging down.



Interpretation of Original Kanji for Rei




Chinese roots of the Reiki kanji

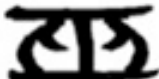
As mentioned earlier, the Japanese kanji are actually derived from Chinese characters. If we look at the earlier, Chinese interpretation of this character, pronounced *ling* in Chinese, (below) this is sometimes broken down into just two parts: drops of rain (also pronounced *ling*), in which the mouths are interpreted as large raindrops,⁴ and a shaman, witch or sorcerer, pronounced *wu* in Chinese.



Chinese Interpretation of Ling

We can even break down the character *wu* further (below), into the work (*gong*) of two people (*ren* written twice). If we look at a still earlier version, for example in a seal script,** we can see that the work the two people are doing is praying or dancing. Further, the two people shown are mirror images and may represent that it is necessary for the shaman to balance her dual human nature (spiritual and material) in order to perform the work of praying for rain.


 **wu**  **gong - work**
 **ren - man/person**

 **Wu, in old Seal Script, show two people praying**

Chinese Interpretation of Wu (Shaman)

The kanji for *ki* (below) consists of the radical, *kome* or rice, surrounded by a vapour or steam (also pronounced *ki*), representing the steam given off when rice is cooking in a pot.⁵ The character for *ki* was originally written as three wavy lines, which symbolised air or breath⁶ – *ki* being something that could not be seen but could cause change and be felt.⁷ We see that there was originally a sense of *ki* being more like an invisible vapour or atmosphere that could be felt, or the breath of life, rather than being life force energy.

 **ki**  **ki - steam/breath/air**
 **kome - rice**

 **early form of ki as 3 wavy lines - breath on a cold day**

Reiki trinity

Putting this symbolism together, we have a representation of the trinity found in many diverse spiritual traditions: Heaven, Earth and Man, known as *Ten-Chi-Jin* in Japan.

In the kanji for *rei*, which on its own means spirit, soul, ghost, divine, sacred, the rain symbolises life-giving energy from heaven in the form of water, collected in the three containers or mouths where it can directly revitalise mind, body and spirit.

The shaman acts as an intermediary between heaven above and the earth below, where the energy-giving rice grows and provides mankind with sustenance and energy from the earth. Thus, the heaven energy combines with the earth energy in the heart of the shaman, allowing her to become fully balanced as a unity and realise her true nature.

This is the spiritual essence of Reiki practice: the Reiki practitioner or teacher, through Reiki practice, balances her own mind and body (or spiritual and material aspects), just as the shaman does.

REIKI KANJI TODAY

If we look at the modern kanji for Reiki (see below), much of this rich symbolism is lost. There are no containers or mouths to hold the rain from heaven, and no shaman. The rice grains, which in the original kanji give an impression of radiance, have been replaced with what looks like a dagger or an X, which implies cutting off or cancelling the energy from the earth, symbolised by steam.

靈氣

Modern Kanji for Reiki

CONCLUSION

If more Reiki teachers taught the deeper symbolism and meaning of the Reiki kanji, students would start with a greater understanding of Reiki practice, leading to a more profound experience for teacher, practitioner and client. The system of Usui Reiki Ryoho is much more than a hands-on complementary therapy.

Notes

* The Usui Reiki Ryoho Gakkai (Usui Reiki Healing Method Society) was originally set up by some of Usui's students shortly after his death in 1926 (some sources say that it was set up by Mikao Usui himself in 1922), with the aim of preserving the practice Usui Reiki Ryoho. The first few Chairpersons of this society were naval officers. The

Gakkai went underground during the post World War 2 clamp down on traditional oriental healing methods and militaristic/nationalistic organisations. The Gakkai has remained hidden and, although there are still some branches in existence, it is not known exactly how many members there are. It functions as a closed society, only accepting family members. Other Japanese Reiki practitioners are no longer allowed to join. Most members are very old, and unless younger practitioners join, the Gakkai could die out in the not too distant future.

** Seal script, or more correctly in this case, small seal script, is even older than the usual kanji (Chinese: *hanzi*) used today. It developed from characters carved on bronze objects (which in turn developed from etchings on oracle bones), and dates from around the 3rd Century BC. Since the characters were etched onto metal, they tended to be quite simple and fairly angular. Nonetheless, seal script often manages to capture an element of flow, and sometimes includes curves. Eventually the script became used on seals (chops, stamps or signets) as a way of signing or sealing official documents or works of art, which is where derivatives of seal script can be seen today, as a rectangular or circular stamp, usually in red ink.

References

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2. https://www.csun.edu/~bashforth/301_PDF/301_P_P/EnglishLoanWordsJapanese.pdf
3. http://www.aetw.org/reiki_1986_article.htm Translation of the 1986 Japanese Twilight Magazine Reiki article, a page from which is shown above.
4. <http://www.chineseetymology.org/CharacterEtymology.aspx?characterInput=%E9%9C%9D>
5. <http://www.mts.net/~bodnaryk/KanjiListOnline.html>
6. <http://www.chineseetymology.org/CharacterEtymology.aspx?submitButton1=Etymology&characterInput=%E6%B0%94>
7. <http://damo-qigong.net/qi-theory.htm>

Thank you to Paul Selk for his support with resources and fact-checking.

PERSONAL NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR, COLIN POWELL:

I have been a Usui Reiki Ryoho Teacher in the UK since 1998. I believe in keeping Reiki practice as pure and as simple as I understand it was originally meant to be. To this end, I began researching the history and development of the system of Reiki and found that the huge amount of information available on the internet and in books was often contradictory or did not fit together.

When I began teaching, in order to teach as closely as possible to what was taught originally, without any of the add-ins and misunderstandings that appeared as Reiki began to spread in the Western world in the late 1970s, I decided to write my own Reiki manuals. I drew upon the influence of the various styles of Reiki practice in which I was trained, including Usui Shiki Ryoho, Gendai Reiki, Komyo Reiki and Jikiden Reiki, as well as my own research, to teach Reiki: pure & simple.