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# *The Figures of Kōho and Li-mi-i, and the Origins of the Case for a Christian Missionary Presence in Tenpyō Era Japan*

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JAMES HARRY MORRIS

### Abstract

*In 1916 P.Y. Saeki devoted a page of his book “The Nestorian Monument in China,” to a short thought experiment which linked a Persian by the name of Li-mi-i 李密翳 who was present in Emperor Shōmu’s 聖武天皇 court and whose arrival was mentioned in the Shoku Nihongi 続日本紀 with a priest named on the Nestorian Stele. Since that first suggestion, several scholars have expounded the idea that Li-mi-i and another figure who arrived alongside him, Kōho Tōchō 皇甫東朝, were Christians and/or missionaries. In this paper I assess these claims, returning to the Shoku Nihongi in order to suggest that there is a lack of data to establish them as true. I then seek to explore the origins of this theory situating it within the joint context of Japan’s imperial expansion and her modernization. Whilst the latter cannot be conclusive, I hope that it may shed light on the significance of the theory which can be seen as a search to discover Japanese history, a statement of the equality between Japanese and Western histories, or an attempt to justify imperial aims in China academically.*

The *Tenpyō* 天平 Era in which Emperor Shōmu 聖武天皇 (701–756 CE) ruled Japan spanned from August 729 CE to April 749 CE.<sup>2</sup> Under Emperor Shōmu, Japan maintained a strong relationship with China, which had historically and contemporaneously contributed to the development of Japanese civilisation, art and religion.<sup>3</sup> According to the *Shoku Nihongi* 続日本紀 under Emperor Shōmu’s rule an envoy (遣唐使 *Kentōshi*) to China left Japan in 733 CE (*Tenpyō* 5).<sup>4</sup> Emperor Shōmu and his wife Empress Kōmyō 光明皇后 (701–760 CE) were patrons of religion, they establishing a system of national monasteries (国分寺 *Kokubunji*) and convents (国分尼寺 *kokubunniji*),<sup>5</sup> and founded a number of temples and

<sup>1</sup> Assistance with Chinese *pinyin* and inspiration was provided by Lu Liyuan 陆立源. My gratitude must be extended to the Spalding Trust, the Russell Trust, and the Historical Society of the Episcopal Church for contributing funds towards my research.

<sup>2</sup> On Emperor Shōmu’s rule refer to: Joan R. Piggot, *The Emergence of Japanese Kingship* (Redwood City, 1997). And: Joan R. Piggot, *Tōdaiji and the Nara Imperium* (Stanford University: Doctoral Dissertation, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> Masaharu Anesaki, *History of Japanese Religion: With Special Reference to the Social and Moral Life of the Nation* (London, 1963), pp. 51–53.

<sup>4</sup> Japanese Culture Electronic Library, *Shoku Nihongi*, Chapter 11, accessed February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.j-texts.com/jodai/shoku11.html>

<sup>5</sup> Japanese Culture Electronic Library, *Shoku Nihongi*, Chapter 14, accessed February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.j-texts.com/jodai/shoku14.html>

monasteries. The topic of this paper are two figures, Li-mi-i 李密翳<sup>6</sup> and Kōho Tōchō 皇甫東朝 (sometimes rendered as Kōfu or Kohfu),<sup>7</sup> who arrived at Emperor Shōmu's court in 736 CE (*Tenpyō* 8) on the return of part of the aforementioned envoy.<sup>8</sup> Several scholars have argued that Li-mi-i and Kōho were missionaries attempting to spread *Jǐngjiào* 景教 (J. *Keikyō*), the form of Christianity present in Táng 唐 dynasty China. I intend to assess this claim, arguing that the evidence to suggest the figures were missionaries or even Christians is speculative at best. I will then explore the significance of the theory, suggesting that its first incarnation in academia is best understood within the context of a modernising and imperially expanding Japan.

### The Figures of Kōho and Li-mi-i, and the historicity of the claim that Christianity was present in Tenpyō Japan

Kōho is referred to by a number of scholars as 'a believer of the Luminous Religion' and is presumed to be, alongside Li-mi-i, a missionary of *Jǐngjiào*.<sup>9</sup> This claim is not supported by the *Shoku Nihongi* which makes no mention of Kōho's religion. After receiving imperial favours on his arrival to the court in 736 CE (*Tenpyō* 8),<sup>10</sup> he features several times in the account; in 766 CE (天平神護 *Tenpyō-Jingo* 2) he gives a musical performance with his daughter,<sup>11</sup> in 767 CE (神護景雲 *Jingo-Keiun* 1) he is placed in charge of the government office in charge of court music (雅楽寮 *Utamai no Tsukasa*),<sup>12</sup> in 769 CE (*Jingo-Keiun* 3) he is promoted,<sup>13</sup> and in 770 CE (宝亀 *Hōki* 1) he becomes Vice-Governor of Etchu Province (越中国 *Etchū no kuni*).<sup>14</sup> Another detail we can ascertain about Kōho from the *Shoku Nihongi* is that he was Chinese (唐人 *Tōjin*).<sup>15</sup> It would seem therefore that rather than a missionary, Kōho is better understood as an envoy, musician and eventually a politician. Despite this, Ken Joseph Sr. and Ken Joseph Jr. have claimed that Japanese court music (越天楽 *Etenraku*)

<sup>6</sup>Lǐ Mìyì (Chinese *pīnyīn*) or Rimitsuei (Japanese). Li-mi-i is the rendering of the name given by P. Y. Saeki, and consequently the rendering used in this paper. Refer to: P. Y. Saeki, *The Nestorian Monument in China* (London, Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1916), pp. 61–62.

<sup>7</sup>Huángfū Dōngchāo (Chinese *pīnyīn*).

<sup>8</sup>Japanese Culture Electronic Library, *Shoku Nihongi*, Chapter 12, accessed February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.j-texts.com/jodai/shoku12.html>

<sup>9</sup>Ikuro Teshima, *The Ancient Jewish Diaspora in Japan: The Tribe of the Hada: Their Religious and Cultural Influence* (Tokyo, 1971), p. 60. Samuel Lee, *Rediscovering Japan, Reintroducing Christendom: Two Thousand Years of Christian History in Japan* (Lanham, 2010), p. 78. Ken Joseph Sr. ジョセフ・ケン・シニア and Ken Joseph Jr. ジョセフ・ケン・ジュニア, *Kakusareta jūjūka no kuni • nihon • gyakusetsu no kodaishi 隠された十字架の国・日本・逆説の古代史* [Japan: Country of Hidden Crosses – Paradoxical Ancient History], (東京, 2000), pp. 98–99. And: John. M. L. Young, *By foot to China: Mission of the Church of the East, to 1400* (Lookout Mountain, 1991), p. 19.

<sup>10</sup>Japanese Culture Electronic Library, *Shoku Nihongi*, Chapter 12, accessed February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.j-texts.com/jodai/shoku12.html>

<sup>11</sup>Japanese Culture Electronic Library, *Shoku Nihongi*, Chapter 27, accessed February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.j-texts.com/jodai/shoku27.html>

<sup>12</sup>Japanese Culture Electronic Library, *Shoku Nihongi*, Chapter 28, accessed February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.j-texts.com/jodai/shoku28.html>

<sup>13</sup>Japanese Culture Electronic Library, *Shoku Nihongi*, Chapter 30, accessed February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.j-texts.com/jodai/shoku30.html>

<sup>14</sup>Japanese Culture Electronic Library, *Shoku Nihongi*, Chapter 31, accessed February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.j-texts.com/jodai/shoku31.html>

<sup>15</sup>Japanese Culture Electronic Library, *Shoku Nihongi*, Chapter 12, accessed February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.j-texts.com/jodai/shoku12.html>

has its origins in Persian Christian music, thereby suggesting that Kōho's role as a court musician was in some way linked to *Jīngjiào*.<sup>16</sup> The commonly accepted theory explored by Laurence Picken, however, is that *Etennaku* came from the Táng tributary state of Khotan, and had been acculturated in China, before being transmitted to Japan.<sup>17</sup> Even if the Josephs' claims were true, it would still require a stretch of the imagination to argue that Kōho was a Christian, and it does not, therefore, seem possible to link Kōho's musical pursuits with his theorised religious identity in any meaningful sense. A piece of *sueki* (須恵器 – Sue Ware or unglazed pottery), containing Kōho's name has been discovered in Nara (奈良市).<sup>18</sup> In a paper exploring the discovery Nakamura Ichiro argues that Kōho was one of the many people who were not acting as religious professionals, sent between China and Japan to work in secular roles in the Imperial Courts during the Táng period.<sup>19</sup> Yano Kenichi similarly views Kōho in non-Christian terms arguing that he was first brought to Japan in order to perform at the opening ceremony of the Nara Daibutsu (大仏 *Daibutsu*) and so that his musical expertise might be used in Japan.<sup>20</sup> It seems, therefore, that in the *Shoku Nihongi* and in archaeological finds relating to Kōho there is no support for the theory that he was a missionary and/or a *Jīngjiào* adherent.

Li-mi-i is mentioned in the *Shoku Nihongi* account once; he arrives alongside Kōho, receiving imperial favours and is described as a Persian (波斯人 *Hashibito*).<sup>21</sup> Beyond that we have no other information about his personage, yet several scholars argue that he is a “Nestorian Christian medical missionary”.<sup>22</sup> Some scholars refer to him by his Japanese name, Rimitsui<sup>23</sup> or Rimitsuei,<sup>24</sup> or derivatives of this such as Rimitsu or Limitsi, whilst others incorrectly treat the characters of Li-mi-i and Rimitsui/Rimitsuei separately.<sup>25</sup> This fictitious separation appears to have stemmed from the entry of theories on Li-mi-i into Western scholarship when insufficient Chinese and Japanese language ability led scholars to believe that the different renderings of his name which appeared in contemporaneous

<sup>16</sup>Joseph Sr. ジョセフ・シニア and Joseph Jr. ジョセフ・ジュニア, *Kakusareta jūjūka no kuni · nihon · gyakusetsu no kodaishi* 隠された十字架の国・日本・逆説の古代史 [Japan: Country of Hidden Crosses – Paradoxical Ancient History], pp. 98–99.

<sup>17</sup>Laurence Picken and Noël J. Nickson (eds.), *Music from the Tang Court Volume 5* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 119–122.

<sup>18</sup>Nakamura Ichirō 所中村一郎 and Nara Bunkazai Kenkyūsho 奈良文化財研究所 [Nara National Research Institute for Cultural Properties], “Tōjin ‘Kōho Tōchō’ no na wo shirushita doki” 唐人「皇甫東朝」の名を記した土器 [The Record of the Chinese National, Kōho Tōchō's name on a Piece of Sueki] (奈良市埋蔵文化財調査センター速報展示資料, 2012).

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup>Yano Kenichi 矢野建, “Kenntōshi to rainichi “Tōjin” Kōho Tōchō wo chūshin toshite,” 遣唐使と来日「唐人」皇甫東朝を中心として [Táng embassies and Chinese coming to Japan – With focus on Kōho Tōchō], *Senshū Daigaku Ajia Sekai Kenkyū Senta Nenbō* 専修大学東アジア世界史研究センター年報 Vol. 6 (March, 2012), pp. 129–141.

<sup>21</sup>Japanese Culture Electronic Library, *Shoku Nihongi*, Chapter 12, accessed February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.j-texts.com/jodai/shoku12.html>

<sup>22</sup>J. C. Pringle, “Japanese Buddhism in Relation to Christianity,” *Church Quarterly Review*, LXXV (1913), p. 312. John Stewart, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise* (Edinburgh, 1928), p. 188. Mar Aprem, *Nestorian Missions* (Trichur, 1970), pp. 76–77. Young, *By foot to China*, pp. 18–19.

<sup>23</sup>Rimitsui is the Japanese pronunciation of 李密醫 (Lǐ Mìyī).

<sup>24</sup>Rimitsuei is the Japanese pronunciation of 李密醫 (Lǐ Mìyī).

<sup>25</sup>John Stewart, John Young and Mar Aprem for instance deal with the Li-mi-i and Rimitsui as separate characters, see: Young, *By foot to China*, pp. 18–19. Stewart, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise*, p. 188. Aprem, *Nestorian Missions*, pp. 76–77.

scholarship indicated the existence of two different characters.<sup>26</sup> The argument that he is a Christian missionary seems to be based on two inconclusive passages in P. Y. Saeki's *Keikyō hibun kenkyū* 景教碑文研究 and its English "translation" *The Nestorian Monument in China*.

The arguments in Saeki's work differ in terms of content. In both texts, Saeki writes Li-mi-i using a different final character than the version of the *Shoku Nihongi* that I am working from, he writes 醫 (*i*) rather than 翳 (*ei*).<sup>27</sup> This difference in final character is present in some versions of the text.<sup>28</sup> The character Saeki uses (醫) refers to those involved in medical roles, and therefore he argues that Li-mi-i was a physician.<sup>29</sup> In *Keikyō hibun kenkyū* he argues that because the words *Bōsī jīngjiào* 波斯經教 (Persian religion of sutras/scripture), *Bōsī jiào* 波斯教 (Persian religion) and *Bōsī sì* 波斯寺 (Persian temple) all refer to *Jīngjiào* or the Church in contemporaneous Chinese documents, the term *Bōsīrèn* 波斯人 (Persian Person) as used to describe Li-mi-i should be translated as 'an adherent of *Jīngjiào*'.<sup>30</sup> This link between Li-mi-i and Christianity is absent in *The Nestorian Monument in China* where Saeki instead states that a scribal transcription error occurred and that the reading Li-mi (李密) should have more appropriately been rendered Mili (密李).<sup>31</sup> He suggests that such an error occurred because Li-mi was a very common Chinese name with which the scribe would be familiar, whilst the equally common Persian name Milis<sup>32</sup> (密李) would have been foreign and looked erroneous to the scribe.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, he concludes, that Li-mi-i, should be understood to be "Milis, the physician."<sup>34</sup> Saeki then poses the question, could this Milis be the same Milis mentioned on the Nestorian Stele<sup>35</sup> erected in the Táng capital of Cháng'ān (長安),<sup>36</sup> a priest and the father of Yazdbōzīd/Yazdbōzēd,<sup>37</sup> the Chorepiscopos,

<sup>26</sup>This appears first in the work of J. C. Pringle and John Stewart, see: Pringle, "Japanese Buddhism in Relation to Christianity," p. 312. Stewart, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise*, p. 188.

<sup>27</sup>Saeki Yoshirō 佐伯好郎, *Keikyō hibun kenkyū* 景教碑文研究 [Research on the Nestorian Stele] (東京, 1911), pp. 15–16. Saeki, *The Nestorian Monument in China*, p. 62. The character 翳 (*ei*) usually refers to shade, shadow or fans used to conceal the faces of nobles.

<sup>28</sup>*Shoku Nihongi* (Waseda Scanned Documents Collection 10, Image 39), accessed February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2015, [http://archive.wul.waseda.ac.jp/kosho/ri05/ri05\\_02450/ri05\\_02450\\_0021/ri05\\_02450\\_0021\\_p0039.jpg](http://archive.wul.waseda.ac.jp/kosho/ri05/ri05_02450/ri05_02450_0021/ri05_02450_0021_p0039.jpg)

<sup>29</sup>Saeki 佐伯, *Keikyō hibun kenkyū* 景教碑文研究 [Research on the Nestorian Stele], pp. 15–16. Saeki, *The Nestorian Monument in China*, p. 62.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.* p. 16.

<sup>31</sup>Saeki, *The Nestorian Monument in China*, p. 62.

<sup>32</sup>Contemporarily rendered as Milis or Mīles.

<sup>33</sup>Saeki, *The Nestorian Monument in China*, p. 62. The popularity of the Persian/Syriac name Milis is questionable; however Erica C. D. Hunter affirms that it was widespread in the Church of the East noting that seven bishops were named Milis. Erica C. D. Hunter, "The Persian Contribution to Christianity in China: Reflections in the Xi'an Fu Syriac Inscriptions," in *Hidden Treasures and Intercultural Encounters: Studies on East Syriac Christianity in China and Central Asia*, (ed.) Dietmar W. Winkler and Li Tang (Vienna, 2009), pp. 75, 77.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup>Major contributors on the study of the Stele include the work of P. Y. Saeki and Paul Pelliot, refer to: Saeki, *The Nestorian Monument in China*. P. Y. Saeki, *The Nestorian Documents and Relics in China* (Tokyo, 1951), pp. 11–112. Saeki Yoshirō 佐伯好郎, *Keikyō no Kenkyū* 景教の研究 [Research on the Church of the East] (東京, 1935). Paul Pelliot, "Chrétiens d'Asie Centrale." 2e sér XV TP (1914), pp. 623–644. Paul Pelliot with Antonino Forte (eds.), *L'inscription nestorienne de Si-ngan-fou* (Paris, 1996). Paul Pelliot, "Recherches sur les chrétiens d'Asie Centrale et d'Extrême-Orient II, 1: La Stèle de Si-ngan-fou," in *Oeuvres posthumes de Paul Pelliot*, (ed.) J. Dauvillier. (Paris, 1984). And: Matteo Nicolini-Zani, *La via radiosa per l'Oriente. I testi e la storia del primo incontro del cristianesimo con il mondo culturale e religioso cinese (secoli VII-IX)*, (Magnano, 2006), pp. 191–214.

<sup>36</sup>Modern day Xi'an (西安).

<sup>37</sup>Rendered Yesbuzid by Saeki.

the man who erected the Nestorian Stele?<sup>38</sup> He leaves this question open, but later writes that the Persian physician who visited Japan is the same as the Priest Milis mentioned on the Nestorian Stele, without providing further evidence.<sup>39</sup>

The lack of information given about either Milis the priest or Li-mi-i the physician, makes it difficult to link the figures beyond the similarity in names. Milis the priest came from Balkh,<sup>40</sup> where there were large Buddhist, Zoroastrian and Christian communities.<sup>41</sup> Persia, from whence Li-mi-i is said to have hailed, could refer to Balkh if we assume limited geographical knowledge on the part of the scribe, but Persia itself also had large Zoroastrian, Jewish, Buddhist, Christian and Manichaean communities.<sup>42</sup> If Persia is a reference to Balkh in the *Shoku Nihongi*, then the men could theoretically be one and the same. If they are separate figures, however, Persian nationality tells us little of Li-mi-i's religion. Whilst there is little doubt to the faith of Milis mentioned on the Stele, Li-mi-i's religion is not mentioned in the *Shoku Nihongi*,<sup>43</sup> nothing can be ascertained from his nationality alone, as by virtue of being Persian Li-mi-i could have been a Zoroastrian, Jew, Manichaean, Buddhist or Christian. Moreover, Saeki's argument that the term *Bōsiren* indicates membership to *Jīngjiào* is problematic because it never acts in such a way in contemporaneous Chinese documents, and terms linking Persia and *Jīngjiào* do so on the basis that the Chinese believed the religion to be of Persian origin.<sup>44</sup> Once this was realised to be erroneous the terminology shifted to reflect Syrian origin.<sup>45</sup>

There is an obvious discrepancy in terms of the two figures' professions, the Milis of the Stele is a priest, and the Li-mi-i of the *Shoku Nihongi* is possibly a physician.<sup>46</sup> We are aware that *Jīngjiào* adherents often practiced medicine and influenced its development in East Asia,<sup>47</sup> so there is a possibility that the two figures are the same man acting in different roles

<sup>38</sup>Saeki, *The Nestorian Monument in China*, pp. 62, 154, 175.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.* p. 142.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.* pp. 37, 40, 68, 96.

<sup>41</sup>Hunter, "The Persian Contribution to Christianity in China: Reflections in the Xi'an Fu Syriac Inscriptions", pp. 75–76.

<sup>42</sup>Ian Gillman and Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia before 1500* (Richmond, 1999), pp. 109–152. See also: Peter Brown, "The Diffusion of Manichaeism in the Roman Empire" *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 59, No. 1–2 (1969), pp. 92–103. And a number of chapters in the *Cambridge History of Iran*, Volumes 2 and 3 (Part 2), see: I. Gershevitch (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Iran Volume 2: The Median and Achaemenian Periods* (Cambridge, 1985). See also E. Yarshater (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Iran Volume 3: The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanid Periods, Part 2* (Cambridge, 1983).

<sup>43</sup>Japanese Culture Electronic Library, *Shoku Nihongi*, Chapter 12, accessed February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.j-texts.com/jodai/shoku12.html>

<sup>44</sup>David Wilmhurst, *The Martyred Church: A History of the Church of the East* (London, 2011), p. 124.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup>As mentioned previously this is dependent on the version of the *Shoku Nihongi* which is used.

<sup>47</sup>A number of texts deal with *Jīngjiào* influence on medical practice, the transmission of medical knowledge, and the role of adherents as medical personnel, some useful studies include: H.D. Modanlou, "Historical Evidence for the Origin of Teaching Hospital, Medical School and the Rise of Academic Medicine," *Journal of Perinatology*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (April, 2011), pp. 236–239. Raymond Le Coz, *Les médecins nestoriens au Moyen Âge. Les maîtres des Arabes* (Paris, 2004). Raymond Le Coz, "The "Nestorian" Doctors from the VIth to the VIIIth Century," *Histoire des sciences médicales*, Vol. 31, No. 3–4 (Oct–Dec, 1997) pp. 327–331. F. P. Retief and L. Cilliers, "The Influence of Christianity on Medicine from Greco-Roman Times up to the Renaissance," *Acta Theologica*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (2006), pp. 259–276. L. R. Angeletti, "Transmission of Classical medical Texts Through Languages of the Middle-East", *Medicina Nei Secoli*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (1990), pp. 293–329. Louis Fu, "History of Orthopaedics: Hippocratic Medicine in China: Comparison with a 9<sup>th</sup> Century Chinese Manual on Bone Setting", [希波克拉醫學與中國 - 第九世紀的中國跌打手冊與希波克拉醫學文獻庫之比較], *Journal of Orthopaedics, Trauma and Rehabilitation*, Vol. 18,

in the two sources. Despite this, the fact that he is referred to as a physician rather than a priest or missionary (usually 僧 *sō* meaning “monk” or “priest,” sometimes 法師 *hōshi* meaning “Buddhist priest”) in the *Shoku Nihongi*, suggests that his role was primarily of a secular nature or was at least perceived to be as such. If they are not the same figure, we cannot ascertain a great deal about Li-mi-i’s religion from his profession, although *Jīngjiào* adherents did practice medicine, medicine in Táng China was also influenced and practiced by Buddhists, Manichaeans and native Chinese.<sup>48</sup> Previously I concluded that Kōho came to Japan in a secular role, if we are to accept Saeki’s reading of the *Shoku Nihongi* we should also conclude that Li-mi-i visited in a secular rather than religious capacity as a physician.<sup>49</sup> Such a conclusion might match Yano’s thoughts on Kōho by suggesting that Li-mi-i had a purpose in one of Emperor Shōmu’s projects, most likely his medical reforms.<sup>50</sup> In regards to his possible role as a missionary or his religion, we cannot be conclusive. There is insufficient evidence in the source text to claim that he was a Christian, a missionary or the same person as Milis the priest mentioned on the Nestorian Stele. This lack of information itself, suggests that Li-mi-i was not considered important to the writers of the *Shoku Nihongi*, or that unlike Kōho he did not continue to play a prominent role in the court. Accepting Saeki’s judgement involves several leaps of logic, and the theory can only be accepted unconditionally if more evidence is uncovered.

Other scholars have attempted to provide further evidence to suggest that Li-mi-i was a Christian. Joseph states that the *Shoku Nihongi* refers to figures accompanying Li-mi-i as *Keijin* (景人) or leaders of the *Keikyō* Church,<sup>51</sup> however I have been unable to ratify this claim in any of the versions of the *Shoku Nihongi* available to me. The Josephs, Samuel Lee, John Young and Mar Aprem all argue that Li-mi-i influenced Empress Kōmyō to build medical facilities and that he converted her to Christianity.<sup>52</sup> The main piece evidence put forward to support this claim is her social welfare work including the building of a leprosarium, which the scholars see as typical of the Church of the East and atypical of *Tenpyō* era Buddhism.<sup>53</sup> There is also reference to a legend of Empress Kōmyō sucking the poisoned wound of a patient, which it is argued, cannot be viewed outside of the context

No. 2 (December, 2014), pp. 128–135. And: Louis Fu, “Medical Missionaries to China: the Antecedents,” *Journal of Medical Biography* (2013).

<sup>48</sup>Refer to: Mine Chen, “Foreign Medicine at Khotan during the Han and Tang Dynasties,” *Historical Research/Lishi Yanjiu*, Issue 4 (2008), pp. 17–39. C. Pierce Salguero, *Translating Buddhist Medicine in Medieval China* (Pittsburgh, 2014), pp. 23–43. Jason David BeDuhn, “A Regimen for Salvation: Medical Models in Manichaean Asceticism,” *Semeia*, No. 58 (1992), pp. 109–134. John Kevin Coyle, *Manichaeism and its Legacy* (Leiden, 2009), pp. 101–121. Fan Ka Wai, “Migrating Physicians: Origin of Medicinal Science in the Tang Dynasty,” *Hanxue Yanjiu*, Vol. 18 (2000), pp. 143–166. And: Chen Hao, “The Imperial Medical office and the Transformation of Identities of Aristocratic Physicians from the Late Six Dynasties through the Early Tang,” *Hanxue Yanjiu*, Vol. 34, Issue 1, (2014), pp. 73–98.

<sup>49</sup>Japanese Culture Electronic Library, *Shoku Nihongi*, Chapter 12, accessed February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.j-texts.com/jodai/shoku12.html>

<sup>50</sup>See: William Wayne Farris, *Population, Disease, and Land in Early Japan, 645-900* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), pp. 50–73.

<sup>51</sup>Joseph Sr. ショセフ・シニア and K Joseph Jr. ショセフ・ジュニア, *Kakusareta jūjūka no kuni · nihon · gyakusetsu no kodaishi* 隠された十字架の国・日本・逆説の古代史 [Japan: Country of Hidden Crosses – Paradoxical Ancient History], pp. 98–99.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.* p. 101. Lee, *Rediscovering Japan, Reintroducing Christendom*, p. 78. Young, *By foot to China*, pp. 18–19. And: Aprem, *Nestorian Missions*, pp. 76–77.

<sup>53</sup>Young, *By foot to China*, p. 19.

of her being Christian.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, there is a legend, recounted to Ken Joseph Jr. by his father, in which Li-mi-i reads the Bible to Empress Kōmyō inspiring her to establish various medical institutions.<sup>55</sup> These arguments seem to be ahistorical as all of Empress Kōmyō's religious works were linked to her strong Buddhist convictions, and her work in promoting medicine, such as building the temple Shinyakushiji (新薬師寺 – 747 CE)<sup>56</sup> is clearly of Buddhist rather than Christian origin. They appear to have directly evolved from comparisons formulated by Saeki's peers E. A. Gordon and Arthur Lloyd between Christianity and the Emperor Shōmu's medical reform.<sup>57</sup> Similarly there is no mention of a conversion to *Keikyō* in the *Shoku Nihongi*. I think it is more likely that the legend linking Empress Kōmyō and Li-mi-i to Christianity is a modern invention; it is difficult to imagine that the legend would survive the persecution of Christianity during the Edo period (江戸時代 – 1603CE–1868CE)<sup>58</sup> and the earliest detailed argument made to link Li-mi-i and Christianity that I have been able to discover is the work of Saeki. Furthermore, the idea supported by some scholars that the name Empress Kōmyō is somehow linked to the word *Keikyō*,<sup>59</sup> ignores the original use of the term in Buddhism within which it refers to the “light emanating from a Buddha or bodhisattva, symbolizing their wisdom and compassion”. Evidence put forward to support the claim that Li-mi-i was a missionary or a Christian by scholars developing Saeki's argument seem therefore to be false. Sufficient evidence to claim that Li-mi-i was a Christian, a missionary or Milis the priest has not been produced and the theory must therefore remain speculative and inconclusive.

<sup>54</sup>Michael Zomber, *Jesus and the Samurai: The Shining Religion and the Samurai* (Bloomington, 2009), p. 9. It is also mentioned by Lee, see: Lee, *Rediscovering Japan, Reintroducing Christendom*, p. 78. Although the legend is not mentioned, Arthur Lloyd links her social work to a potential faith, see: Arthur Lloyd, *The Creed of Half Japan: Historical Sketches of Japanese Buddhism* (London, 1911), p. 222.

<sup>55</sup>Joseph Sr. ジョセフ・シニア and K Joseph Jr. ジョセフ・ジュニア, *Kakusareta jūjūka no kuni · nihon · gyakusetsu no kodaishi 隠された十字架の国・日本・逆説の古代史* [Japan: Country of Hidden Crosses – Paradoxical Ancient History], pp. 100–101.

<sup>56</sup>Kanehara Masaki 金原正明, Aoki Satoshi 青木智史, Tsuru Mami 鶴真美, Shimanoki Mitsuru 島軒満, Nishimura Masahiro 西村匡広, *Shinyakushiji Kyūkeidai 新薬師寺旧境内* [Shinyakushiji's Original Grounds] (国立大学法人奈良教育大学, 2012).

<sup>57</sup>Lloyd, *The Creed of Half Japan*, pp. 222–223. And: E. A. Gordon, *The Lotus Gospel; or Mahayana Buddhism and its Symbolic Teachings Compared Historically and Geographically with those of Catholic Christianity* (London, 1920), pp. 294–296.

<sup>58</sup>Even the *Kakure Kirishitan 隠れキリシタン* who were able to continue practicing Christianity underground during the persecution forgot the meaning and lost the means to understand many of the traditions, doctrines and practices they had received. They kept true only to the received forms of worship and organisation. Refer to: Tagita Koya 田北耕也, *Shōwa Jidai no Senpuku Kirishitan 昭和時代の潜伏キリシタン* [The Hidden Christians of the Showa Era] (1954). Stephen Turnbull, *The Kakure Kirishitan of Japan: A Study of Their Development, Beliefs and Rituals of the Present Day*, (Richmond, 1998). And: Miyazaki Kentaro 宮崎健太郎, *Kakure Kirishitan no shinkō seikai カクレキリシタンの信仰世界* [The Kakure Kirishitan's Religious World] (東京, 1996). The persecutions are dealt with at length in the following texts: Miyazaki Kentaro, “Roman Catholic Mission in Pre-Modern Japan,” in *Handbook of Christianity in Japan*, (ed.) Mark R. Mullins (Leiden, 2003), pp. 1–18. Jurgis Elisonas, “Christianity and the Daimyo,” in *The Cambridge History of Japan, Vol. 4: Early Modern Japan*, (ed.) John Whitney Hall (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 301–372. C. R. Boxer, *The Christian Century in Japan, 1549–1650* (Manchester, 1993). George Elison, *Deus Destroyed: The Image of Christianity in Early Modern Japan* (Cambridge, Mass., 1973). Ebisawa Arimichi 海老沢有道 and Ōuchi Saburo 大内三郎, *Nihon Kirisutokyōshi 日本キリスト教史* [A History of Christianity in Japan] (東京, 1970). Luis Frois, *Nihonshi 日本史* [History of Japan], trans. Matsuda Kiichi 松田毅一 and Kawasaki Momota 川崎桃太 (東京, 1977–1980, 12 vols). Kataoka Yakichi 片岡弥吉, *Nihon Kirishitan Junkyōshi 日本キリシタン殉教史* [A History of Kirishitan Martyrdom] (東京, 2010).

<sup>59</sup>Lee, *Rediscovering Japan, Reintroducing Christendom*, p. 79. And: Pringle, “Japanese Buddhism in Relation to Christianity”, p. 312.

### The Significance of Saeki's Argument Read in Context

If there is little evidence to suggest that Li-mi-i or Kōho were Christians, why did these ideas enter the realm of scholarship? What are the theological and political significance of these claims? These questions cannot be conclusively answered; however I would like to offer some thoughts on the matter. All texts are the products of and responses to a particular context. It is my contention that Saeki's argument first published in 1916 (大正 *Taishō* 5), must be understood as a narrative arising in the context of a Japanese nation which was seeking to 'extend its influence internally . . . peripherally and . . . externally.'<sup>60</sup> The fundamental goal of Meiji (明治) Japan (1868–1912) was 'to create a rich state and a strong military,'<sup>61</sup> it did so through industrialisation and centralising its political system, a process described as Japan's turning to the West.<sup>62</sup> Victories and involvement in the First Sino-Japanese War (日清戦争 *Nisshin Sensō* - 1894–1895), the Boxer Rebellion (義和団の乱 *Giwadan no ran* - 1899–1901), and the Russo-Japanese War (日露戦争 *Nichiro Sensō* - 1904–1905) established Japan as a modern power capable of competing with the West.<sup>63</sup> In 1914 as part of the First World War, Japan seized German territory at Jiāozhōu (膠州) and the Chinese territory in the surrounding area of Shāndōng (山東).<sup>64</sup> The following year the Japanese government issued Twenty-One Demands (対華21ヶ条要求 *Taika Nijūikkajō Yōkyū*) which sought to cede much of China's power and sovereignty to Japan.<sup>65</sup> The demands were reduced to the number of thirteen after Chinese resistance, and were accepted.<sup>66</sup> By the time Saeki published his works in 1911 and 1916 respectively; Japan had modernised and begun her imperial expansion. This double context of modernisation and expansion is essential, I believe, for understanding the significance of Saeki's argument.

<sup>60</sup>Mark E. Caprio, *Japanese Assimilation Policies in Colonial Korea: 1910-1945* (Seattle, 2009), p. 20.

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup>Hirakawa Sukehiro and Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi, "Japan's turn to the West," in *The Cambridge History of Japan Volume 5: The Nineteenth Century*, (ed.) Marius B. Jansen (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 432–498. Other important contributions exploring the modernisation and westernisation of Japan during the Meiji period exist in the same volume, see: Marius B. Jansen (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Japan Volume 5: The Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1989). External modern contributions include: Michael A. Barnhart, *Japan and the World Since 1868* (London, 1995). Marius B. Jansen (ed.), *The Emergence of Meiji Japan* (Cambridge, 1995). Marius B. Jansen and Gilbert Rozman eds., *Japan in transition, from Tokugawa to Meiji* (Princeton, 1986). Stefan Tanaka, *New Times in Modern Japan* (Princeton, 2004).

<sup>63</sup>Barnhart, *Japan and the World Since 1868*, p. 45.

<sup>64</sup>*Ibid.* p. 51. For information on Japanese involvement in the First World War, refer to: Frederick R. Dickinson, *War and National Reinvention: Japan in the Great War, 1914-1919* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001). Frederick R. Dickinson, *World War I and the Triumph of a New Japan, 1919-1930* (Cambridge, 2013). Inoue Toshikazu 井上寿一, *Daichiji sekaîtaisen to Nihon 第一次世界大戦と日本 [World War I and Japan]* (東京, 2014).

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.* pp. 52–53. The original document translated into English is available from *A Multimedia History of World War One*, see: *A Multimedia History of World War One*, "21 Demands Made by Japan to China, 18<sup>th</sup> January 1915," accessed February 16<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.firstworldwar.com/source/21demands.htm> Relevant commentaries include: G. N. Steiger, "The Twenty-One Demands: Japan versus China," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (May, 1992), pp. 331–332. Robert Joseph Gowen, "Great Britain and the Twenty-One Demands of 1915: Cooperation versus Effacement," *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (March 1971), pp. 76–106. Kitano Go 北野剛, *Shingaikakumeigo no Nihon no Mamō seisaku: 1912-1914 nen 辛亥革命後の日本の満蒙政策: 1912-1914年 [Japan's Policy toward Manchuria and Mongolia Following the Xinhai Revolution, 1912-1914]* 歴史学研究, Issue 890 (March 2012), pp. 1–17.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.* p. 52.



Modernisation led to the development of a process of rediscovering the past within academia, this primarily affected how the past related to knowledge and therefore how historical narratives were written.<sup>67</sup> There were criticisms of the imperial records, with particular focus on the *Kojiki* (古事記) and *Nihon Shoki* (日本書紀), which led to the debunking or lowering in status of various historical and/or ahistorical figures, and the understanding of these texts as documents.<sup>68</sup> The importation of Western culture helped form a Western academic tradition and scholars wrote histories to Western as well as Japanese audiences.<sup>69</sup> Saeki's *Keikyō hibun kenkyū* and *The Nestorian Monument in China* should be understood within this context. The latter is a text written for a Western audience,<sup>70</sup> and both show several features indicative of Meiji period historical narratives such as the critique of the imperial records which he offers by rereading the *Shoku Nihongi*. I wonder if his assertion that Japan has a long Christian history is an attempt, within the context of Japanese modernisation, to illustrate Japan's equal status as a world power with Western nations, contemporaneously and historically, by referring the readers to a common point of shared history in the deep past. Whether or not this is the case it is clear that Saeki's argument can be understood as both the product of and response to Japan's ongoing modernisation and her seeking therein to discover a history around which to build society.<sup>71</sup> However, the text's significance is also linked to the imperial expansion of Japan.

Saeki's *Keikyō hibun kenkyū* and *The Nestorian Monument in China* are replete with references linking his study, and the artefacts and ideas dealt with therein to Japan.<sup>72</sup> These references are mostly absent from his later works dealing with the same topic such as *Keikyō no Kenkyū* (景教の研究) published in 1935, and *The Nestorian Documents and Relics in China* first published in 1939.<sup>73</sup> This may simply illustrate that by 1935 Saeki had realised that the argument that Li-mi-i was a Christian missionary is speculative and does not stand up to strong critique, or perhaps it reflects increasing censorship in Imperial Japan. Nevertheless, the argument Saeki produced in 1916 regarding the character of Li-mi-i is significant because he directly links Japanese academia and history to sites and relics of archaeological or historical importance in China. In doing so he knowingly or unknowingly provides a justification for Japan's imperial interests there, that of discovering her history. Is the argument therefore better understood as the product of and response to Japan's imperial expansion? It is certainly interesting to note how religion and religious history were used in Japan's imperial endeavours as part of the colonial narrative. Japan 'generated a concept of "religion" that could be utilised in the spiritual integration of the nation,<sup>74</sup> by regulating, reorganising and using, Buddhism,

<sup>67</sup>Tanaka, *New Times in Modern Japan*, pp. 27, 53.

<sup>68</sup>Tanaka, *New Times in Modern Japan*, pp. 69-70, 76-82, 117-126.

<sup>69</sup>Hirakawa and Wakabayashi, "Japan's turn to the West," pp. 432-498. And: Nobuya Bamba and John F. Howes, *Pacifism in Japan: The Christian and Socialist Tradition* (Vancouver, 1978), pp. 12-15.

<sup>70</sup>Saeki, *The Nestorian Monument in China*, pp. ix-x.

<sup>71</sup>Tanaka, *New Times in Modern Japan*, p. 22.

<sup>72</sup>Saeki, *The Nestorian Monument in China*, pp. 11, 29, 31-33, 37, 45-46, 61-65, 86, 91, 93, 118-119, 136-140, 145-147, 156, 159-161, 198, 201-202, 219-220, 224-226, 231, 237, 239, 241, 252.

<sup>73</sup>Some relics found in Japan from the Yuan (元) dynasty invasions are explored in both texts: Saeki, *The Nestorian Documents and Relics in China*, pp. 444-447. Saeki 佐伯, *Keikyō no Kenkyū* 景教の研究 [Research on the Church of the East], pp. 975-983.

<sup>74</sup>Taehoon Kim, "The Place of 'Religion' in Colonial Korea around 1910: The Imperial History of 'Religion'," *Journal of Korean Religions*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (October, 2011) p. 42.

Shintō and to some extent Christianity<sup>75</sup> for the purpose of controlling its colonies.<sup>76</sup> Local religions were patronised in order to influence subject peoples through the use of their sacred and national symbols, for example a shamanist temple at Wūlánhàotè (乌兰浩特) was built and dedicated in 1944 for the purpose of influencing Mongol subjects.<sup>77</sup> Is it possible that by extending the length of Christian history in Japan, Saeki's argument acts to transform Christianity into a "native" religion, akin to Shintō and Buddhism, which through playing a role in imperial history ought to belong to the imperial establishment, rather than the missionaries or ordinary believers?

If his theory is true, Saeki's argument is theologically volatile. If Christianity was present in *Tenpyō* Japan, the historical claim that the Jesuits were the first Christian missionaries to Japan is erroneous. The religion becomes, like Buddhism and Shintō, part of the religious makeup of Japan, part of her imperial history and possibly an indicator to Japanese identity. As such conversion to Christianity is destigmatised. I have suggested that this may have arisen or at least can be understood as a product of the context of Japanese modernisation and imperialism which sought to control and use religion to its own ends. However, if true it is also significant for Christians, who would be able to capitalise on Japan's extended Christian history in their missionary work. No longer would Christianity be a foreign import, rather it would be something "native" to Japan.

### Conclusions

I have sought to illustrate that it is not possible to argue that the figures of Li-mi-i and Kōho who visited Japan in 736 CE (*Tenpyō* 8) were Christians or missionaries. Rather, they should be understood as foreign visitors who took secular roles in *Tenpyō* Japan. Such a conclusion must, however, be made tentatively. Although the *Shoku Nihongi* and archaeological finds relating to the figures do not allow us to ascertain the figures' religious identity, Saeki's argument that Li-mi-i has been transcribed incorrectly is convincing. There is a possibility that Li-mi-i and the Milis of the Nestorian Stele are the same person, however, all available primary sources lack the necessary detail to confirm this link. Without further archaeological finds, or definitive evidence of Christian presence in *Tenpyō* Japan,<sup>78</sup> the theory that Li-mi-i and or Kōho were Christians must remain speculative and the subject of further research.

After exploring the theory that Li-mi-i and Kōho are Christians, I have attempted to contextualise Saeki's argument. I argued that Saeki's argument must be understood within

<sup>75</sup>Korean Christianity was generally resistive to Japanese colonialism, however Japanese Christianity played a central role in the colonialisation, refer to: Yumi Muriyama-Cain, *The Bible in Imperial Japan* (University of St Andrews: Doctoral Thesis, 2010). A. Hamish Ion, "The Cross Under and Imperial Sun: Imperialism, Nationalism, and Japanese Christianity, 1895-1945," in *Handbook of Christianity in Japan*, (ed.) Mark R. Mullins (Leiden, 2003), pp. 69-100.

<sup>76</sup>Kim, "The Place of 'Religion' in Colonial Korea around 1910: The Imperial History of 'Religion,'" pp. 25-46. Muriyama-Cain, *The Bible in Imperial Japan*, pp. 46-51. And: J. H. Grayson, "Religion, Nationalism, and State Policy: The Conflict Between Christianity and State Shinto in Colonial Korea, 1910-1945," *Japan Christian Review*, Vol. 60 (1994), pp. 111-123.

<sup>77</sup>Sechin Jagchid and Paul Hyer, *Mongolia's Culture and Society* (Boulder, 1979), p. 175.

<sup>78</sup>Other evidence for Christian presence during the *Tenpyō* period is assessed in my forthcoming paper, however I am unable to conclude therein that there were any Christians in Japan during the period, see: James Harry Morris, "The case for the presence of Christianity in Japan prior to the 16<sup>th</sup> Century," *Oriens Christianus*, Band 98 (2015), pp. 109-137.

the context of a Japan which was both modernising and expanding imperially. It must be read as a product of and response to this context, and understood as a text indicative of early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Japanese historical narratives. Despite this, a link between the argument and the writer's context should not be overstressed, although I believed it can be understood within the context in which it arose, I am not arguing that it was a conscious attempt to justify imperial aims or modernisation. Finally, I gave some thoughts on the theological significance of the argument, which I believe has the possibility to be paradigm shifting if proven.

This paper has focused on Saeki's argument, which is the earliest developed argument of the theory that Li-mi-i was a Christian that I have been able to locate. Whilst Li-mi-i is assumed to be a Christian prior to Saeki's publication in 1911, by Arthur Lloyd in his *Shinran and His Work* published in 1910,<sup>79</sup> this assumption is linked to Saeki in Lloyd's footnotes.<sup>80</sup> If Saeki wrote on the topic before his 1911 publication, this earlier instance of the theory may produce a need to question anew the significance of the argument within an earlier context, and maybe also the reasons for its genesis. Although I would argue that the context of a modernising and imperially expanding Japan is also applicable in Saeki's earlier development of this argument as a product of early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Japan. Saeki's theory was expanded upon during the late 1940s and early 1950s by a scholar called Sakae Ikeda writing for the periodical *Light from the East*.<sup>81</sup> Ikeda wrote on Li-mi-i and has been influential on the scholars who have developed the theory in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century such as Ken Joseph Jr. Ikeda admitted a need for his claims to be confirmed,<sup>82</sup> however, the research presented by Ken Joseph Jr. Mar Aprem, Samuel Lee, Ikuro Teshima, Michael Zomber, Arthur Lloyd and John Young, has failed to affirm the claim that Li-mi-i and Kōho were Christians. The quest for confirmation, therefore, continues. <[jhm53@st-andrews.ac.uk](mailto:jhm53@st-andrews.ac.uk)>

JAMES HARRY MORRIS  
University of St Andrews

<sup>79</sup> Arthur Lloyd, *Shinran and His Work* (London, 1910), p. 175, n. 174.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia before 1500*, 360–361. Ikeda's expansion is somewhat disappointing and fails to differ from the expansions given by Lloyd and Gordon much earlier. A reprint made by the self-publishing company Lulu is currently available: Partiarthal Council, Inc. of the Church of the East, *Light from the East*.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.* p. 361.