

The Ten Foot Square Hut

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Introduction

“Ceaselessly the river flows, and yet the water is never the same, while in the still pools the shifting foam gathers and is gone, never staying a moment. Even so is man and his habitation.”⁽¹⁾

The opening lines of the Hojoki, known in English as The Ten Foot Square Hut, have been revered by generation upon generation of Japanese since it was written in 1212. The theme of evanescence, while pervasive in Japanese literature, has seldom been expressed so beautifully and concisely. Life is an ever-changing river, and we are but shifting foam on the waves. Similar statements were made in the Manyoshu, in the Vimarakiirtinirdesasutra, and in countless waka poems by Japanese poets,⁽²⁾ but the author of the Hojoki, Kamo no Chomei, adopted this theme into the branch of ancient Chinese literature known as “ki.” Ki (記) is defined as narration or description with some supportive argument. Ki regarding housing included the reason for the housing, the environment surrounding the housing, and the author’s feelings about the housing, and was exemplified by Po Chu-i(白居易, often called 白樂天) in his The Five Pavilions on Paip’in Sandbank(白蘋洲五亭記).

Kamo no Chomei lived during the tumultuous age described at length in the Heike Monogatari or Tales of the Heike, but he has not a word for the trials and tribulations of the ruling class described at such great length in that work. For him, the Taira and the Heike are just ever-changing names floating in the whirlpool of history. He pools them together with the nameless thousands who are, as he writes, “Dead in the morning and born at night, so man goes on for ever, unending as the foam on the water.”⁽³⁾ One immediately notes that while such comments in Japanese literature usually run “Born in the morning and dead at night,” Chomei uses the opposite wording. Yanase Kazuo, who has studied the fine points of the Hojoki in great detail, notes that Chuang Tzu(莊子) uses this framework in his 朝菌の注.⁽⁴⁾ Near the end of Hojoki, Chomei again uses a phrase

from Chuang Tzu, so it is relatively safe to say that Chomei was influenced by Taoism.

Hojoki is usually grouped with Tsurezuregusa, the other famous essay work of the medieval period of Japan. However, technically speaking, they belong to different categories of literature. As mentioned above, Hojoki is a ki, a record, while Tsurezuregusa is a zuihitsu, a collection of random thoughts of the author, abounding with comments and jokes about the aristocracy.

Section One: About Kamo no Chomei

In literary works, Kamo no Chomei is always referred to by the Chinese reading of his name, which he adopted when he became a monk around the age of 50, but during his youth and the period of his career as a court poet, he was called by the Japanese reading "Nagaakira," or by either of his two nicknames, "Minamidaifu" or "Kikudaifu." The first half of the nickname, Minami(south) or Kiku(chrysanthemum), refers to Nagaakira's grandparents' home, in which he resided during his youth, and the latter part of both nicknames refers to his rank in the Japanese social system. Nagaakira was endowed with the lower fifth rank known as Daifu in 1161, when he was seven years old if you believe the scholars who put his birthdate in 1155, or nine years old if you believe the other group of scholars who say he was born in 1153. In either case, it was a promising beginning for a small boy. Nagaakira's father was a prestigious and charismatic Shinto priest named Kamo no Nagatsugu. Anyone who has read The Tale of Genji will remember the famous battle of the carts of Aoi and Rokujonomiyasudokoro at the Aoi Festival of the Kamo Shrine. The Kamo Shrine was divided into two sections, Upper Kamo and Lower Kamo. Upper and Lower refer to the order in which the Kamo River flows past the shrine, not the order of prestige. In fact, Lower Kamo is not only geographically closer to Kyoto and the emperor, it enshrines the ancestors of those enshrined in Upper Kamo, and therefore in no way is lower in rank. The oldest ancestor of the Kamo family, Kamonotaketsunominomikoto, is among the enshrined. Returning to the subject, Nagatsugu had a really bright career, first becoming the highest-ranked priest of Tadasunoyashiro, then becoming the highest priest of Kamonomiyajinja, a.k.a. Lower Kamo Shrine. Young Nagaakira had every intention of following in his father's footsteps, but his hopes for higher rank and better position were dashed by his father's early death around 1173. Nagatsugu's untimely demise put the control of the Kamo family into the

opposite branch of the family, easily distinguished because the men of this branch have names beginning with “Suke, while in Nagaakira’s branch, male names begin with “Naga.” So the list of highest priests during Nagaakira’s lifetime runs as follows: Nagatsugu – Sukesue · Sukekane – Sukeyori. Once the Suke branch gained control, they had no intention whatsoever of allowing the highest priest to come from the Naga branch. Of course, similar battles for power occur in family-controlled monopolies, in political families, and in other sectors of society, and are neither new nor old, but timeless.

Allow me to note that while Nagaakira was out of the power race, he continued to perform his duties as a Shinto priest, an occupation he is said to have begun at age seven. An interesting episode about Nagaakira is recorded in a collection of tales of the times known as Legends of the Three Countries, in Japanese, 「三國伝記」. In Japan, there is a tradition of looking at the moon on the night of the fifteenth, but on August 15, the moon could not be seen due to rainfall. Nagaakira was asked to help with prayers at Kamo Shrine, and when he recited an original poem, roughly translated, “If you are indeed the real autumn sky, blow away the clouds over the peak of my Kamo Mountain that pretend to be the autumn sky!” the sky cleared, and the moon could be seen.⁽⁵⁾ To the western reader, it may seem odd that August 15 is considered autumn, but the Japanese calendar puts the seasons as follows: spring – first three months, summer, second three months, autumn, third three months and winter, last three months, with the new year beginning around February on the western calendar. I do not ask the modern reader to believe that Kamo no Nagaakira had the power to control the autumn sky, but it is important to notice the fact that the people at the time really believed that the moon could be seen because of Nagaakira’s prayers. This episode is about all we know about Nagaakira’s career as a Shinto priest, but he is referred to as a “kannushi(神主)” in this text. Kannushi literally means “guardian of the shrine,” and is without question an incorrect appellation as the word is not used at Lower Kamo Shrine, but his being referred to as kannushi assures us that his rank was not low in the priesthood, and while he is accused of neglecting his Shinto duties, at the very least, we can say that people believed in his priestly power. In other works, he is referred to as an ujibito(氏人), a person whose job is to participate in festivals and in other priestly duties.

Nagaakira at one point was married and seems to have had at least one child, but his father’s death and the ensuing power struggle caused them to separate. Nothing more about this is known than the fact that while he was still living in his grandparents’ house

with his family in his young and happy youth, he was living alone in a tiny house in Kyoto in his thirties. Minamoto Ienaga, an officer in the poetry section of court, refers to Nagaakira as an “orphan(みなし子)” in his Ienaga Diary(『家長日記』)⁽⁶⁾, which may seem odd considering that he was probably around the age of nineteen when his father died, but at the time, if one did not have proper backing, it was impossible to succeed in life. And so Nagaakira’s rank in the social system never rose above the rank he received when he was a child.

Although he was a low-ranking orphan, Nagaakira became quite a famous man in the court clique because of two particular skills he possessed. First, he was a master at a stringed Japanese instrument called the biwa, rather like a lute. Nagaakira studied under a famous court master named Nakahara Ariyasu, and was good enough to receive permission to play one of the secret (esoteric) pieces reserved for the initiated. He really loved playing the biwa, and made his own instruments. However, this hobby got him into big trouble once, when he invited some friends over to have a private music party at Kamo. The party got lively, and everyone got excited, and Nagaakira played a forbidden piece of music named “Takuboku.” For which he was scolded severely by the retired emperor Gotoba, egged on by a rival named Fujiwara no Takamichi. This may seem really silly, but at the time, it was considered a great musical sin to play secret works that had not officially been passed on by the master. There are two theories about the timing of this event, one being that it took place before his retirement and was one of the reasons Nagaakira retired, and the other that it took place after his retirement, and was the reason Chomei moved from Ohara, where he retired first, to Hino, where he wrote Hojoki. In any case, the event unquestionably fueled his desire to live in retirement in the mountains.

Nagaakira’s other great talent was for the 5-7-5-7-7 syllable Japanese poetry known as waka. From ancient times, the ability to produce good waka was the mark of an educated Japanese, and even today, the members of the imperial family are required to write appropriate waka on the traditional waka-writing days. Because Nagaakira was raised as the son of the highest priest of the famous Lower Kamo Shrine, he was of course educated in the basics of waka writing, and he seems to have excelled at this pastime from an early age. He belonged to a rather free-thinking group of waka poets known as the Karinen(歌林苑), led by a poet named Shune(俊恵), which was active from 1156 to 1185. In 1181, he compiled his first original poetry collection, entitled Kamonochoreshu(『鴨長

明集』), famous for the waka, "Possessing, I weary of it; turning my back, I long for it; the ways of my fickle body and heart are so mysterious."⁽⁷⁾ This poem is considered proof that Nagaakira led a sexually fulfilled life in his youth. In 1182, four of his wakas were selected to be among the 1200 waka collection known as Tsukimodewakashu(『月詣和歌集』), which began a string of such honors. First, one poem was selected for the Senzaiwakashu(『千載和歌集』), a high-level poetry collection composed in 1187. This attracted attention, and led eventually to Nagaakira becoming a member of the official group of court poets. In a period when social status was all-important, this was a rather momentous event, as only two of the official court poets were of the lower class. The other was a really fascinating poet named Fujiwara no Hideyoshi, who was as famous on the battlefield as he was in the poetry circles. Both of these lower class poets were looked after with affection by the retired emperor Gotoba. However, it must be noted that while they were admitted to the circle, it is recorded that Nagaakira had to sit outside at a lower level because of his rank, and so although his poetry was given relatively equal treatment, Nagaakira the man was considered to be lower than his aristocratic colleagues. Nagaakira really made his mark in the waka world in 1205 by having ten wakas selected to enter the Shinkokinwakashu(『新古今和歌集』), a rather interesting selection of poetry including authors of old such as Murasaki Shikibu and Kakinomoto Hitomaro, but dominated no doubt by the 94 wakas of the poet-priest Saigyō, who was rather the poet of the times. Nagaakira is and was considered a good poet, but not a great poet, and despite the fact that he spent most of his life writing poetry, his prose work Hojoki is without question his most famous piece of writing.

As mentioned above, Nagaakira belonged to the official group of court poets and was looked after by the retired emperor Gotoba. Oddly enough, it was this goodwill which caused Nagaakira to leave Kyoto and the poetry circles, and take vows as a Buddhist monk, retiring to the mountains to live alone for the remainder of his life. Nagaakira had dreamed of following his father's footsteps and becoming the head priest of Tadasunoyashiro in Lower Kamo Shrine since he was a child. The position was vacated, and Gotoba suggested that Nagaakira take charge. At the time, Nagaakira was close to fifty, and there would have been nothing unusual about his taking the position. However, in the Ienaga Diary it is written that Sukekane, the head priest of Lower Kamo Shrine at the time, objected vigorously, declaring that Nagaakira was lax in his duties and was of lower rank than Sukekane's son Sukeyori, whom Sukekane of course thought was the man

for the job.⁽⁸⁾ It's hard to tell how true this statement was. Without question, Nagaakira was lower in rank, but not by much, as Nagaakira was lower fifth rank and Sukeyori was upper fifth rank. But Nagaakira was older, which also counts. As for how lax he was in his duties, we cannot know in detail, but any person who had talent enjoyed writing poems and making music at the time, and unless Sukeyori was a particularly dull, plodding type, Sukeyori may well have been spending his time doing the same sort of thing at a lower level. However, Kamo Shrine is the dominion of the Kamos, and Gotoba's opinion was cast aside. At which point Nagaakira quit the lay world, changed his name to Chomei, and went to live alone in a mountain hut in Ohara. Ohara was the location of two Tendai Buddhist institutions, and the elder of one of these institutions regularly looked after the many recluses living in the area. Minamoto Ienaga tells us in his diary that when he met Chomei next, he was surprised at how much weight Chomei had lost.⁽⁹⁾ It must have been hard for a first time mountain dweller to find enough food in the forest. Chomei lived there for five years, and then moved to another mountain hut in Hino. Hino was another popular place for reclusion, as it was near the Yakushido (temple of the Buddha of Healing) of Hokai Temple. By the time he got to Hino, he had got the knack of hunting for food, and writes about it in detail in Hojoki, as we will see.

Chomei's last chance to return to glory came in 1211, when he went to Kamakura with Asukai Masatsune in an attempt to work for the Shogun Sanetomo. However, Sanetomo had already decided that he preferred the bright new star of poetry, Fujiwara Teika, and so Chomei quietly returned to Hino, where he lived the quiet life we see in Hojoki. Besides Hojoki, he wrote a poetry collection named Mumyoshu (『無名抄』, thought to have been written between 1211 and 1212) and a collection of Buddhist tales entitled Hosshinshu (『発心集』, 1214) while in Hino. His lonely life ended in 1216.

Section Two: The Beginning of Hojoki

Hojoki begins with a series of comments on the evanescent nature of housing and the inhabitants within. To quote a representative section:

“And this man that is born and dies, who knows whence he came and whither he goes? And who knows also why with so much labour he builds his house, or how such things can give him pleasure? Like the dew on the morning glory are man and his house, who

knows which will survive the other? The dew may fall and the flower remain, but only to wither in the morning sun, or the dew may stay on the withered flower, but it will not see another evening.”¹⁰⁰

Beginning with the first sentence, “who knows whence he came and whither he goes,” one of the works that Chomei tells us is in one of the three baskets in his hut is the *Ojoyoshu* (『往生要集』) of Genshin (源信, 942-1017), the morbidly delightful bestseller of the Heian Period that explains in great detail the terrors of the Buddhist Hell. In this work, specific sins are met by specific punishments, for example, “The seventh division is for those sentenced to extreme torment. It is said that under a steep cliff, sinners are constantly burned by iron fire. Those who, in the past, killed selfishly to satisfy their desires fall into this division.”¹⁰¹ And true believers in the Jodo or Pure Land Sect of Buddhism, to which Chomei seems to have belonged, believe that if they call on the Amida Buddha, when they die they will be led to the Western Paradise, which is the Amida Buddha’s domain. So the sentence is not based on Buddhism. It would be easy to put it down to Taoism, as Chomei alludes to Chuang Tzu from time to time, but I really think the attitude comes from Chomei’s background. As mentioned, he lived during a period of constant battling, ending with the complete defeat of the Taira clan that had been in glorious rule in Chomei’s youth. So powerful men were always being attacked, and powerless men were always dying in the ensuing battles, even ignoring the vast majority who died of lack of food and lack of medicine. And as he points out later on, houses are easily destroyed, and he has seen so many destroyed that he cannot trust them. One tends to believe what one has seen rather than what one has read, and while Chomei had a picture of Amida Buddha in front of him when he wrote *Hojoki*, when he thought of death he remembered the thousands of ordinary people he had seen dying on the street, not the transparent messenger of Amida. As for the second sentence, “who knows also why with such labour he builds his house,” there is an interesting story in Chomei’s *Hosshinki* that can be roughly translated, “The Poor Man who Loved to Draw Blueprints.”¹⁰²

The poor man cannot afford to build a house, and so his blueprints are ever just paper, but his desire is satiated by forever thinking up new designs. The point of the story is that while a real house is a source of troubles, and one person usually must be satisfied with one or few houses, a paper sketch is a perfect work, and one can have as many palaces and gates as one desires. Again, Chomei writes out of experience, remembering the many houses he has seen destroyed, and while the Buddhist message not to desire

wealth is doubtless an essential theme, the message that we feel he has learned through his own experiences is that nothing goes as planned, and nothing can be counted on.

The third and fourth sentences are quite beautiful illustrations of the quality of evanescence if one encounters the dew allusion for the first time, but actually, it had been well used before Kamo no Chomei was even born. In the abovementioned Ojoyoshu, for example, it is written, "The body is as the morning dew. When it sees the light, its lifetime immediately terminates."⁽¹³⁾ However, it is not a sin to use a well-known theme, and the image of the withering morning glory and the dew, powerless against the sun, lead the reader to consider to what stage his own life has progressed, and what color of morning glory he has become.

Section Three: The Disasters

In the next section of Hojoki, Chomei proceeds to discuss various disastrous events that he witnessed between 1177 and 1185 which led him to conclude that housing and human life are indeed fragile, powerless against the forces of man and nature that endanger them at every moment. The first of these was a great fire which broke out in Kyoto in April of 1177. Fires were everyday events in the era before electric lighting and gas burners, but this particular fire completely destroyed a large section of Kyoto, and is recorded in many literary works. Chomei clearly witnessed this event firsthand, as the clarity of the fire he depicts reveals.

"Now as the flames came on they spread out like an opened fan, and the remoter houses were smothered in smoke while those nearer roared up in flames. The sky was dark with ashes and against this black background the fire glowed red like early dawn, while everywhere the flames driven by the wind went leaping on over a space more than a hundred yards wide. And of those caught by it some fell choked in the smoke, while others were overtaken by the flames and perished suddenly. And those few who managed with difficulty to escape were quite unable to take their goods with them, and how many precious treasures were thus lost none can tell."⁽¹⁴⁾ This translation is notably incorrect, as Chomei actually wrote, "the remoter houses were smothered in smoke, while in the vicinity, the flames blew down upon the ground."⁽¹⁵⁾ The important point is that the flames did not go up, but down, a characteristic peculiar to particularly large fires. It has been pointed out that if Chomei had not witnessed the event, but only heard of it, he

would probably have written that the flames went up, as the English translator incorrectly translated. And the vivid contrast of the beauty of the colors with the despair of those falling amid the smoke and flames could only be depicted by someone who had actually seen it. Fire is destruction, dawn is rebirth; Chomei's phrase, "the fire glowed red like an early dawn" links destruction and rebirth in a cycle of evanescence.

In other descriptions of this event, a detailed report of damage to aristocratic property is the central point. For example, the Minister of the Right at the time, Fujiwara no Kanezane, noted in his *Gyokuyo Diary* (『玉葉日記』) that while the college was burned, the portrait of Confucius was saved from the flames. He also mentions that in the same month, there were two other fires, one caused by arsonists going after government papers, and that one aristocrat was sent far away in punishment for his crimes.¹⁶ Chomei notably cared little for such aristocratic particulars. What lingered in Chomei's mind was the vision of red flames against dark smoke, and lives taken in the flash of a moment. Because in a period when educated men usually wrote only in Chinese characters Chomei wrote in a combination of Chinese characters and Japanese kana, it is said that he was a man of the people; and his disinterest in the affairs of the elite class really proves that he is in no way a snob. His overwhelming sentiment is that of utter waste. Chomei concludes this section by saying that "to spend money and time on building houses in such a dangerous spot as the Capital is foolish indeed beyond measure."¹⁷ Which is of course reflected in the abovementioned "The Poor Man Who Loved to Draw Blueprints."

The next disaster Chomei depicts is a great typhoon whirlwind. As with the fire, this type of event was not at all uncommon. In ancient days and in modern days, Japan has always been hit by typhoons, but this particular one was so strong that Chomei tells us "there were very many who said: 'Ah, this must be the portent of some dreadful happening.'"¹⁸ Again, Chomei's description is vivid: "Household treasures were blown up into the air and destroyed and pieces of board and shingles filled the air like driven leaves in winter."¹⁹ Chomei is the on-the-spot reporter, engraving the picture clearly into his memory bank and adding his characteristic artist's viewpoint. Allegorically comparing the shingles to leaves, he again stresses the fragility of housing. It looks so strong when standing, but blows away as the fallen leaves. We also see the how the delicate man-made treasures, painstakingly created, are helpless against the brutality of the whirlwind. Man's labor is in vain; better not to waste time building castles to be destroyed.

The next disaster Chomei depicts is not a natural disaster, but again, the ordinary man was helpless to fight it. The Capital was suddenly changed, and so everyone connected with Capital business, namely the majority of the ruling class and everyone serving them in any way, had to pick up and move to the new Capital at Naniwa in Settsu. Cabinet members and government officials were given only two days to complete the move. In this day and age, one could sell the old house and ask a moving company to move things to the new house, and while it would still be difficult to do in two days, it might be possible, but at the time, Chomei tells us, "Every one felt as unsettled as drifting clouds."^{ca} While from the Taoist viewpoint, it is fine to be a drifting cloud, and from the Buddhist viewpoint, one should not be tied to this world by desires of any sort, from the purely psychological standpoint, the thousands of people who suddenly had to move must have felt that they had lost their home bases. He writes that the old houses in Kyoto became ruinous day by day, many breaking down and falling into the river, and in Settsu, "the natives of the place were full of complaints over losing their land, while the new inhabitants grumbled at the difficulty of building on such a site."^{cb} With his usual curiosity, he tells us that he went over to Settsu to view the scene, and as his eyes and ears were open to the plight of the average man, we see the event not as the history books have it, but as a real human drama of real human beings. We see clearly a picture of ordinary people forced into an extraordinary situation at the whim of the ruler, and not enjoying it in the slightest. Again, both people and houses are helpless victims, and in this respect, there is no difference between a natural disaster and a man-made disaster.

A very interesting fact about the next disaster is that while Chomei reports it as a natural disaster, actually it was in large part due to the political situation of the times. He tells us that there was a famine, and that it was due to parching summers followed by typhoons and floods for two years. But actually, the reason that rice and other foodstuffs did not come into Kyoto was largely political. In 1180, the Taira lost to the Minamoto at the Battle of Fuji River, and so eastern rice was not traded to the western regions. Also, the northern rice was cut off by anti-Taira forces. And so the famine of 1181 – 1182, while no doubt the harvest was in fact not good, cannot be put down simply to inclement weather, as Chomei has it.

The section about famine is characterized by a depiction of how consistent lack of food consistently lowers human standards. In the first year, "Though householders brought out their goods into the street and besought people to buy like beggars with no sense of

shame, yet no one would even look at them, and if there should be any ready to barter they held money cheap enough, but could hardly be brought to part with grain.”²² Chomei, the ordinary man, only remembers the reaction of the average person on the street; but this is actually better information historically than that which we find in the government records. Here, he is in the literary sense far away from his aesthetic beginning, “Ceaselessly the river flows, and yet the water is never the same.” But thematically, he is continuing with evanescence, explaining to us how and why he came to conclude that nothing continues long enough to be counted on. He goes on to tell us that “a pestilence followed, and the prayers of the people were of no effect. As the days passed they felt like fish when the water dries up, and respectable citizens who ordinarily wore hats and shoes now went barefooted begging from house to house. And while you looked in wonder at such a sight they would suddenly fall down and die in the road.”²³ The ordinary man, under extraordinary circumstances, returns to beasthood. Tomie Ohara, who experienced life in Tokyo just before Japan admitted defeat in World War II, writes that this section of Hojoki is exactly the same as her memory of Tokyo at the time. People without housing and food, begging to survive, completely lost track of the pride or sophistication of their a Shinto priest and later a Buddhist monk former lives.²⁴ We also notice that Chomei, a Shinto priest and later a Buddhist monk, tells us quite baldly that prayers have no effect.

As a mother, the section of Hojoki that always makes me cry follows: “Another very sad thing was that those who had children who were very dear to them almost invariably died before them, because they denied themselves to give their sons and daughters what they needed. And so these children would always survive their parents. And there were babies who continued to feed at their mother’s breast, not knowing she was already dead.”²⁵ There are those who say that Chomei believed in evanescence because of Buddhist literary works, but anyone who had seen such a terrible, heart-breaking sight as this would have to believe in evanescence. Those poor babies, almost certainly to die, but still trying to suckle! One wants to rush over, pick them up in one’s arms and comfort them, but one is powerless. Chomei continues by telling us that there was “a noble recluse of the Jison Hall of the Ninnaji Temple called Ryugyo Ho-in and entitled Lord of the Treasury, who out of pity for the endless number of dead arranged for some monks to go round the city and write the syllable “A” on the foreheads of all they found, that they might receive enlightenment and enter Amida’s Paradise. And the number that they counted within the city, in the space of four or five months, between the First and Ninth

Avenues on the north and south and between Kyogoku and Shujaku on the east and west, was at least forty-two thousand three hundred. And when there is added to this those who perished before and after this period, and also those in the River-bed and Shirakawa and Western City quarters, they must have been almost beyond count.”⁽²³⁾ Here is the source of Chomei’s sense of impermanence, here is his starting point. Buddhist works are just older expressions of the same thought; after all, Buddhism began when Sakyamuni witnessed pain, suffering, aging and death. Chomei, walking the streets lined with forty-two thousand dead bodies, again was overtaken by the utter waste. Can you imagine walking the streets day after day for five months, counting dead bodies and writing on their foreheads? While from a religious viewpoint, it was unquestionably the right and virtuous thing to do, the sight of the dead and their terrible stench would stop the ordinary person in his tracks. Perhaps Ryugyo Ho-in was the Mother Teresa of the times.

As if the dead were not enough, Chomei also writes that houses were cut up to be sold, and mountain temples were robbed, the images and utensils sold as kindling. This is important to him as his point is that not only humans, but also their habitations, are susceptible to disaster. Without this comment, he would not have fulfilled the requirements of his tenet.

The last disaster Chomei tells us about is a great earthquake, which came in July of 1185. No rest for the weary citizens of Kyoto. “The hills crumbled down and filled the rivers, and the sea surged up and overwhelmed the land. The earth split asunder and water gushed out.”⁽²⁴⁾ Aftershocks continued for three months, he writes. This earthquake was said to be the wrath of the dead ruler Taira no Kiyomori, and it was entitled “The Shock of the Dragon King”(竜王動). This was a logical reaction, because the Taira clan had been completely wiped out in March of that year, and Kiyomori had been the symbol of Taira glory. Watching the buildings of Kyoto being destroyed day after day by the continuing effects of the great quake, Chomei writes in wonder, “Of the four elements, water, fire and wind are always doing damage, but with the earth this is comparatively rare.”⁽²⁵⁾ This concept of the four elements was common knowledge at the time, and if you look closely, it can be seen in other sections. As quoted above in the fire section, “some fell choked in the smoke, while others were overtaken by the flames and perished suddenly.” Here two elements, fire and wind, are raising havoc together. The second disaster, the typhoon, necessarily involved water and wind, and with the earthquake, not only the earth but also the sea is seen enjoying a spree of destruction.

The five disasters Chomei discusses are separate events, but taken as a group, they show how fragile human life and habitation are, and how easily they can be disturbed or destroyed. This naturally leads us to the question of life in times when there is no disaster, which is the topic of the next section of Hojoki.

Section Four: The Transition

Before writing about the next section, it is necessary to discuss the Chiteinoki(『池亭記』) of Yoshishige no Yasutane(慶滋保胤). Yoshishige was born into the Upper Kamo family, and studied under the famous monk Genshin, mentioned above as the author of the bestseller Ojoyoshu. A famous scholar, Yoshishige taught the imperial family, and he is reported to have died around the age of 70 in the year 1002. His Chiteinoki is usually considered the forerunner of Hojoki, and the transitional section of Hojoki uses very similar phrasing. While there is no mention of disasters in Chiteiki, there is a long section about the troubles of everyday life. To quote two excerpts, Yoshishige writes that, “If there is a fire in the eastern house, the western house will be unable to escape the flames. If the southern house is being robbed, the northern house will find it difficult to escape the arrows.” and that if a family lives in the neighborhood of a powerful man, “Although having fun, they cannot open their mouths widely to laugh, and although sad, they cannot raise their voices to cry loudly.”²⁹ Now let me quote from the transitional section of Hojoki, “Suppose he is a person of little account, and lives near the mansion of a great man. He may have occasion to rejoice heartily over something, but he cannot do so openly, and in the same way, if he be in trouble it is quite unthinkable that he should lift up his voice and weep.”³⁰ A little further on, Chomei writes, “And if a man has little land around his house he is likely to suffer in a conflagration, while if he lives in an out of the way place it is awkward for traveling and he is very liable to be robbed.”³¹ The similarities are so remarkable that were he a modern day author, he would probably be sued. However, this one transitional page is the only page that is so completely borrowed, and other sections are basically Chomei’s experiences and Chomei’s conclusions.

The point of this transitional section is that, as he writes, “all the difficulties of life spring from this fleeting evanescent nature of man and his habitation.”³² and so “Wherever you go and whatever you do it is hard to find rest for mind and body.”³³ Here we must ask, if this is so, how is a person to escape such troubles? In the next section,

Chomei provides his answer.

Section Five: About Chomei's Hut

Chomei begins the long section about his experience with housing by explaining that after he lost out in the Kamo family power struggle and had to leave his great-grandmother's estate, he built a small cottage and lived there for roughly thirty years, but, "the various rebuffs that I met left me with a poor opinion of this fleeting life. So when I arrived at the age of fifty I abandoned the world and retired, and since I had no wife and child it was by no means difficult to leave it, neither had I any rank or revenue to be a tie to hold me."⁸¹ Originally from an aristocratic background, Chomei was too proud to proclaim defeat. Instead, he tells us that he is the one who chose to leave the floating world of dreams and desires that the city of Kyoto was at the time. He spends no time discussing the splendor of his great-grandmother's estate; he has turned his back on that period of his life, just as the people he was connected with at that time turned their backs on him. Instead, he takes the position that the tiny hut in the mountains in which he now resides is the ideal way of life, and explains its simple design in detail. He writes that, "it is only ten feet square and less than seven feet high...the walls are of rough plastered earth and the roof is of thatch. All the joints are hinged with metal so that if the situation no longer pleases me I can easily take it down and transport it elsewhere...I have put up eaves projecting on the south side to keep off the sun and a small bamboo veranda beneath them. On the west is the shelf for the offerings of water and flowers to Buddha, and in the middle, against the western wall is a picture of Amida Buddha so arranged that the setting sun shines from between his brows as though he were emitting his ray of light"⁸² and tells us he has three black leathered baskets for poems, for music and for Ojoyoshu, a folding koto(a Japanese harp) and a jointed biwa. The original hojo or ten foot square hut was that of Vimalakirti, a rich lay disciple of Buddha who was famous for his learning and his profound understanding of Mahayana. Vimalakirti lived in a ten foot square room and is said to have entertained over two thousand Buddhas and Bodhisattvas at once in his hojo. And as mentioned in the introduction, the motif of the body as foam, presented in the introduction to Hojoki, is also mentioned in the Vimalakirtinirdesasutra, a sutra featuring Vimalakirti. In later ages, the word hojo came to be used as a synonym for a monk's house. Chomei's hojo is a bit different from the

ordinary hojo in that it is a predecessor to the prefabricated home, built elsewhere and transported to the location its inhabitant orders. Looking at this hojo critically from Chomei's point of view as explained above, we first notice the lack of troublesome neighbors, and we also note that the elimination of unnecessary items, combined with the remote location of the hojo, renders it an unlikely target for thieves. As far as disasters go, it seems likely to fall in an earthquake or typhoon, but as the hut was prefabricated with metal joints, it would be easy to set it up again. Admittedly, the hut would be awfully cold in winter, and hunting for food would be an everyday struggle, and so one arrives at the question, which of the evils is the lesser one? Self-sufficiency is quite a task, but one can see it as a challenge, as in *The Little House on the Prairie*. Chomei was a curious, intelligent man. He may well have found it interesting, rather a treasure hunt, to have to forage for food, and he may have enjoyed the challenge of making what he needed. We know, for example, that he built his own shelf and he made his own biwa, and we also know that he was interested in design and in creating original works. So it seems rather in character to choose the challenge of living alone in the mountains over the purposeless future he foresaw in the city.

Next, Chomei tells us how he spends his days in the mountains. After a few obligatory remarks about spring, summer, fall and winter pleasures, written for style rather than for the record, he writes, "in the evening, as I listen to the rustling of the maples in the wind the opening lines of the "Lute Maiden" by the great Chinese poet Po Chu-i naturally occur to my mind, and my hand strays to the instrument and I play perhaps a piece or two in the style of Minamoto Tsunenobu."⁶⁸ We remember that Chomei was once scolded for playing a piece that he had not been officially taught. With this in mind, we can imagine how free he must have felt playing alone in the mountains. He could play any piece he wanted without fear of reprehension, and he points out that whether his performance was particularly good or poor, as there was no listener to comment, he could feel at ease.

Another activity that Chomei enjoyed was walking in the mountains with the ten year old son of the keeper of the hills. The child was much younger, and of lower societal status, so his presence did not hinder Chomei's pleasure. "Sometimes we gather the Lalong grass or the rock-pear or help ourselves to wild potatoes or parsley, or we may go as far as the rice-fields at the foot of our hills and glean a few ears to make an offering to the deities. If the day is fine we may climb up some high peak and look out over the Capital

in the distance and enjoy the fine views of Mt Kobata, Fushimi, Toba or Hatsukashi. Fine scenery has no landlord, so there is nothing to hinder our pleasure.”⁽³⁷⁾ As with the section about the lute, we notice that he can enjoy life precisely because there is nobody of higher rank, in this case no landlord, to worry about. The repetition of such sentences really makes the reader sense how completely sick Chomei was of having to conform to this rule and that rule because of his low rank, and enforces our understanding of Chomei’s retirement from aristocratic society. He writes that, “By occasional tidings that reach me from the Capital, I learn that the number of distinguished people who have passed away is not small, and as to those of no consequence it must be very great indeed. And in the various fires I wonder how many houses have been burned. But in this little impermanent hut of mine all is calm and there is nothing to fear.”⁽³⁸⁾ Again, we see his thoughts running to the many commoners rather than the few aristocrats. And he returns to his conclusion about housing, which is that to build a house in the capital is to invite trouble, and so life alone in a tiny impermanent hut is less stressful. Remember that his family discarded him, and he has clearly been betrayed by his friends, as he writes, “as to friends they respect wealth and prefer those who are hospitable to them, but think little of those who are kindly and honest. The best friends one can have are flowers and moon, strings and pipe.”⁽³⁹⁾ While Chomei must have had some friends, as we know he had music parties, if it was a question of siding with Chomei or siding with a person of high rank, they seem to have chosen the wealthier party. Again, we see reflections of Chiteiki, in which it is written that, “Those whom we call friends are friends because of power, friends because of profit.”⁽⁴⁰⁾ To some extent, no doubt, Chomei was imitating the style and the spirit of Chiteiki; but he would not have chosen to imitate those particular phrases if he did not agree with the philosophy contained therein.

Chomei concludes the section about his hut and his life there by telling us about his attire. “Garments woven from wisteria-vines, and bed-clothes of hemp, covering the body with what comes nearest to hand, and sustaining one’s life with the berries and fruits that grow on the hills and plains, that is best. If you do not go into society you need not be ashamed of your appearance, and if your food is scanty it will have the better relish.”⁽⁴¹⁾ It has been pointed out that garments made of wisteria-vines and hemp were the ordinary garments of ordinary people, and just because Chomei is not wearing the expensive silk of the aristocrats, there is no need for him to feel embarrassed, so long as he is covering the vital parts. But if we take into consideration the fact that Chomei was once an aristocrat,

once the pampered child of the head priest of Kamo Shrine, and reread this section, we can see how embarrassing it must have been for him to be seen in his present state of poverty by those who knew him when his family was flourishing.

I find myself wondering, "If it was really possible to survive on the fruits and berries that grow on the hills and plains, why did so many people die of starvation in Kyoto?"

Section Six: Chomei and Religion

As we have seen, Chomei began life as the son of a Shinto priest, deeply immersed in the world of Shinto, and at every step of his life, we see him showing respect and love for nature, which is the backbone of Shintoism. He relates the force of the whirlwind and the violence of the earthquake with awe, but devotes equal time to the beauty of the mountains. The fact that Chomei refers to Chuang Tzu time and again shows us that he was not ignorant of Taoism, and indeed, this is the religion that is most reflected in his lifestyle. In Chuang Tzu's Taoism, our lives are a part of the cycle of nature, and it is silly to desire power. We should be happy to live or die as nature determines, and happy to transform into another type of creature upon our death. Chomei somewhat misuses an allusion to a famous passage in Chuang Tzu by writing that the fish "do not get tired of the water; but if you are not a fish you cannot understand their feelings,"⁽¹²⁾ his point being that his life in the hojo can only be understood properly by living similarly; but the way he spends his days playing his lute and looking at the moon seems proper for a Chuang Tzu follower. It is easy to find echoes of Shintoism and Taoism in Hojoki, and this seems to be a natural reflection of the educational pattern of the times.

The question that always troubles researchers of Kamo no Chomei is how sincerely he believed in Buddhism. In Japan, there is nothing unusual about believing several religions independently as the occasion requires, and because Shintoism, Buddhism and Taoism are largely a way of thinking and acting rather than deity-centered religions, they are easy to mix and match. However, Kamo no Chomei took vows and became a Buddhist monk, and he has pictures of Amida Buddha and Fugen, not to mention a copy of the Lotus Sutra and some excerpts from Ojoyoshu in his hut. He mentions Buddhism and Buddhist objects directly about thirty times in the Hojoki, and he is clearly taking the position that he is a Buddhist first and foremost. But on the other hand, he tells us quite directly that he is lax in his Buddhist duties. "If I get tired of repeating the Invocation to

Buddha or feel disinclined to read the Sutras, and go to sleep or sit idly, there is none to rebuke me, no companion to make me feel ashamed.”⁽⁴³⁾ He is so interested in the Sutras that he goes to sleep when reading them, and if nobody is watching what does it matter if he skips the Buddhist practices? We sense that he may be assuming the pose of a monk because it is convenient for him. This is enforced by our knowledge that having fallen from glory, he can't pass muster in the world of the capital aristocrats. He writes, “If I go out to the Capital I may feel like a mendicant priest, but when I come back home here I feel compassion for those who are still bound by the attraction of earthly things.”⁽⁴⁴⁾ In other words, he knows that he looks like a beggar and feels uncomfortable, but in the hut he doesn't have to think about earthly things because nobody is present to criticize his possessions. Whether he is happy about this or not, it is hard to tell. It seems safe to say that had he achieved the position of head priest of Lower Kamo Shrine, as he wished, he would not have become a monk and would not be living in poverty in the mountains. And he asks himself at the end of Hojoki, “Thus to forsake the world and dwell in the woods, has it been to discipline my mind and practice the Law of Buddha or not? Have I put on the form of a recluse while yet my heart has remained impure? Is my dwelling but a poor imitation of that of the Saint Vimalakirti while my merit is not even equal to that of Suddhipanthaka the most stupid of the followers of Buddha?”⁽⁴⁵⁾ The Hojoki was and is considered an excellent piece of writing and has been used as a model by countless authors since the middle ages. For example, Tanizaki Junichiro, the famous author of twentieth-century Japan, wrote, “If I gather the straws together and bind them, they become a temporary hut, but when they break loose, the hut again becomes a field of straw.”⁽⁴⁶⁾ The theme of evanescence of the temporary hut are clearly reflections of Hojoki. I could go on indefinitely; there are countless works of literature that have been influenced by Hojoki, beginning with the Tales of the Heike and continuing even today. However, the fact that Chomei himself questions his devoutness was a big minus point for the contemporary readers. Ishida Yoshisada, who studied the literature of those who retired from the world, writes that Chomei's way of life was too individualistic to be a model for contemporary readers, and so while many followed the path of the poet-priest Saigyō, few were tempted to imitate the way of Chomei.⁽⁴⁷⁾

Conclusion

I would like to conclude by first considering how Hojoki fulfills the requirement of the type of literature known as the ki. As mentioned above, the necessary elements of ki regarding housing included the reason for the housing, the environment surrounding the housing, and the author's feelings about the housing. Kamo no Chomei lived in his ten foot square hut because he had seen how ordinary houses, built with such care and costing so much money, can be destroyed easily by natural forces, and also because he thought that life in the Capital in a fixed dwelling always involves troublesome neighbors and people of higher rank who were always causing trouble for the lower ranked citizens. So he chose to live in the mountains in a portable hut. The reason for selecting that particular dwelling is crystal clear. Next, as far as environment goes, a detailed description of the interior and exterior of the hut is included, and Chomei also discusses the plants near the hut and the surrounding scenery. He tells us what scenic points are within walking distance, and points out that as there is no landlord of the hills, he is free to enjoy the beauty of nature to his heart's content. As for his feelings, he writes that he feels great affection for the hut, which he considers a sin, and that because he lives alone in a remote location, he can spend his days serendipitously, following the call of his heart. As each requirement of the ki is fulfilled, I feel safe in concluding that Hojoki, often lumped together with zuihitsu(random thoughts put together into one work) such as Tsurezuregusa, is actually a completely different type of writing, purposefully following the model pattern provided by Chiteiki and other ki.

Another point that really stands out when comparing Hojoki to other famous works of early to medieval Japanese literature is that while most works focus on the trials and tribulations of the top aristocrats, Kamo no Chomei is concerned more with the troubles of the man on the street. He sees the natives of Settsu complaining when the ruler suddenly decides to move in on their terrain, and he sheds tears for the nameless babies of nameless parents who starved on the street corners. He watches the man of little power hiding his tears and his laughter out of deference to the man of great power. This outlook is probably closer to true history, the history of the masses, than the many scenes in early literature in which the countless poor exist only to worship at the foot of the lavishly dressed aristocrat. In an aristocracy, those of high enough education to write literature tend to be aristocrats themselves, and so we are given a biased view of the society described. But while Chomei lived in Kyoto through the downfall of the Heike, for him and for the ordinary man it didn't really matter which of the aristocrats was in power.

All the ordinary person wanted was to feed his family and live in peace. This, I think, is the really important message of Hojoki.

Notes

- 1 The Ten Foot Square Hut and Tales of the Heike, by Kamo no Chomei and translated by A.L. Sadler, published in 1972 by Charles E. Tuttle Company, Inc. Page 1.
- 2 For details, see 方丈記, 訳注築瀬一雄, published in 昭和42年 by 角川書店, page 47.
- 3 The Ten Foot Square Hut and Tales of the Heike, page 1.
- 4 For details, see 方丈記, 訳注築瀬一雄, page 48.
- 5 Excerpted from 日本文学と仏教 第4巻, published in 1994 by 岩波書店, 第三章 方上記 written by 水原一, page 87. Translated by J. Strothman.
- 6 Ibid., page 87.
- 7 日本古典文学大辞典 第二巻, published by 岩波書店 in 1984, p.16-17 「鴨長明集」 Translated by J. Strothman.
- 8 日本文学と仏教 第4巻, page 91.
- 9 Ibid., page 91.
- 10 The Ten Foot Square Hut and Tales of the Heike, p. 1-2.
- 11 往生要集, by 源信, 石田瑞磨訳注, published in 1992 by 岩波書店. Page 16. Translation by J. Strothman.
- 12 日本古典文学 第23巻 中世説話集, published in 昭和52年 by 角川書店. 発心集 by 鴨長明, 貧男指図を好むこと, page 233.
- 13 For details, see 方丈記, 訳注築瀬一雄, page 49.
- 14 The Ten Foot Square Hut and Tales of the Heike, page 2.
- 15 Translated from 方丈記, 訳注築瀬一雄, page 18.
- 16 特選日本の古典7 グラフィック版 徒然草 方丈記, published by 世界文化社, page 97-101.
- 17 The Ten Foot Square Hut and Tales of the Heike, page 3.
- 18 Ibid., p. 3-4.
- 19 Ibid., p. 3.
- 20 Ibid., p. 5.
- 21 Ibid., p. 5.
- 22 Ibid., p. 7.
- 23 Ibid., p. 7.
- 24 古典再入門, by 遠地文子 and others, published by 鎌倉書房 in 昭和56年, from 「方丈独居の楽し

- さ」 by 大原富枝, page 152.
- 25 The Ten Foot Square Hut and Tales of the Heike, page 8.
- 26 Ibid., p. 8-9.
- 27 Ibid., p. 9.
- 28 Ibid., p. 10.
- 29 Translated from 池亭記 by 慶滋保胤, found in 方丈記, 訳注築瀬一雄, p. 121-2.
- 30 The Ten Foot Square Hut and Tales of the Heike, page 11.
- 31 Ibid., p. 11.
- 32 Ibid., p. 10-11.
- 33 Ibid., p. 12.
- 34 Ibid., p. 12.
- 35 Ibid., p. 13.
- 36 Ibid., p. 15.
- 37 Ibid., p. 16.
- 38 Ibid., p. 17.
- 39 Ibid., p. 18.
- 40 Translated from 池亭記 by 慶滋保胤, found in 方丈記, 訳注築瀬一雄, p. 125.
- 41 The Ten Foot Square Hut and Tales of the Heike, p. 19.
- 42 Ibid., p. 20.
- 43 Ibid., p. 14-15.
- 44 Ibid., p. 19-20.
- 45 Ibid., p. 20.
- 46 陰翳礼讃, by 谷崎潤一郎, published by 中公文庫 in 1994, p.39. Translated by J. Strothman.
- 47 隠者の文学, by 石田吉貞, published by 講談社 in 2001, p. 179-180.

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